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The Exploitation of Women and Social Change in the Writing of Nawal El-Saadawi

By Muhammad Youssef Suwaed¹

Abstract

Nawal El-Saadawi is an Egyptian writer, a physician by education, who dedicated her life to promote gender equality. She is an activist writer, and the only one in Egypt who point out the connection of women's sexual oppression to women's social and political oppression. She boldly pursues women rights, and demands to change the status and image of the Arabic woman. Her writings include novels, studies and educated scholastic articles, focusing on the oppression and exploitation of the Arabic women, particularly customary rules imposed on women in rural Egypt relying on religion, tradition and the regime. Her writings keep the issue alive.

The books and articles of Saadawi enraged the political and religious authorities in Egypt, which led to an official ban on her books. In 1981 conservative Egyptian authorities caved into the pressure of powerful circles in society considering her a threat to the social order, and arrested her to satisfy these circles.

Her writings had and still have a tremendous impact on the Arab younger generation especially since she always claimed that social processes are caused and led by those who recognize injustice and have the will and the drive to change things.

This article aims to contribute to the present discourse within Arabic society in the wake of the Arab Spring, about the future of the society and the state, through analysis and reflection on the issues raised in the novels of Nawal El-Saadawi illuminating the connection between religion, politics and sexual exploitation. The paper emphasizes the oppression and exploitation of Arabic women through gender discrimination, social inferiority, sexual oppression, girls' circumcision (Khitana), sexual exploitation, and rape. It is important to point out that Saadawi, more than many intellectuals interested in various aspects of social injustice, emphasizes physical and emotional needs, alongside the obvious discrimination in education and employment.

Keywords: Arab women, Exploitation, Feminism, Social abuse, Egypt, Gender, Nawal- El-Saadawi, Women's empowerment

Introduction

Nawal El-Saadawi, an Egyptian writer and physician, was born in rural Egypt on 1931. The consent of her mother to the violation her body (Khitana) in childhood and her personal experience as a girl, always inferior to her brother in her family, affected her personal development and her perception of Muslim tradition, Egyptian social conventions and the customs of Arab society at large. Saadawi writes about the discrimination in various planes: Discrimination of women, exploitation of the lower classes by the upper echelon, and religious control in the public-political arena. She is considered unique, since no writing of an Arab woman has taken on so many taboos.

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As a revolutionary feminist writer, Saadawi is endowed with an indefatigable expression of power and a rare capacity to transmit and propagate her messages by means of varied literary pipelines: Novels, short stories, plays, travel books, memoirs, critical articles, medical articles, and theoretical and scientific essays.

She represents a new phenomenon in Arab women's literature, a highly educated professional woman who is also a brilliant writer, bringing the voice of the women's struggle for liberation to the Egyptian public. Her feminist agenda is a specific objective within a wider conception of comprehensive social liberty, exhibited in her view, expressed in many of her writings, that true liberation is impossible within a hierarchical, oppressive social system.

Saadawi fights against women's exploitation and gender discrimination everywhere, at home, in the family, in society, at the working place, and in the political arena, everywhere and at all times. In her view, a woman has the right to be an autonomous person both physically, emotionally, and economically. The man as the spouse, sharing her life with its joys and sorrows; can also be a colleague, a respected father, a beloved brother, or a cherished child. She can respect him, love him, and support him regardless of his apparent success or failure, his morality, or corruption. However, in her opinion, current social conventions and local tradition deny many women the development of these feelings, as well as the benefits of sharing and the comforts of support and understanding regardless of their skills, achievements, excellence, and successes.²

One can see Saadawi as an active social advocate thriving to convert the traditional patriarchal society into an open, non-oppressive, liberal society based on justice, freedom, and equality. She believes that women's oppression is the central factor for the backwardness of society in general and of women in particular. She openly promotes the idea that women need to rebel against traditionally derived values, and the social and political heritage oppressing them. She calls all women to fight for their rights, and actively pursue a change of the existing oppressive situation; women must seek and fight for self-realization and to join other social forces fighting to gain equality among all layers of society.³

Saadawi claims that one of the prominent faults of contemporary Arab society is the fact that it lacks scholastic, spiritual and political leadership that dares to question or criticize traditional values, especially values regarding women rights and status. Many people truly believe that their values came down from heaven, while in fact they are nothing but reflections of the feudal system and the conventions of the patriarchal society.

According to her views, the meekness often observed in behavior of Arab women, is not an inherited trait but rather an acquired behavioral pattern forced on them by society since early childhood. In many patriarchal societies, especially in rural areas, women are considered and treated as property, subjected to the needs, will and whims of the head of the household. They are not expected to develop their own gifts and skills, except for those appreciated by the master, the head of the family. When a woman is considered property, she represents certain value, and an expectant husband pays for the privilege to own her by marriage. Once she is part of his household, she is expected to serve him, to give him pleasure, bear his children, wait upon him and other

² El- Saadawi, Nawal, *Muthkarat Tabibah*, Beirut: Dar al- Aadab, 1988, pp. 1-14 (hereafter: El- Saadawi, Muthkarat Tabibah); Malti-Douglas, Fedwa, *Men, Women and God- Nawal El-Saadawi and Arab feminist poetics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 9-10.

