POWER OF WOMEN – SOLIDARITY – UNVEILING OF THE MIND
The Life and Work of Nawal El Saadawi

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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ABSTRACT

In the Middle East and around the world, women’s rights issues are the subjects of much discussion. Although there are many scholars and activists with interests in this area, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi is one woman who has truly devoted her life to women’s rights issues, experiencing firsthand some of the terrible treatments to which women are exposed, and truly devoting her life to those causes in which she believes, even going to prison for her beliefs. For more than two decades, El Saadawi has educated men and women around the world on some most sensitive topics such as female circumcision, incest, and sexuality. In this thesis, I explore El Saadawi’s work and life and examine how it is accepted by others such as fellow activists and the government, and the impact that it has on the world.

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In the world of Middle Eastern feminism, few women are, on the international level, as well respected, taught, and read about as Nawal El Saadawi. This dynamic Egyptian native—she lived in Egypt from the moment of her birth until the age of 60—has served women, students, and concerned citizens across the world as author, doctor, and feminist, starting as far back as the 1960s. Her life has been filled with joy and disappointment, encouragement and opposition, yet Nawal El Saadawi continues to teach, to write, and speak about those causes in which she truly believes and which she believes need justifying and clarification, influencing feminist movements in Egypt, the Middle Eastern region, and around the globe. Her writing, which began over 25 years ago, her work through organizations such as the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, and her inability to remain silent about the inequalities with which Arab women are forced to face and live on a daily basis, especially when faced with fierce opposition, are just a few of the many remarkable things about Nawal El Saadawi that make her stand out among her colleagues and peers. It is because of these things and more that I argue that Nawal El Saadawi is one of the world’s most important female activists, never yielding to opposition or compromising her values or beliefs, shedding new light on and educating both men and women on many issues such as rights and sexuality, and inspiring women all over the world to unite and fight the oppression with which they are faced.

Nawal El Saadawi’s voice in the struggle for women’s rights in the Middle East is clear and unwavering. For over 25 years, El Saadawi has been a constant force in this vast arena of inequality, bringing light to taboo issues such as the act of clitoridectomy and encouraging women to get out of the house, become independent beings, and fight for fairer living conditions. Backed by a degree from the University of Cairo in general medicine and psychiatry, El Saadawi has been a leading scholar in many previously unexplored or unpublished issues such as these.
In this paper, I will examine works written both by and about El Saadawi in order to display the full range of her work, how it is accepted by others, and its impact on people in various parts of the world. Although she is the author of both fiction and nonfiction, I will focus mainly on El Saadawi’s nonfiction works including autobiographical information, scholarly articles, and interviews. Because El Saadawi is a leading and known Egyptian feminist, and much has been written about her and her work, I will also be reviewing works written about El Saadawi including biographies written by University students such as myself, full books dedicated to El Saadawi and her organization, the AWSA, and references made about her by other well-known scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed.

**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

El Saadawi’s story begins on the night of her birth in the home of her parents, son of the peasant family of Al-Saadawi and daughter of the once-noble family of Shoukry Bey, whose lineage goes back to “the great Tala’at” of Istanbul. Her father, Al-Sayed Effendi Al-Saadawi, was, at the time, a teacher in the Ministry of Education, and her mother, Zaynab Hanem Shoukry, a wife and mother. Nawal Al-Sayed Habash El-Saadawi, was, in October 1931, the second child of nine born to her young parents (all nine of their children were born before El Saadawi’s mother reached the age of 30). Born just one year after her older brother Tala’at, Nawal was the first of the six female children that her mother would bear.

