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A critical reflection on Egyptian Feminism and Psychology: Nawal El Saadawi, the best loved, most hated and best-known feminist in the Arab world.

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Nawal El Saadawi's name is known to many in the Middle-East for having been stained by social taboo, controversy and continuous debate over the past decade. She is one of Egypt's most outspoken feminist writers and a Psychiatrist by training. Her profile has never been higher since the revolution in 2011 and its aftermath. In her time, she has stood for Presidency and advocated for women rights, anti-oppression movements, gender identity, freedom, and has campaigned against FGM and against wearing the veil for the most parts of her career. She defines herself wherever she goes as a proud Arab woman, an activist, a writer and a free-spirited Egyptian who demands nothing but full respect from men and from a society which still holds onto values and beliefs of a stagnant culture and religion. El Saadawi once claimed that her role is to link politics and society, to bring both together in a fight for justice and to ask why.

Why does she write?

El Saadawi has contributed much to the psychological, feminist, and anti-oppression movements and literature because she is not satisfied with an oppressive culture, the rise of an oppressive regime after regime, and is fervently opposed to oppressive relationships with men – the “*Other*” she is not. Her fight is to change things in Egypt; and continues to be her motivation behind her very sharp tongue and her pen.

It is no wonder that El Saadawi was actively involved in key events which shaped the socio-political landscape of the Egyptian government today. Campaigning on many occasions entirely fearless, striding where others still fear to tread. One can clearly see in her videos a sense of shock from her interviewers as she elaborates on her straight-forward answers to their relentless debates.

El Saadawi wrote about what she knew best; the life and struggles of the Egyptian women. She has published more than 50 titles in Arabic; *Woman at a Point Zero*, *God Dies by the Nile*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, only to name a few. Luckily, for many intellectuals who share her views, her words were translated in many languages and her books tell many tales of women protagonists who have experienced injustice, abuse, oppression, and discrimination for the very mere fact of being women in the world, and, more tragically so, in a ‘Middle-Eastern’ world.



Egyptian life Politicized

El Saadawi rose to fame as many Egyptian writers whose names became known with the deterioration of the state of freedom of expression in Egypt over the past 5 years. It became customary at one point for Egyptian newspapers to report of writers who disappeared, were kidnapped and imprisoned. History retells the story of a 'state of exception', which lasted for most part of President Mubarak's ruling as it was for Nasser and Sadat before him. Egyptian life to this day is politicized, vulnerable and tied to the survival of a ruling regime. El Saadawi who lived in one of the crowded suburbs in Shubra, one of the oldest Cairo tower blocks not far from the Tahrir Square, claims that her fame and career did not make her rich: *"When were dissident writers in it for the money?... especially in Egypt where copyright is, to put it mildly, tricky to enforce?"* she says in one interview. Perhaps, there was once some respect for holding an academic profession in Egyptian history, to a certain extent witnessed during the intellectual renaissance in Egypt during Nasser's reign in the 1950s where women followed European fashion and architects landscaped Cairo to be an extension of Europe; parts of which are still visible in the architecture of Tahrir Square and other old buildings scattered around the city. There has been a gradual decline in the way that society and the people see an intellectual profession; especially since the early 70s. The rise of fanatics such as the Muslim Brotherhood movement have influenced the government since Sadat's regime until their diminishing influence with the fall of President Morsi. El Saadawi was amongst many women who marched in Tahrir Square in 2011. She is openly skeptical of the current regime led by General Sisi in Egypt. As many of the older leftists and intellectuals who joined the revolution, she believes that there is a world of difference between Mubarak and Sisi. General Sisi, came to power on the back of a coup in 2013 and has successfully managed to suppress, if not get rid of, the Muslim Brotherhood. This is something that has never happened with Mubarak or with Sadat before him. However, she is skeptical if this could be an opportunity for the younger generations to implement strategies to change the political landscape once again and rise against cultural stigma and against the crippling ideologies, religion and traditions. This is a pivotal theme raised by El Saadawi in her writings.

Why is She Right?

The situation in Egypt today continues to be alarming especially as General Sisi's ruling approach is as a counter-revolutionary. State killings, high-profile disappearances, and the number of government opponents in prisons continues to rise, though is largely undocumented. An example is the scandal which emerged in the Egyptian media as party candidates expressed their wish to stand for 2018 elections against the sitting President. It was reported that: *"sitting president takes more than 97% of vote, having silenced opponents."* Five potential opponents were prevented from getting on the ballot as speculations and accusations around their businesses, character and integrity came to the surface. This shows, El Saadawi claims that there is discontent at the current regime from within the state and the people. There is a clear crackdown on anyone who wishes to run for presidency, and on freedom of speech, something which El Saadawi sees as a continuous trend that accompanies every regime in Egypt. To date, El Saadawi reveals, people are worried in the current regime about the future and they have every right to be so. Since the revolution, it has been revealed that 61% of Egypt's population are under the age of 30. The revolution was appealing to the youth of Egypt who had ambition for renewed hope and prosperity as they entered their careers, but it patently obvious that those who rule do not have young Egypt at the heart of their political ambitions. Sisi's agenda has been ambiguous from the very beginning and more so his views on the education of youth, women's rights, and the hope for building bridges to create an intellectual platform for a better dialogue and a brighter future for the country.

Breaking from Dogma

“This is not liberalism. This is censorship.”