³ El- Saadawi, Nawal, *Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Jins*, Alexandria: Dar Wamataba al- Mustakbal, 1990, pp. 130-136 (hereafter: El- Saadawi, Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Jins); Zeidan, J. T., *Arab Women Novelists- The Formative years and Beyond*, New- York: State University of New- York Press, 1995, pp. 158- 159; Al-Ali, N.S., *Gender Writing/ Writing Gender- The Representation of Woman in A selection of Modern Egyptian Literature*, Cairo: American University press, 1994, pp. 33.

family members, look after the house, and perform all sorts of chores. Her initial socially accepted value decreases if there was a previous marriage or early sexual relations. Therefore, when a man takes a wife, he often tends to choose a girl who is many years younger than he, who will maintain her youth and the freshness of her body for long years and will be able to continue to fill the roles for which he took her, until old age.⁴

The writing of Saadawi describes the socio-economic reality of woman in various settings. She advocates the right of women to pursue whatever career they like, regardless of previous social conventions, and calls for the analysis of the role of women in Islamic history in school and university curricula. She also advocates for egalitarian treatment of gender in school texts.

Today she works with women in rural Egypt, aiming to help them reach financial independence that will enable them to break free from the oppression of men and tradition.

The Egyptian Feminist Movement and the Contribution of Saadawi's Writings to Women's Aspirations in Egypt and other Arab Countries

The education of girls was not on the agenda in Egypt until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Mohamed Ali, who ruled Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century, understood that part of the development of the state lay in investment in education, including girls' education. Schools for both genders had been established in most urban centers of Egypt, followed by the foundation of a school training professional midwives in the year 1832, with the goal of training women specialists in gynecology.⁵

Ali also constructed industries and reorganized various aspects in the structure and functioning of the administration. These changes required reorganization of manpower. In certain circumstances, entire families were sent to forced labor; wives of conscripted soldiers were sent to work on the land; and women were employed by the new industrial plants.⁶

Egyptian society found itself in the midst of change which provided fertile ground for absorption of new values and ideas. One of these processes was a change in the status of the women, their liberation from the traditional shackles, and the creation of new and modern women.

During the nineteenth and early 20th centuries, liberal intellectuals preached for women's right to education. To pacify opposition, they claimed that educated women would manage their houses with greater efficiency and would be able to improve in childrearing practices. Education would positively influence their capacity to accept rational views and abandon superstitions.

Regardless of the above, very little was done to advance women's status in Egypt until the 1870s.⁷ However, although the state had established schools designed to admit both boys and girls, in the early 1920s, more girls were admitted to Muslim societies and missionary schools, which offered separate education, than to state schools.

⁴ El-Saadawi, Nawal, *Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah Al-Siasiyah Wa-Al-Jinsiyah*, Cairo: Matbaat Madbouli. 2006, pp. 19-20 (hereafter: Al-Saadawi, *Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah*); Sullivan, E. L., *Women in Egyptian Public life*, Cairo: American University in Cairo press, 1989, 114- 115.

⁵ El-Saadawi, Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Jins, pp. 180-181, 187, 200-201.

⁶ Marsot, Afaf, *Women and Men in Eighteenth Century Egypt*, Austin: Texas University Press, 1995; Tucker, Judith E., *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Nashat, Guity and Tucker, Judith E., *Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp. 76-77.

⁷ Badran, Margot, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 52-54.

The British conquest, in the year 1882, contributed to the influence of western values on the development of the women's movement in Egypt.⁸ During the period of British rule, dozens of schools for girls were founded and thousands of girls went to school on a regular basis. Parents began to show interest and became involved in the formation of the curriculum.⁹

Education became a major feature of women's liberation from the male-dominant patriarchal society. New social trends in Egyptian society led to the birth of the women's movement, calling for freedom from oppression. Between 1892 and 1908, a series of women's newspapers were founded. These newspapers promoted gender equality and raised the issue of the women's desire to be involved in the public life of the state.¹⁰

Ethnic and religious differences became important in determining the behavior of women in Egypt. For example, Christian and Jewish women who had more access to foreign information than Muslim women, stopped wearing the veil earlier, but in the late 1930s, Muslim women also stopped wearing it. The women's movement in Egypt affected several neighboring Muslim societies in the region. The acknowledgement of women's rights created access for women to health and educational services and brought about a change in the family customs and occupation, including the right to vote. In 1956 Egyptian women obtained the right to be elected to public office.