In our world, and by our standards, the birth of a healthy baby, no matter the sex, is reason for most people to celebrate. In 1931, however, conditions in Kafr Tahla, the small village outside of Cairo in which El Saadawi was born, were much different. In her autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi describes in her own words the night of her birth and the reactions of those who witnessed the event.
"...Two broad, horny palms caught the rounded head in their grasp, long sinewy fingers pushed the straining thighs apart...The two small thighs of the newly born baby were held tightly closed, one against the other, with a force which seemed almost superhuman. It was as though between them lay something which had to be hidden, something which was a source of shame. But the steely fingers of the daya pushed one thigh away from the other as if they were the legs of a chicken, eager to reveal whatever good or evil lay hidden between them, to be the first one who would let out a screaming ‘Yoo-yoo’ if her eyes fell on a penis...if she glimpsed the sacred organ bestowed by Allah on males alone, or to be the first to lower her head, show a solemn face, and become as silent as the dead if all she could find was a cleft—that unhappy vaginal opening accursed in this world since sinful Eve...

I happened to be that thing which the daya turned over between her hands sucking at her lips with a sound of deep regret before she let it drop to drown in the basin full of water.”

Although she is not sure how she escaped death when dropped into this basin of water, El Saadawi lived through this incident and grew to become a strong young girl, both physically and in spirit. Nonetheless, throughout her childhood, members of her family reminded El Saadawi that they all wished she had been born a male and that males and their achievements were inherently “worth” more than those of their female counterparts. During her many talks with her father’s mother, Sittil Hajja, for example, El Saadawi’s grandmother often told her that “A boy is worth fifteen girls at least,” providing evidence of this by elaborating, “Girls are a blight. A boy, the Prophet bless him, lifts his father’s head up in the world, and in the next, carries his father’s name, and hands it down. With a boy, the family household is kept running, but girls get married and go off, leaving the father’s house, and their children carry the names of the men they
Sittil Hajja further emphasized this point during the Eid Al-Sagheer (small feast), when visitors and members from both El Saadawi’s mother’s and father’s side gathered to eat and celebrate. Sittil Hajja, the most prominent of the visitors, would sit on a sofa and wait for the children to gather around her. She then distributed festival presents and millimes, small amounts of money, to the children. To each of the boys, with whom she always started, Sittil Hajja gave two millimes, but to the girls she gave only one, reminding young Nawal that “God has told us that a girl is worth half a boy.”

Even more upsetting than her grandmother’s words, however, was the lack of praise and encouragement from her family when it became clear that Nawal excelled in school. Instead, any joy at her accomplishments and success was overshadowed by the fact that her older brother, son of their father, the town’s Inspector of Education, failed at his own examinations. “Your sister,” her father would say to him, “the girl succeeded in her examinations, and you go on failing?”

At school, El Saadawi had a reputation of being very intelligent and passed her examinations with distinction; after finishing primary school, her parents agreed to send El Saadawi to Helwan Secondary School for Girls in Cairo, where she lived with relatives, and then in the dormitories. Here, El Saadawi quickly became well known for her love of prose, poetry, and literature, and was often asked to give a speech or recite a poem at school events. Students and teachers both admired her and said, “She is a model pupil, combines science with religious faith is outstanding in chemistry, physics, and rhetoric. Her eloquence is remarkable, and she writes both poetry and prose, and knows the Qur’an and the Prophet’s sayings by heart.”

El Saadawi passed her secondary school certificate with distinction. She wanted to go on to the School of Literature, but was convinced by her father that she was much too smart to do that.
and become just another government servant or clerk. Instead, at the suggestion of her mother, Nawal turned to medicine. In 1948, at the age of 17, El Saadawi was admitted to Fouad Al-Awal University in Giza. This was the first time in 10 years that El Saadawi had been in a co-educational school. When she graduated in 1955, El Saadawi was only twenty-four years old. She has practiced in the areas of gynecology, family medicine, thoracic surgery, and psychiatry.

