

'WHY KEEP ASKING ME ABOUT MY IDENTITY?'

NAWAL EL SAADAWI



THE
Nawal El Saadawi
READER

The Nawal El Saadawi Reader



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About the author

Egyptian novelist, doctor and militant writer on Arab women's problems and their struggle for liberation, Nawal el Saadawi was born in the village of Kafr Tahla. Refusing to accept the limitations imposed by both religious and colonial oppression on most women of rural origin, she qualified as a doctor in 1955 and rose to become Egypt's Director of Public Health. Since she began to write over 30 years ago, her books have concentrated on women. In 1972, her first work of non fiction, *Women and Sex*, evoked the antagonism of highly placed political and theological authorities, and the Ministry of Health was pressurised into dismissing her. Under similar pressures she lost her post as Chief Editor of a health journal and as Assistant General Secretary in the Medical Association in Egypt. From 1973 to 1976 she worked on researching women and neurosis in the Ain Shams University's Faculty of Medicine; and from 1979 to 1980 she was the United Nations Advisor for the Women's Programme in Africa (ECA) and Middle East (ECWA). Later in 1980, as a culmination of the long war she had fought for Egyptian women's social and intellectual freedom, an activity that had closed all avenues of official jobs to her, she was imprisoned under the Sadat regime. She has since founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and devoted her time to being a writer, journalist and worldwide speaker on women's issues.

With the publication by Zed Books in 1980 of *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, English language readers were first introduced to the work of this major writer. Zed Books has also published four of her previous novels, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), *God Dies by the Nile* (1985), *The Circling Song* (1989) and *Searching* (1991). Nawal El Saadawi has received three literary awards.

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Introduction

My mother told me that I was a quiet child, that I spent hours alone humming tunes to myself before I could even speak. Once I learned to speak, I started asking those questions that parents do not answer, such as 'Where did I come from?' or 'Where did my dead grandfather go?' and 'Why does my older brother enjoy more freedom and privileges than I do?'

Once I learned to read and write, I started writing stories for myself in which the protagonists were my mother, my father, and my eight brothers and sisters. I used to take a pencil and sketch the faces of the members of my family. I felt a strong desire to draw portraits of people around me. I also had a strong urge to express my moods through my writings, and to register the events I witnessed in a way that reflected my thinking and my views of them.

My mother was a woman of great intellectual ambition, which was aborted when her father took her out of school at the age of seventeen to marry my father. And though her married life was relatively happy, she yearned for her old dream of being a woman of importance, intellectually or scientifically.

I have probably inherited from my mother this ambition. When I was a child, I used to hear her repeat that she would have loved to visit the whole world by plane, or that she would have wanted to be a scientist like Madame Curie, or an accomplished pianist, or a poet, painter or surgeon.

I never heard my mother praise marriage as an institution even though my father was in her view an ideal husband. She was very perceptive and considered my father a rarity among men. She witnessed the life of her mother and father, and she lived the sadness and misery of her mother, whose husband imprisoned her in the house. My mother hated marriage because her own mother hated marriage and cursed marriage as a cemetery for women.

So as a child I hated marriage and I never dreamed of myself in a wedding dress. Instead I dreamed that I was a physician, a creative writer, an actress, a poet, a concert musician, or a dancer.

When I graduated from medical school in 1955 at the age of twenty-four, I was a very young woman, extremely idealistic, daydreaming that I would live in a poor, sick village where I would treat everybody without ever charging them, where I would never be afraid of contagion, where I would work day and night until I died of a contagious disease.

I was very influenced by these persistent dreams which were enriched by all the novels that I read. No wonder then that I started practising medicine in the country. But after a few years I realized that the diseases of the peasants could only be cured by curing poverty. From this point on, I realized that writing was a stronger weapon than medicine in the fight against poverty and ignorance.

I started by writing poetry. Then I wrote short stories, novels and plays. Writing was a release for my anger. What angered me most was oppression: oppression of women and oppression of the poor. I used to write about love. Love that was nonexistent in the relations between men and women. I used to praise freedom and justice, without which life would have no value.

Then I discovered the relation between love and politics. Between poverty and politics. Between sex and politics. I realized that the political regime imposed the will of men upon women and imposed poverty and slavery upon the poor and the destitute. Later I discovered the relationship between the local rulers and the international rulers. And I understood what constitutes global imperialism, class exploitation, and patriarchal oppression of the family.

I realized the connection between the liberation of women and the liberation of the country from subordination or occupation by any form of new or old colonialism. I understood the connections between sex, politics, economics, history, religion and morality. This might be why my writings led me to the loss of my position in the government and to prison, to the confiscation of my books and to my being black-listed.

The boldest of my writings were hidden in the drawers of my desk since no publisher could dare to publish them. They dealt with the taboos (sex, politics, religion).

Despite the actions of the government, my writings spread among the Arab people from Morocco and Algeria to Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. They even penetrated Saudi Arabia. This triggered the enmity of the Arab governments towards me, enmity that became stronger as the numbers of people (women, men and the young) reading my writings increased.