Nawal El-Saadawi (1931-) was born into a traditional society ruled by outdated customs and false interpretations of religious scripts, wherein women are born inferior to men. As a young woman, she absolutely refused to accept these conventions and rebelled against all aspects of female discrimination, exploitation, and violations. She proved to her family that she could be better and more accomplished than her privileged, fondly nurtured brother, and learned to be a physician. As a student, she learned about the women's movement, but for her, liberation was not just a matter of education and employment opportunities. She wanted complete gender equality and freedom from all gender related restrictions. As a writer, she raised the banner of rebellion and broke all taboos.

Nawal El-Saadawi who is a trained psychiatrist as well as a physician, has had a diverse and quite unusual career including governmental appointments and academic positions, but her writing affected the development of her career. Today she works as a psychiatrist-physician in rural Egypt, doing her best to help the women in rural settings to overcome their daily abuse, exploitation, and humiliation. Being a prolific writer, she describes their life and their daily struggle with discrimination and injustice. Her writings revealed physical and secret violations against women performed in the dark, in silence. Unlike the tendency of other Egyptian authors to call attention to social injustice by proxy, making the unfortunate heroine a non-Muslim figure, (a Jew, an Armenian, an African slave etc.), Saadawi's literary heroines are all regular Muslim women. Her novels describe the life of the destitute, illuminating social and political injustices and the tragic results of abuse and cultural discrimination within Muslim societies, such as the story of the orphaned Pardus who was betrothed to an old man, repellent in his appearance, and abusive towards her. The story sheds light on the daily hardships and humiliations of the heroine and her inability to integrate and find her place in society, until she could no longer bear the abuse and

⁸ Hanna, Abdullah, *Al-Mojtamaane Al-Ahli Wa-Al-Madani Fi Al-Dawlah Al-Arabiah Al-Hadithah*, Damas: Dar Al-Mada Lithakafa Wa -Al-Nasher, 2002, p. 61.

⁹ Abu Al-Assad, Mohamed, *Siasat Al-Taaleim fi Masr Taht Al-Ehtlal Al-Britani*, Cairo: Tiba Ldrasat Wal-Nasher, 1993, pp. 144-145, 164-165; Ali, Said Ismail, *Daur Al-Taalim Al-Masri Fi Al-Nedal Al-Watani Zman Al-Ehtelal Al-Britani*, Cairo: Al-Hyaah Al-Msriah Al-Amah Lilketab, 1995, pp. 294-295.

¹⁰ El-Baz, Shahida, "Al- Harkah Al-Nesaaiah Fi Masr," in: *Al-Maraah h Al-Arabiyah Fi Muwajhat Al-Asr*, Cairo: Nur- Dar Al-Maraah h Al-Arabiyah Lnashir, 1996, pp. 110-111.

lashes out. The law, which was never there for her, was nonetheless quick and eager to punish her.¹¹

Sometimes, Saadawi draws on her personal experience:

*“I hated my femininity, I got angry about my nature and that I did not know anything about my body. All that remained for me was to reject, to challenge, to resist! I rejected my femininity, I challenged my nature, I resisted all the desires of my body, to prove to my mother and to my grandmother that I was not a woman like them, that I would not waste my life in the kitchen peeling onions and garlic, waste my day in order for my husband to be able to eat and eat. I was about to show my mother that I had a higher intelligence than my brother, than the man for whose honor she wanted that I would wear the cream dress, than any man, and that I can do anything which my father did and more”.*¹²

In another autobiographic script, she voices nostalgia for certain aspects of her childhood:

*“My village ‘Al Kafr’ has no place on the map, although it is found in reality more than the city (Cairo). It is the closest village to me, the houses are small and attached, built from clay, real clay, the earth on its land is real, the faces of the people are real, the skin brown, the sun colored it”.*¹³

She also reveals and emphasizes the social negligence of women’s feelings, the result of ignoring their mental and emotional needs. Her essays and short articles call for gender equality by law; she has demanded legislation that will establish women rights not only in the social and political arena, but first and foremost, the right to personal autonomy of their bodies, their thoughts, their property, and their right to choose or at least give their consent regarding their spouse and their profession.¹⁴

She wrote:

*”Since the foundation of the patriarchal class regime in history, public life was separated from private life. The subject of the woman was placed under the clause of matrimony matters. The false distinction that divided people between rulers and ruled and differentiated between the law of the state and family laws, spread, it gave absolute control to men of the family, and to the ruler, the absolute control of the state.”*¹⁵

From the beginning of her public activity, Saadawi insisted that it is impossible to separate the issues of social life from political issues. She claimed that progress could only be realized through the achievement of social and conceptual freedom, and the elimination of the oppressive class regime.¹⁶

¹¹ El- Saadawi, Nawal, *Imraah Ind Noktat Al-Sifr*, Beirut: Dar al- Aadab, 1985, pp. 55, 82 (Saadawi, Imraah Ind Noktat Al-Sifr).