Despite all of her accomplishments, “intelligence in girls was not considered a quality.” Sittil Hajja often said to El Saadawi’s aunt Rokaya, “She’s exactly like her father,” then make a sucking noise with her lips to express regret before she added, ‘if only she had been born a boy!’ and at night, El Saadawi could hear her father’s whispers from the room which he shared with her mother, “I wish she had been born the boy and he the girl. This must be a sign of Gods wrath descending upon us…” implying that Nawal’s intelligence and achievements were not due to her own hard work, but were instead the results of Allah’s anger towards her parents, a kind of sin that must be concealed.

When asked in a 1986 interview how she became a feminist, El Saadawi replied that it was incidents such as these within her family that first made her aware of the discrimination and injustice that exists towards women. She said that, “I became a feminist when I was a child. Starting to feel the discrimination between myself and my brother, and how he was treated, how he had more privileges than I…I did very well at school. He did not. But over the summer holiday, he was rewarded by being allowed to travel, and I was rewarded with nothing.” Instead of being outside and playing with the other children, El Saadawi had to stay in the house and help her mother in the kitchen, her least favorite room in the house.
Despite all of this, El Saadawi’s childhood was not altogether unhappy. Although in some ways fairly traditional, both El Saadawi’s mother and father were also progressive in many ways. She describes her parents and family as “quite liberal, relative to other people.” Her father, “a kindly man,” believed in the importance of education for both girls and boys; he paid school or college expenses (although sometimes under financial stress) for all nine of his children, and unlike other parents in their village, saw nothing wrong with reading from the Gospels and encouraged his children to learn the English language. And although it was her father who paid for her education, it was really El Saadawi’s mother, Zaynab, who pushed for it, responding to her husband when he said to her, “Zaynab, the work you are doing at home has become too much for you. Why not take Nawal out of school so that she can give you a helping hand?” by replying without hesitation, “My daughter will never be made to stay at home. I don’t need help.”

El Saadawi’s mother encouraged and supported Nawal in other ways, too. It was she who taught the young Nawal to write her name and to read the Arabic alphabet and language, and it was she who stood up for her and whispered secret words of encouragement to her when she struggled against relatives like her father, aunts or grandmothers, or with her uncle Sheikh Muhammad, who did not believe in girls going to university or with their mixing with boys and men. “At the age of ten,” El Saadawi writes, “I could have been trapped in a marriage were it not for her.” It is quite clear from the way that she writes that El Saadawi was more influenced by her mother than by her father. She includes stories and quotations and references to her in nearly all of her writing, and she writes fondly of her, remembering that,

“My mother made my childhood very happy…Her voice in the stillness of the night was like the voice of God, and her laugh in the morning a ray of sunlight. It made me run towards her, lift my arms up in the air so that she would take me to her breast, and...
we could play or sing together...”, “She had a very special laugh that belonged only to her, and resembled no other laugh in the world. It rang out in the house, swept through the walls into the street into open space filling the whole universe...Its ring in my ears was wonderful, like the ring of sweet limpid water in a vessel of pure silver or crystal”, she was a “refined sensitive lady with the gentle voice, the silky skin, and the honey-coloured eyes I knew.”

When her mother died, El Saadawi was only 25 years old. Of all of her children, Nawal was the only one who cared for her, who fed her and held her in her arms as she lay on her deathbed. Although more than thirty years have passed since then, this moment continues to remain fresh in El Saadawi’s mind, just as her mother’s laugh and smell remain with her.

Inevitably, however, the two women differed in a few ways. Zaynab, for example, maintained throughout her life “certain traits of femininity” in which Nawal does not believe. Whereas Nawal loves her dark skin and “never hid it under make-up or powder, or pastes of any kind,” just moments before her death, her mother “stretched out her hand to a little flask of kohl, pulled out the rod and drew a line of black around her eyes, painted her lips with a baton of rouge, sprayed perfume around her neck and behind her ears, and combed her hair.” Another difference is that while Zaynab once had great dreams for herself, regretted being just a housewife, and wanted at one time to be a musician, finish her education, or invent something useful, she did not rebel when her father, Nawal’s grandfather Shoukry took her out of school and married her to Nawal’s father. Nawal, however, did not let this happen to herself.