~ Nawal El Saadawi

In Greek mythology, sexuality is often depicted as a powerful tool that seemingly facilitates the liberation of women. Hercules' desire for Omphale held him captive at her feet. Even with her formidable influence over him through his love for her, she was unable to avenge herself. In Aristophanes' play 'Lysistrata' a band of women joined forces to gain social ends through the sexual needs of their men. This was based on the legend of the Sabine women who at the end abandoned their plan of remaining sterile to punish their ravishers. The truth that El Saadawi stresses over and over in her writings is that women have not been socially or psychologically emancipated through men's needs or sexual desires. It is the desire for offspring which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female 'Other'. The absolute and the 'Other' relationship dictates that 'man' is the subject or original and 'woman' is the extension or object. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*: "*Biological need—sexual desire and desire for posterity—which make the male dependent on the female, has not liberated women socially.*" (1949, p.9). Both de Beauvoir and El Saadawi agree that for one to exist, one must exist only in relation to the other. "*Humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as a relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... He is the subject, he is the absolute- She is 'the Other'*" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.286). In Egyptian society, this ideology is strongly embedded in the cultural norms and religion. Women are identified with inferiority while men identify with superiority – something which is reflected and depicted in all social interactions. This is passed on from father to son and from mother to daughter; one generation after another. Social values and norms have shaped the Egyptian woman to become, as de Beauvoir states, 'the second sex' and men the superior sex which forms both the socio-cultural and psychological foundations of patriarchal society.

In El Saadawi's narrative, *The Fall of the Imam* (1987), she presents a non-Western perspective on the social construction of gender which led to the oppression of women for decades. The narrative depicts gender inequality in religious discourse and how religion is socially constructed leading to a deep-set psychological view and experience of it. The entanglement of religion in culture makes it easy to claim that within the discussions of male and female characteristics, there are metaphorical references to the limitations of freedom due to social hierarchies. The abuse of religion is an underlying theme in her novel. The opening scene depicts the stoning of the female protagonist; an act which signifies shame and sin in Middle Eastern cultures and goes back many years. 'Bint Allah' is stoned by the village people for being a child of sin; the off-spring of a sinful mother who met the same fate. The narrative unfolds to reveal that the town Imam refuses to acknowledge that Bint Allah is his daughter. He fears discrediting his religious leadership, authority, and position of power amongst the people. The psychological interplay between characters show how El Saadawi challenges religious contradictions which are embedded in the Egyptian lifestyle and, more importantly, are imposed on women in the name of a God.

El Saadawi's Own Psychology

One cannot overlook that it is El Saadawi's life experiences and upbringing as an Egyptian woman, as an oppressed female writer, as a Psychiatrist tending to women experiencing severe psychological distress at the hands of their loved ones, fellow citizens, and their religious society, and as an advocate for justice that drew her into the discussions of the inferior 'Other'. Viewed with suspicion by the Egyptian authorities, El Saadawi was imprisoned in Qanatir women's prison in 1981, drawing on her experience in her memoir, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1983).

In many of her works, be they on her clinical Psychoatry work, her novels, or her feminist manifestoes males are shown to use their authority and power to segregate the lifestyle of men from women. The ‘religiously acceptable’ is highlighted in gender relationship, and religion is described by El Saadawi as being used as a quasi ‘political ideology’, and a ‘veil to the mind’ which hinders women from clear thinking and is manifested in culture, politics, media, and education to enforce and perpetuate this oppressive lifestyle. Although de Beauvoir may have assessed El Saadawi’s writings to have an overemphasis on the victimisation of women (if she had had the opportunity), it is a true and problematic feature of all non-Western cultures. In *The Second Sex*, she writes:

“If a little girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded with women and men who seemed to her undoubted equals, the meanings of the castration complex and of the Oedipus complex would be profoundly modified.... the child would perceive around her an androgynous world and not a masculine world.” (1949, p. 829)

Concluding Comment

In conclusion, patriarchy is always built on injustice. There is no doubt that El Saadawi has devoted her career to speaking out against all forms of oppression against women and advocating freedom as a precursor to better psychiatric health. As an Egyptian feminist writer, she was forced to leave her country after her name was included on a fundamentalist death list following the publication of her 1987 novel, *The Fall of the Imam*, has been detained by the Government, and has suffered years of public and political abuse and defaming. Political persecution and threats from Islamist groups saw El Saadawi flee Egypt for the USA in 1988, where she taught at various prestigious institutions and only returned in 1996. She went on to defeat a case that demanded the withdrawal of her Egyptian nationality in reaction to her play *God Resigns*. She is a relentless Egyptian writer who has been inspired by women’s struggles in life. As one of the most well-known feminist writers worldwide, El Saadawi’s books have been translated into over 30 languages and are taught in universities across the world which shows the impact of her voice nationally and internationally. In an interview with the Frontline Club in London in 2011 after the Egyptian revolution, El Saadawi, jokingly concluded, referring to her political life and personal experiences of marriage, said: *“I was afraid when I divorced my first husband, I didn’t know what was going to happen to me. Divorce in Egypt is bad, but then I was ok, so I divorced my second and my third husbands. I learned to be brave. We need to undo the fears of our childhood.”* El Saadawi’s name today is known to younger and older generations and is integral to psychological and psychiatric, gender studies, and feminist discourses. She is someone who championed the interests of women and challenged traditional customs from campaigning and marching in the streets in Tahrir Square in 2011 to fighting for a brighter future for the youth. She remains a tireless critic of all that is wrong in the psychological and psychiatric detention of free citizens, and especially of women – and her name shall long be remembered as one of the most divisive, but forward thinking academic, political, and feminist Psychiatrists in not only the history of Egypt, but that of the world.

Key texts:

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Videos:

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<https://youtu.be/Y8vheC2lZmo>

Insight with Nawal El Saadawi, Frontline Club in conversation with special correspondent and presenter for BBC News, Razia Iqbal. <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/18015993>

https://www.frontlineclub.com/insight_with_nawal_el_saadawi/

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