¹² El-Saadawi, Muthkarat Tabibah, pp. 20-21.

¹³ El-Saadawi, Nawal, *Oraki Hayati*, Cairo: Dar al- Hilal, 1995. Pp. 3, 28, 29 hereafter (El-Saadawi, Oraki, vol. A).

¹⁴ Sullivan, E.L., *Women in Egyptian Public Life*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1989, pp. 114-115.

¹⁵ Al- Ahram newspaper, 22 July 2000.

¹⁶ Al- Saadawi, Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah, pp. 19-20, 37-39.

In one of her novels, Saadawi emphasizes her central and basic idea, discrimination of women, in a remark used by a pimp, who says, “There are two types of humans, masters and slaves”.¹⁷ She insisted that educational systems must be redesigned with curricula emphasizing equality between men and women, among all age levels, from birth until death, equality in rights and duties, outside the home and within it. Women need to be aware, she asserted, that the route is long and weary, and this process needs heroism, force, patience, and more knowledge and awareness.¹⁸

Her criticism and calls for change aroused broad discourse in Egyptian society and led to threats on her life and restrictions on her personal freedom. The efforts of the authorities to hush Saadawi and other advocates of women’s rights only increased the interest of women and the younger generation, empowering women and encouraging them to examine their own situations, expectations, and options.

Saadawi is the first woman in Egypt to unveil in writing, the social taboo regarding sex. She claimed that sex plays an important role in life, just as food does. She wrote:

*“Those who detract from the importance of the world of sex do not understand the primary foundations of the world of politics, and all those who detract from the value of the special studies on the subject of the woman and her relation with man and with society, do not understand the true problems of society.”*¹⁹

This bold proclamation was a revelation to many women who considered sex as part of their matrimonial obligations, whether they enjoyed it or not. The notion that it could be discussed, denied, demanded, or even enjoyed, was indeed a revelation, specifically to young educated women who sought a better life than their mothers and grandmothers.

Several female authors today in Egypt no longer hide in metaphors, but on the contrary, they write about women they know and make a distinction between various types of women, the privileged, the scholarly, the good friend, devoted mother, the exploited, the rebels, among many others. These women authors write from their specific perspectives, giving readers insights into the variations on Egyptian womanhood, inspired by Saadawi.

Saadawi’s Published Novels and Articles

Saadawi wrote dozens of books and novels, many of which were translated into several languages that dealt with the status of women and their place in society.

Among her writings:

- Muthkarat Talbah Ismaha Suwad (the Memoirs of a Girl whose Name was Suwad) – 1944.
- Muthkarat Tabibah (the Memoirs of a Woman Doctor) – 1958.
- Al-Ghaib (the Missing Person) – 1969.
- Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Jins (The Woman and Sex) – 1969.
- Al-Untha hia Al-Atzel (the Female is the Source) – 1971.

¹⁷ Saadawi, *Imraah Ind Noktat Al-Sifr*, p. 105.

¹⁸ Suwaed, Muhammad, *Al-Maraah h Fi Al-Adbiat Al- Arabiyah Al- Muasirah*, Amman: Dar Zahran, 2010, pp. 162-163, (hereafter: Suwaed, Al-Maraah).

¹⁹ Al- Saadawi, *Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah*, p. 8.

- Al-Rajoul Wa-Al-Jins (The Man and Sex) – 1973.
- Al-Wajh Al-Aari L-Al-Maraah (The Exposed Face of the Woman) – 1974.
- Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Zraa al-Nafsi (The Woman and the Mental Struggle) – 1975.
- Imraah Ind Noktat Al-Sifr (Woman at Zero Point) – 1973.
- Oraki Hayati (Pages of my Life) – 1995, 1998.
- Kdaia Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Fekir Wa-Al- Siasah (The Issue of the Woman, Thought and Politics) – 2002.
- Kasser Al-Houdoud (The breaking of Borders) – 2004.
- Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah Al-Siasiyah Wa-Al-Jinsiyah (The Political and Sexual Question of the Egyptian Woman) – 2005.

In her work, Saadawi moves between medicine and literature. More than once she has declared that she preferred literature as a vocation, but she learned medicine to show the world of men that her achievements and intellectual ability are no less than theirs.

As above stated, some novels and articles published by Saadawi led to her persecution, including threats to her life, especially after the publication of her book *Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Jins (The Woman and Sex, 1969)*. Suddenly, a woman speaks of sex openly in a book and dares to ridicule the subject of protection of the hymen to preserve family dignity. She was widely proclaimed as a heretic. The government prevented her book from being published in Egypt, so she published it in Beirut. This was the cause of her dismissal, against her will, from the Ministry of Health. She also lost her job as editor of the periodical “Al-Tzha”.