As a young girl, El Saadawi saw the institution of marriage as Sittil Hajja once described it to her: “Verily it is true, for Allah is my witness, the wedding bed is a deathbed in this village of ours, believe me, O daughter of my son.” When presented to a potential husband, El
Saadawi often sabotaged or ruined the event, sometimes intentionally and sometimes by accident. After being groomed against her will, she rubbed off the makeup that took her aunts so long to apply, sneezed in the faces of her potential bridegrooms, spilled hot coffee and water all over, and one time took a bite of a black eggplant before entering the room, staining her freshly-scrubbed teeth which were exposed as she grinned at her suitor.26

EL SAADAWI THE ACTIVIST

Perhaps the biggest issue about which El Saadawi and her mother disagreed, albeit in principle and not face-to-face, was that of female circumcision. El Saadawi is the first Egyptian woman to have confronted this very sensitive issue (along with other issues such as prostitution, sexual diseases, incest, and sexual exploitation). Clitoridectomy, which El Saadawi first addresses in her book, *Al-Mara wa al-Jins* (*Women and Sex, 1972*), is a procedure which she herself experienced.27

When El Saadawi reached the age of six in 1937, it was custom for all girls to be circumcised before they started menstruating. As she puts it, “Not a single girl whether from the city of the village, from a rich or poor family, escaped... My mother did not rescue me from this operation, nor did she rescue any of her other daughters...”28 To call this painful procedure an operation, however, is not completely accurate. At the age of six, four women took El Saadawi from her warm bed in the middle of the night and pinned her down on the cold bathroom floor. She did not know what was happening, and thought she had been kidnapped; instead of cutting her throat, as she thought her captors were going to do, the *daya* cut another piece of her skin, called *al-bazar*, “at its root” using a razor sharpened on a piece of stone “back and forth until it turned red like fire.”29 The *daya* then buried the blade, called on Allah three times to protect those present from the devil, and washed the blood off of her hands. In the *daya’s* eyes, this
procedure was an act of purification; it killed the germs, sterilized the wound, and cleansed it of all sin. A few days later, the *daya* returned to look between El Saadawi’s thighs and announced, “All is well. The wound has healed, thanks be to God.”

Since then, El Saadawi has helped protect many girls from the barbarous act of clitoridectomy, including her own daughter, by educating and organizing groups against it. By bringing light to taboo issues such as this, “…no writer has played a more important and eloquent role than Nawal El-Saadawi—nor has any feminist been more outspoken and done more to challenge the misogynist and androcentric practices of the culture,” writes Leila Ahmed of El Saadawi in her classic, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

Outside the area of clitoridectomy, El Saadawi has played a major role in “defining the territory and articulating the discourses of female subjectivity” in Egypt and in the Middle Eastern region. Perhaps her greatest contribution is her simply putting these issues such as sexuality and gender into the foreground, genderizing her subject, starting open discussions about sexuality and women’s rights, and writing about these issues in books, such as *The Hidden Face of Eve* and *Women and Sex*, all with “the confidence of a physician, the passion of an activist, the credibility of an eyewitness and the pathos of an injured woman.”

**PRAISE AND DISAPPROVAL**

Other authors and experts in the field have praised El Saadawi’s work and writing. In Nadje Al-Ali’s book, *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement*, Al-Ali points out that even in the roughest of times, such as in 1985, when differences from within the women’s movement in Egypt became emphasized and women were just as divided by men by the huge gaps that existed between the differing groups’ viewpoints, El Saadawi, whom Al-Ali describes as “one of the earliest and most powerful challenger of
modernist-nationalist discourses on women," continued to defend those ideals in which she believed and campaigned relentlessly to maintain them. \(^{35}\) Indeed, El Saadawi has displayed both courage and initiative in her assaults on male domination, patriarchal society, and all forms of authority that aid the subordination of women; she has truly initiated a kind of feminism that differs from previous trends. \(^{36}\)