The same authorities tried to alienate me from my readers. I became

a target of attack of the political forces that dominated the Arab countries, including Egypt. Among the means of attack was what we call the propaganda war. The authorities claimed that I was inciting women to absolute sexual freedom and immorality, even though in everything I wrote I tried to combat the reduction of women to sex objects fit only for seduction or consumption. I was even opposed to women wearing makeup. I encouraged women to be intelligent human beings and not mere bodies to satisfy men, to produce children, to work as slaves.

The authorities also claimed that I was a communist because I wrote about the subjugation of the poor and the causes of poverty and hunger. They claimed that I was against religion because I discussed rationally matters pertaining to religion and because my faith was not like theirs, inherited blindly as one inherits land or camels.

During the eighties, when my books were being translated into English, French, German and other languages, the authorities claimed I was writing for Western consumption. They made this claim even though I always wrote in Arabic, and all first editions of my books were published in Cairo. Only when my books were confiscated did I move publication to Beirut, Lebanon.

If my books met the approval of readers in Europe, America, or Japan, they met a greater degree of approval in the Arab countries, including Egypt.

The authorities in Egypt and the Arab world tried to prevent my message from getting to the people, and they largely succeeded, since they dominated all media of information and propaganda.

The most dangerous medium of information in our country is television, which explains why I have been banned from speaking on television in Egypt and in most of the Arab countries to this day. I still remember my last visit to Tunisia, in 1983. I was invited by a television director to talk onscreen about Tunisian women. We talked for about half an hour and the conversation was broadcast on television. As a result of the programme, the director was fired by a decree signed by President Bourguiba. Why? Because in our conversation about Tunisian women, I failed to mention that Bourguiba had liberated them.

I have numerous memories of my travels in the Arab countries; I always met with hospitality and love on the part of the people, but with hatred and enmity on the part of the rulers. This was natural, since everything I wrote unveiled the close connection between antiquated forms of government and all sorts of poverty, repression and discrimination based on sex, social class, religion or race.

I have met Israeli women who side with the Palestinians against the

Israeli government, which proves that a woman who praises justice transcends the artificial boundaries between countries, and sides with the truth even if that pits her against government.

The women's liberation movements have played a very important role since the 1970s in struggling against neocolonialism and the multinational companies, against wars, the arms race and nuclear armament, against racism and against discrimination based on race, colour, religion or social class.

I have always felt that the pen was an effective weapon that I could use against injustice and oppression. But writing is also a very private undertaking, which could lead to one's isolation and removal from the battles of life. In order to avoid such isolation, in 1982 I founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. We have been working diligently since then towards the advancement of Arab women. Our motto is: 'Power of Women – Solidarity – Unveiling of the Mind.'

Power is necessary, for what is right is lost without power. Just as power without right is tyranny.

Awareness is also necessary, since knowledge generates power. It is impossible for a woman (or a man) to know her or his rights if she or he wears a veil on the mind. What the media accomplish in the Arab countries (as in the rest of the world) is that they delude the people by placing a veil on their minds through which they cannot see what is happening to them or around them.

This delusion takes different forms depending on the country. In the industrial capitalist countries, there are modern technological means to brainwash the people. The governing bodies in our countries imported this modern technology, and television became one of the most dangerous devices for destroying the human mind.

What is the role of the book against this octopus? Millions watch television but only thousands read books. Such is the tragedy, which is compounded by the fact that the books promoted by the authorities are not the best: rather they are the ones that can best be used to mislead and delude the minds of the people. What I mean here by 'mind' is not limited to the conscious; the brainwashing also manipulates the subconscious minds of the people.

In spite of all that, I still believe in writing. I still believe in the power of the truthful word to reach the minds and souls of people in spite of the barriers erected around them.

Writing has been the most important thing in my life, more important than marriage and more important than medicine. It is no wonder that I walked away from marriage and from medicine in order to write. I did not completely quit medicine, but I never devoted much

time to it. Similarly, I did not reject marriage completely, but I refused to be married to a man who would hinder my writing.

Even though my parents were relatively liberated, I sometimes clashed with them when I felt that they restricted my freedom.

For example, I married my first husband without the approval of my parents, and I assumed full responsibility for doing so. The marriage ended in divorce when I discovered that he was not the man I dreamed he was, that he was imposing restrictions on me, that he was standing in the way of my creativity. I had had a daughter with him. She was still a baby when she and I left the house. My daughter and I lived together alone for several years. Then I married my second husband, whom I later left. I remember my second husband telling me one day, 'You have to choose between me and your writings.' I answered, without hesitation, 'My writings.' Because I was pregnant, I had an abortion to get rid of the foetus. I decided never to get married again. But several years later, I met a truly liberated man who in 1964 became my third husband. I had a son with him, so I now have a daughter and a son.

I was unable to become a mother without becoming a wife, and I have always liked to experience life to the full, including motherhood and love. I am still married to my third husband, who respects the freedom and dignity of women. He too is a creative writer and artist in addition to being a physician. He knows the value of literature and creativity to human life. He encourages the rebellious and revolutionary spirit; he is also a revolutionary and a rebel. Literary writing, medicine, and the liberation of human beings – men or women – brought us together. His name is Sherif Hetata and he has a long history of struggle against the British and against oppression and exploitation. He was among the best students at medical school, but he spent thirteen years in prison because of his intellectual and political rebellion.