In 1972, Saadawi began a new period: she edited a series of studies on the subject of mental illnesses common among women. She published these studies in a book under the name of *Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Zraa al-Nafsi (The Woman and her Mental Struggle, 1975)*. Her research was based on studies conducted on female prisoners and mental hospitals patients. This was the first daring step after her dismissal. Its publication led to her incarceration after being accused that she insulted the regime. However, prison did not break her spirits and did not prevent her from writing. She wrote with a pencil on toilet paper, and after she was released from prison, she published her thoughts and impressions in her book *Muthkarat min Sejn Al-Nisaa (Memoirs from a Women’s Prison, 1981)*, in which she criticized the government, the corruption, and the persecution of the opposition as well as intellectuals. Regardless of their resentment, the authorities could not ignore threats on her life and appointed a guard to her house.

Saadawi worked for the United Nations (1978-1980) as specialist for women’s affairs; she was part of a team assigned to develop programs for women’s advancement in developing countries. When her mission was over, she came back to Egypt and started similar programs for local women of lower classes. She had the support and backing of her husband, which helped her to stand her grounds regardless of the bans and persecution affected by her enemies and critics.

Although her previous books and novels dealt mostly with women’s inferior status and the impact on all aspects of women’s lives, Saadawi revealed another literary mode in her writings, the ability to describe and captivate the reader by exposing her perceptions as an individual and her capacity to describe her feelings and emotions.

Her book *Kdaia Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Fekir Wa-Al- Siasa (The Issue of the Woman: Thought and Politics, 2002)* is her autobiography, subdivided into six chapters,¹⁶ written with a distinct introspection revealing her feelings about herself. For example, her love and fascination with her name, Nawal (Giving, in English), and the name of her mother, Zainab whom she loved dearly. She tells the reader about her offence when her father erased her mother’s name from official signs,

placards, and documents replacing it with his, name, the family name. When she protested to her father, his answer was: “This is the will of God”. This was the first time the child Saadawi heard the word “God”, from her father. She knew at that moment that He lived in Heaven and that He was responsible for the erasure of her mother’s name.

A sour memory that affected her deeply was growing next to her brother, who was one year older than she. According to her, he grew up with no obligations, did nothing useful, neither in school nor at home, but since he was born a boy, he received love, affection, and privileges she did not. When she asked her father about the meaning of the discriminating attitude, her father answered that God said in the Holy Koran that the daughter is half of the son.

From her father’s answers Saadawi learned that God was responsible for the discrimination between her and her brother. Her father said to her that God is the truth. She did not understand the meaning of the sentence! So the first letter she wrote was to God, read: “God, you are truth and justice, then why do you make a distinction between me and my brother, why do you separate between my father and my mother?”²⁰

Her mother told her that God did not read and write, so Saadawi wrote her letters to God, but addressed them to her father. However, no letter reached him, as she would burn them before she would convey them.²¹

Saadawi tells us about an event which happened to her at age six when she was physically violated by an unknown woman with her mother’s consent, who told her that this was the will of God. Saadawi asked her father why it was done to her and her father told her that this was Khitan, (female circumcision)²², a tradition given to the faithful by the Prophet of God. She was too young to know that this custom is not a compulsory commandment, and was not even mentioned in the Koran. She was too young to know the distinction between permission and compulsion; it took her three months to recuperate.

Nawal repressed the incident until she graduated from medical school and worked as a doctor in the rural region, where she saw the fishermen perform this painful degrading operation on bodies of little girls, and reacted by saying that she did not learn to perform Khitan in the School of Medicine.²³

Memoirs of a Girl Named Suwaed

This story was the first literary accomplishment of Saadawi. It was originally written as a school assignment to write a memory-based composition. The young rebellious Saadawi told her own memories under disguise. She changed all names and did not mention a specific location to hide her autobiographic story full of painful memories that the girl Suwaed embodied, which were her own. The teacher was highly displeased with her work; he marked it zero, and told her that she needed reinforcement in language and religion.

At home she anxiously hid the notebook, fearing that it might fall into the hands of her father who often threatened to take her out of school if she did not obtain good marks. She knew that excellence in school was her only hope to avoid the slavery of the kitchen and the four walls of the house. One day the notebook fell into her mother’s hands, who read it thoroughly, waited

²⁰ Suwaed, Al-Maraah, p. 171.

²¹ Ibid., *ibid.*

²² Khitan, this is circumcision for girls.

²³ Suwaed, Al-Maraah, p. 172.

for Nawal to come home from school and told her warmly: “You have abilities.” This was the very first recognition of her literary gift. There and then she realized that writing was her vocation.

At a later date she heard from her mother that there was no joy when she was born; in fact, her father was angry, as he wanted a son that would bear his name and the name of his father. Nevertheless, her mother who was taken from school to be married at 16, loved her and did her best to help her have better life than she had, and Nawal was grateful to her and always remembered her love and warmth.

Memoirs of a Doctor, a Prisoner and a Woman in Exile

Most of the works of Saadawi are based on her own experience, and the stories of the people she encountered as a doctor, met in social circles or studied as a scholar.

After the loss of her parents, Nawal was expected to take care of her younger brothers, but she soon found out that being a woman, she could not be their official guardian. As a young physician she found out that she could work as hard as male doctors, and even harder, but she was not equal: she could not give testimony in court. In her writing she describes how the medical profession revealed to her the diseases of society, the tragedies of people, and especially the hardships of lower class women. Her remedy was to use her pen as the knife of a surgeon, to cut into the living flesh. She reached the conclusion that the use of the pen, the instrument that brought the truth to the public, was her best way to act in the direction of total revolution against despotism and oppression.

In the autumn of 1981, Saadawi was sent to three months in prison for her criticism of the regime and the social order. She confessed that at first she was apprehensive, but her fear was not of jail, but of the unknown. In prison she was not allowed to write; the warden who denied her access to writing materials told her: “the page and pen are more dangerous than the revolver”.²⁴ Nawal obtained a pen from another detention cell and wrote on toilet paper at night. She hid her pen and manuscript during the day. She had the time to write her life story, to describe the meaningful figures in her life, including a friend she had in high school and in medical school. She wrote of success and the failure of her marriage. She wrote about everything. She said: “I was sunk in writing about what occurred to me without thinking what would be the result.” Later, she used these notes to substantiate her books and reports.

Pages of My Life

Saadawi wrote her autobiography in the winter of 1993, after she reached the age of sixty while in exile in a small town called Dirham. According to Saadawi, the exile experience was in many aspects similar to her jail experience, since she had a guard for her safety. While in exile, she became a lecturer at Duke University in North Carolina USA; her husband, the writer Dr. Sharif Hatata accompanied her in exile. She describes the writing style of her autobiography as connecting between “the imaginary and reality, the dream and truth” and remarks:

“It can be that the personal biography is truer than the novel, or more artistic than creativity, as it reveals the ego, as it reveals the other person. The pen in my hands is like the knife, it reveals what is under the skin, under the muscle, reaches roots of the parts cut from the body from the brain or from the memory. And

²⁴ . Ibid., p. 174.

*afterward it soars me up to the sky, in order to see things which I cannot see when I walk on the ground. I am one whole unit of body, mind and soul. We live our childhood with our young and our old, the present is intertwined in the past, and time is in place.”*²⁵

In her autobiographic novel, *Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah Al-Siasiyah Wa-Al-Jinsiyah (The Question of the Egyptian Woman, 2005)*, she makes the observation that the private, special little things like food, drink, sexual intercourse, traveling by bus, and standing in a field and breathing the fresh air, are the collective things which create a state—these little things determine high politics. A politician, anywhere and at any level should never ignore the small details of life:

*“In every situation it is impossible to separate the emotional and sexual life of people from the economic life, any separation between them leads to superficial and pathological thought. What creates history is not the person or the economic relations alone —what creates history are both of them together and to the same extent”.*²⁶

Egyptian Reality: Society Seeking Balance

Besides acting as harbinger for women’s liberty and gender equality, Saadawi has always been sensitive to social injustices and the suffering and exploitation of the lower classes in Egypt. Her mantra was that no real liberty and equality for women will be possible in an unjust, hierarchical society in which only the rich and the powerful enjoy privileges and have full access to resources and services. Thus, as a veteran rebel, she calls the attention of the public to various paradoxes in Egyptian society.

When she returned from exile, she published a number of articles and studies reflecting her view that anyone living in Egypt in recent years that reads the press, watches television, hears and sees advertisements, walks the streets, enters cinemas, or other places of leisure and entertainment, may become confused by contradictory public messages. On the one hand, everyone living in large urban centers in Egypt is exposed to the expansion of the pornographic films phenomenon, the increase of revealing female attire on television, movies and in the press, and the sight of several local women, housewives, students, and professionals, dressed in the best and latest western fashions, wearing makeup and perfume. On the other hand, every such person is simultaneously exposed to frequent religious public sermons, loud calls for worship, and the sight of people worshipping in the streets; several daily religious messages in the electronic and written media, and consistent appeals to rule and conduct Egyptian society according to Sharia-Muslim orthodox law, demanding, among other things, the imposition of modest dress on women and the illegality of selling and drinking alcohol. A person living in Egypt today cannot ignore the fact that there is an impression of growing permissiveness, a considerable increase in the amount of boarding houses furnished to facilitate sexual intercourse, the growing custom of fictitious marriage contracts, and the common sexual exploitation of servants who work for the rich and the mighty. At the same time, a person living in an Egyptian city cannot ignore the increase of voices calling to protect conservative religious morals and to punish women deviating from those prescripts. One

²⁵ El-Saadawi, Nawal, *Kadia Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Fikir Wa-Al- Siasa*. Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 2002, pp. 50-51.