I also was imprisoned during the regime of Sadat, but I was luckier than my husband. After Sadat was assassinated, I was set free by Hosni Mubarak, the president who succeeded him, after having spent only three months in prison. Were it not for these circumstances, I would probably have spent thirteen years in prison as my husband did.

Imprisonment in my country is always a possibility for any person who thinks and writes freely. Most of the men and women I know have been in prison at one time in their life.

As for women generally in my country, their husbands are their permanent prisons. It is very difficult for a woman not to be married. Extramarital love and sex are forbidden to women, but men are free in this regard. I have fought this moral double standard in my writings.

The first nonfiction book I wrote about women was titled *Women and Sex*. It was published in 1970, and confiscated by the Egyptian censors. It was because of this book that in 1972 I lost my job as director general of health education at the Ministry of Health and the publication of the health journal of which I was editor-in-chief ceased.

During the Sadat regime I was blacklisted, publication of my books was forbidden in Egypt, and I therefore started publishing my books in Beirut. I wrote articles that criticized Sadat's policies and uncovered his ambivalence. He preached democracy but practised dictatorship.

Nothing proves Sadat's dictatorship more than the fact that he threw me in prison because of what I wrote, even though I had never belonged to any political party. It was well known that I was a writer, independent from political parties, who expressed her opinions freely.

That is why I write. I write everywhere and under any circumstances. Even in the prison cell I wrote. Every morning the prison guards would enter and search my cell from floor to ceiling. Their chief would shout: 'If we find a paper and a pen, that would be more dangerous for you than if we found a gun.'

They never found the paper and the pen that I hid. This was my small triumph which filled me with hope in my prison cell.

But even outside prison, life is filled every day with small triumphs over the oppression, aggression and tyranny of the authorities. Because of these small triumphs I live my life and never lose hope or optimism even in the gloomiest and darkest of circumstances.

We are going through times of decadence – not only in the Arab world but in the world in general – but such decadence will be outweighed by a new awakening, and a new dawn.

Women pay dearly with their freedom and dignity to obey the laws of marriage and the patriarchal class system that dominates society. Women also pay dearly in order to become free and escape domination.

I have chosen to pay such a price and become free rather than pay the price and become a slave. In either case we pay a high price. Why pay it to attain slavery and not freedom?

My third husband and I have succeeded in forming a family that abides neither by the prevailing laws of marriage nor by the inherited traditions. He and I instituted our own law based on equality among us. We also succeeded in creating a new understanding of motherhood and fatherhood in relation to our daughter and our son.

All four of us joined hands in founding the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. We have all been active in its various committees. The educational and the youth committees, among the most active committees in the organization, were founded by my daughter with the

help of my son and other young men and women. The Arab Women's Solidarity Association was the first pan-Arab organization to be accorded international status at the United Nations.

What distinguishes the activities of our organization is that men and women are involved: we do not classify people according to their sex. Some of the male members are more zealous towards women's causes than some of the women.

On 15 June 1991 the Egyptian government closed the Egyptian branch of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association illegally, and without reason – except that we had stood out against the Gulf War. We took the government to court. Since then, the case has remained buried in the court system.

But the international Arab Women's Solidarity Association continues its work, and our fifth international conference is scheduled to take place in Cairo in October 1997.

In June 1992 the Egyptian government said that terrorist organizations had placed a number of writers, including myself, on a 'death list'. Government security guards surrounded my home and I was provided with a bodyguard to accompany me everywhere. After their arrival, I no longer felt safe in my own home. I left Egypt and went to Europe and then to the USA, where I was a visiting professor at Duke University for four years. But I decided to return, and since the end of 1996 I have lived in Egypt once again with my family.

My work as a psychiatrist has allowed me to meet many women (and men) who are victims of subjugation, oppression and fear. But I have for many years considered myself a writer rather than a physician. Today I devote most of my time to writing, and in my spare time, after I have finished writing for the day, I tend to other work that awaits me at my office. Very often I escape to my village where I spend a few days, weeks or months tending a new literary work away from the congestion and noise of Cairo.

In 1995 I published the first part of my autobiography in Arabic. I am now writing the second part. In 1993 my novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* was published in Arabic. The 1991 Gulf War was important in the genesis of this novel: after the war the characters of this novel started to live with me. Oil was the reason for the Gulf War. Oil has been the reason for the continuing colonial aggression against us in the Arab world for the past half-century. Arab rulers, including the Gulf kings and princes, collaborated with the neocolonizers. Millions of women and men in our region suffer poverty, ignorance and disease. My novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is about that suffering. And it describes what happens when its heroine tries to escape her oppression

– in all its forms. It deals, that is, in fictional terms with the ideas and themes contained in the nonfiction writings collected in this anthology.

[Edited and updated version of 'An Overview of My Life', translated from the original Arabic by Antoinette Tuma and published in *Contemporary Authors' Biography* series, Vol.11, Gale Research Inc., 1990, and updated by the author]

PART ONE

Gendering South–North
Politics