²⁶ El- Saadawi, Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah, p. 11.

constantly hears and reads in various media, repeated calls for all women to stop working outside the home.

A person living in an Egyptian city today must be aware of the increase in demands to chaperon girls, to punish prostitutes for being engaged in the profession, and calls to deny Egyptian citizenship to women who appear with little clothing in visual media. There is also an increase in voices demanding the censure of sex scenes in films and plays—even the issuing of government orders to prevent kissing in films, and “concerned” voices calling to prevent youth from watching films or plays that “corrupt morals”.

Everywhere one turns one encounters conflicting messages: on the one hand, there is a demand to ban alcohol, and on the other, the police report that there is an increase in the rate of addiction to drugs and alcohol among men, both teenagers and adults, and growing rates of theft and robbery. Egypt is full of contradictions, exacerbated by social injustices, which Saadawi calls to attention. There is the spread of long queues of low income families seeking food and other necessities from the doors of charitable associations. Rising prices for everything, and the growth of imported, high priced goods ordered and acquired by people of the top echelon. Saadawi writes:

*“We do not hear of studies of these phenomenon and their causal factors, nor on attempts to treat their reasons or seek justice. We, the people would like to post questions: Who should be punished, the lion or the little rabbit who falls in a trap? Who is guilty, the lion who devours and eats the meat, or the victim whose flesh is eaten? Who is the criminal, the murderer or his victim? Why do we leave it to the lion and his victim? Why we overlook the reasons people die slowly getting addicted to alcohol and drugs? Why theft of honor and property of a person not considered a sin? Who is the bigger sinner, he who steals in order to eat and feed his children or him who steals millions to build villas and a casino? Who is a greater sinner: he who sells the body or he who sells the mind?”*²⁷

Saadawi suggests that the right way to eliminate these pathologies is to apply scientific research methods to investigate the causal factors of structural inequalities in order to reduce them or eliminate them completely. The goal should be to eradicate the virus without killing the patient or simply dispensing pain killing pills. We are not defying religion in totality, she argues, only the misguided interpretation of the faith; true religion preaches justice and equality and not despotism and oppression. Islam fights poverty first and punishes the thieves later.²⁸

The Double Standards and Erroneous Understanding of Honor

Saadawi claims that one of the characteristics of Arab society is the double standard in morals. She notes that men opposing women’s liberation assert that they are protecting their honor while breaking them nightly. Saadawi observes that in Arab society there are two measures for honor and morals, one for women and one for men. Thus, women are punished for deeds men commit freely. Moreover, men take pride in the numbers of their sexual encounters. She advocates elimination of the double standard that permits men to conduct an open daily life in which morals rule, and a secret life in which morals are broken.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 16-17.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 31-36.

Women's Liberation

Saadawi proposes that the first step for women's liberation, following education, is to go out to work. She admits that liberation has a price, but she reminds her readers that slavery also charges a heavy price, so it is preferable to pay a price for freedom than for slavery. She suggests that if women can unite and become a pressure group their chances to obtain rights would be much higher. To gain maximum effectiveness they should find allies and cooperate with other oppressed groups in society. In addition, they need to join forces with those enlightened, liberal men who believe in women's rights.³⁰

Personal Views

Nawal El Saadawi has written that she has lived in a strange world since birth, unable to find her rightful place. She blames this feeling of strangeness on social injustice, her enforced gender inferiority and other aspects of social oppression. She says that she could never feel right at home, in the family, in the street, at school, at the university, everywhere, it doesn't matter—everywhere there is inequality. She proposes that the solution to the feeling of strangeness lies in three dimensions: equality, justice, and love. She says that in a world ruled by these three, the feeling of strangeness will disappear and evaporate.³¹

Saadawi calls herself “the barrier breaker,” reminding her readers that her choice to be both a physician and a writer is barrier-breaching; as a woman doctor she has aimed to break conventional barriers both in science and as an author, thriving by breaking creative literary barriers:

“Since childhood we were taught to honor various borders, to fear crossing the red lines in any field, especially in politics and religion, therefore, specialists in the field of science and art did not go out from our country, we grew up on imitation, simulation, copy, and translation from others.”³²

The solution: to breach the borders, to rebel against what exists, and to create a healthy society in their stead.

The Image of the Woman in the Writings of Saadawi

In Saadawi's writings two types of women stand out. There is the middle class woman who can pave her way to success and independence, as depicted in her story “The Memoirs of a Woman Doctor” (Muthkarat Tabiba)³³, and a woman of the lower class who cannot fend for herself being used, exploited, and driven to tragic end, like the heroine Pardous, in her “A Woman at Zero Point” (Imraah Ind Noktat Al-Sifr, 1975).³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., p.45; Suwaed, Al-Maraah, pp. 185-186.

³¹ Al- Saadawi, Nawal, *Al-Maraah Wa-Al-Ghurba*, Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 2005, p. 66.

³² El-Saadawi, Nawal, *Kasser Al-Houdoud*, Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 2004, p. 9.

³³ El-Saadawi, *Muthkarat Tabiba* (2016).

³⁴ El, Saadawi, *Imraah Ind Noktat Al-Sifr* (1975).

“A Woman at Zero Point” is a story about a prostitute accused of murder, awaiting execution. The accused is called Pardous, the Arab word for Paradise, but her life is anything but. The story takes place in prison, where the inmate Pardous refuses to talk, but finally agrees to meet a psychologist. We learn that Pardous was orphaned at young age, and her uncle sent her to a boarding school, from which she successfully graduated at 16. Her aunt and uncle discussed her future and decided to marry her off to the elderly Sheikh Mahmoud.

Her husband was abusive, so she escaped and ran to her uncle’s house, but he would not give her shelter and she had to return to her abusive husband. She again escaped from an impossible situation, and having nowhere to go, entered a coffee house where she was raped by the owner and his friends. One of the neighbors helped her to get out and introduced her to Sharifa, who employs her in prostitution. Again she runs away and met a policeman who also abuses her sexually.

She attempted to change her fate and works for a while as a clerk, but again, she is exploited and degraded and eventually, returned to the streets. When one of the pimps tries to subjugate and control her, she resists and kills him. She is tried, convicted, and sent to prison. The final chapter ends with the description of Pardous being dragged from her cell to be executed.

The aim of this tragic novel was to show that a girl like Pardous cannot be freed from the social strata in which she was born. Education and encounters with other aspects of life as a married woman and as a prostitute, opened no doors for her, she was and always will be a lower class person with no rights or protection. Her abusers were never punished. All her attempts to escape her fate were doomed; she could not fit where she did not belong.

The novels of Saadawi criticize Arab society in general and Egyptian society in particular; the message of this novel is clear: poor suffer more than the rich, women suffer more than men, and the people who are controlled suffer more than those holding government positions.

What Social Changes does Saadawi call for?

Saadawi calls for extensive social change; implementation of equality before the law, equal opportunity of employment, freedom from restricting rules and outdated conventions. Saadawi calls for women’s liberation, men’s liberation, and liberation of the entire society. Her feminist goal is defined as a temporary stage within a wider conception of comprehensive liberation, since real liberation of women or any other social segment is impossible in an oppressive and abusive social system. She strives for an open non-oppressive society, based on justice, equality, and freedom of the individual. She posts five requirements whose fulfillment can lead to real change in the status of women in Arab society.³⁵

- 1. Economic independence:** An economically independent woman can overcome her humiliation; if she divorces or is threatened with divorce, she can rely on herself, since every woman can be a productive member of society.
- 2. Social independence:** When circumstance dictates, a woman has to learn to live alone without a man at the time of need. She ought to be self-confident and develop inner strength that will enable her to withstand the belligerence of a society that wishes her to in to social conventions.

³⁵ El- Saadawi, *Kadiat Al-Maraah Al-Masriyah*, p.45.

3. **To rebel for freedom:** Women must be aware that there is a price to pay for freedom; they also have to be aware that they are paying a price when living in slavery, so if there is always a price to pay, better pay for freedom than for slavery.
4. **Create social forces to enable pressure for change:** Women must know that no rights will be obtained without pressure. They must organize and become a recognizable social force, able to apply pressure to change the law. They should cooperate with other oppressed groups in society, to attract attention and increase their social power.
5. **Join forces with intellectual men:** Women should also join forces with intellectual men who believe in women's rights and fight to remedy social follies and change women's status.

Saadawi believes that the oppression of Arab woman will not diminish without a drastic change in the social order. The ruling factors are too corrupt to simply give in to logical demands; therefore, the only way to achieve social justice is through a widespread women's revolt.

Summation

The writings of Dr. Nawal al- Saadawi reveal multiple discriminations across several planes: women's discrimination, abuse of the low classes by the rich and the powerful, and religion's control of the public-political arena. Saadawi advocates social equality for all, complete, comprehensive liberation of the entire social body, as real liberation for woman is impossible within an oppressive and exploitative social system. She fights for the feminization of all of life's systems, to convert the current social order based on the patriarchal system, managed according to the principle of male and elders' control, to an open and un-oppressive society, based on: justice, equality, and freedom of the individual. She realizes that oppression and exploitation of Arab women will not cease without a drastic change of the social order and current powerful social factors.