On the other hand, there are many who fail to see or appreciate the road that El Saadawi has paved for them, and even more who criticize her work and views, often without having fully read her writing or who have read it in a context in which it was not meant to be presented. The reception of El Saadawi’s work varies depending on the part of the world in which it is received. For example, there is a notable difference between the reception of her work in the West and its reception in the Arab world, while at the same time, although El Saadawi has gained considerable fame in both of these regions, her work has remained “significantly marginal in Egypt,” illustrating the varying degrees of “like” that exist in regards to her work. \(^{37,38}\)

Finally, there are those activists and writers who recognize El Saadawi’s work but do not support it fully. Although they may distance themselves from El Saadawi, most activists in the Middle East acknowledge her courage and influence on several generations, and her pioneering role in women’s activism. Those who dislike El Saadawi’s work do so because they think that she is “too western,” “too radical,” “too elitist,” or “too authoritarian.” \(^{39}\) She is often berated and mocked for her fierce attacks on males. Her frankness, especially about sex and sexual oppression, is (and has been for many years) especially unwelcome by the Egyptian government, and today, El Saadawi needs bodyguards, even while at home in Egypt. \(^{40,41}\)

Over the years, the Egyptian government has strongly opposed El Saadawi and her work, which has engaged and enraged people across the political spectrum. In 1972, El Saadawi was dismissed from her job as Director-General of Health Education in Egypt following the
publication of *Women and Sex*, and in 1981, she was imprisoned for her writings and “outspoken speech” and “crimes against the state” by Egyptian President Sadat (She was released one month after his assassination). Health, the magazine that El Saadawi founded and edited for more than three years, and the Health Education Association that she and her husband formed, were also closed down because in the association and in the magazine, El Saadawi made connections between health and politics. Her writing, long considered “controversial and dangerous for the society,” was banished in Egypt and in several other Arab countries, forcing El Saadawi to publish her work in Beirut, Lebanon, and at a 1981 Gulf conference on women, there was a bomb scare just as El Saadawi was to speak. Again in 1991, the government found a way to “shut up” El Saadawi when the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA) was shut down after criticizing U.S. involvement in the Gulf War. To this day, El Saadawi is banned from speaking on television in Egypt and in most other Arab countries.

There is also a younger generation of activists in their 20s or early 30s who are less appreciative of El Saadawi’s work and contributions than older activists. When interviewed for Nadje Al-Ali’s book, most knew of or commented on El Saadawi’s work, especially *Women and Sex*, but few of these younger activists had actually read much of it. Even fewer yet have had any actual contact with El Saadawi, and based their opinions of her on heresay, backing up their assumptions with “what one had heard about her.” One young woman wrote:

“I have read Nawal, but very little. I only read her sociological analysis of the *Jahaliyya* [pre-Islamic] time. I don’t like her. I disagree with everything she’s doing. She’s so outspoken that it works against her. It is this aggression that I hate. She only speaks about the sexual aspect. I feel this is very superficial. I haven’t read any of her fiction.”
This difficulty in working together is not specific to El Saadawi and the younger generation of activists. The clash between authoritarian and hierarchical styles of decision making and "democratic aspirations" is a difficulty characteristic of the relationship between the older and newer generations in general. El Saadawi is just one of the many female activists in Egypt who fall under the "older generation" category and who feel sidelined by the newer, younger, professional women of today's movement. In response to these reactions and misinterpretations of her work, El Saadawi says that younger women have not read her work because it was prohibited and censored for so long, because for two years she lived and worked in the United States, and because she is not in the media in Egypt. 50

One of El Saadawi’s most famous books, Women and Sex, has alone provoked both positive and negative comments and discussion about El Saadawi. This book, which focuses on physical and psychological disease resulting from the sexual oppression of women "enlightened many women and helped raise consciousness of a whole generation of women students in the democratic movement of the time". 51 It also stirred up a lot of uproar and turmoil; many felt that El Saadawi was the victim of society’s double standard. Azza L. describes how she felt about the reception of Women and Sex and how El Saadawi was dealt with by the government:

"I used to attend her lectures at the Naqabat al-Attibaa [the doctors’ syndicate] every two weeks until they threw her out. Imagine, they threw her out, because she was writing a scientific book about virginity and circumcision. The book was called Women and Sex. She was trying to save women who were naïve and ignorant. It was a medical and scientific book. Today you see all these books about sex...In front of the café there was a guy selling sex books with pictures. Nobody is doing anything about this. The Islamists aren’t doing anything, but they did threaten Nawal, because she’s trying to empower women". 52
EL SAADAWI AND THE ARAB WOMEN’S SOLIDARITY ASSOCIATION

Nawal El Saadawi is not just trying to, but she is empowering women. One of the most successful ways that she has accomplished this over the years is through the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association. The AWSA was founded by El Saadawi in 1981, after she was released from prison. Before, she had never been involved in any party or group, but after being released realized the power of collective work. The AWSA was formed as a means of consolidating power, for El Saadawi believed that solidarity was imperative, that “right without power is ineffective, weak and easily lost”. When recognized by the Egyptian government in 1984, the AWSA became the first legal, independent feminist organization in Egypt.

In 1985, the AWSA was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations as an Arab non-governmental organization, and by the mid-1980s, the organization had grown to about 500 members in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, composed of mostly Arab professional women. The organization is international, not-for-profit, secular, and “aimed at the promotion of Arab women and Arab society in general, politically, economically socially and culturally—and seeks to consolidate the ties between women in all Arab countries”. The motto of the organization is: ‘Power of Women – Solidarity – Unveiling of the Mind.’ The AWSA is a part of a larger radicalization of the earlier women’s movement which did not touch issues such as sexuality and individual freedom. Some of the general objectives and principles of the association are as follows:

1. Women’s participation in social, economic, and cultural life of the Arab countries is necessary for the existence of democracy.

2. All forms of discrimination on the basis of sex both in the public and private spheres should be eliminated.
3. Efforts should be made to promote the creative development of women and the emergence of their distinctive personality to enable them to criticize the ideas and values aimed at undermining their struggle for freedom.

4. To combine intellectual and practical endeavors in order to improve work conditions and to take substantive and continuous steps to reach the broadest sectors of women in the poorer classes in both rural and urban areas.

5. To participate actively in projects aimed at intensifying the participation of women in political, economic, social and cultural activities at private and public levels; to explain to women the relationship between their problems and the problems of the society at large; and to open new fields of activities for the creative endeavors of women for the liberation of the mind and the stimulation of the capabilities of youth.

6. To open membership of the Association to those men who believe that advancement of Arab society cannot be accomplished without the liberation of women.

Clearly, the AWSA focuses on women’s rights, but also political and economic problems. One of the AWSA’s main points is that women’s rights cannot be achieved without social and economic equality for society as a whole. El Saadawi and the AWSA believe that liberation of Arab people can not be accomplished without the liberation of women, and that the liberation of women is necessarily dependent upon the liberation of the land from economic, cultural, and media domination. “The battle against dependence on foreign powers cannot be separated from that of women’s dependence on men,” she says, and how can a country be liberated if half of its inhabitants are dependent? As El Saadawi points out, many Egyptian women work, but almost all are financially dependent on their husbands; and for those who do control their own wages, this may provide them with economic but not social or psychological independence. Although they may be responsible for 50% of the household income, there is no sharing of decision-making or authority, which is completely the man’s responsibility and duty.
Another major goal of the AWSA is to prove that women are a viable source of political power. El Saadawi writes that the three conditions that must be present for a group to become a social force are: a consciousness of the true reasons for oppression and exploitation, political organization, and the economic ability to organize. Blatantly, Arab women lack some, if not all, of these conditions. Even the increasing amounts of political rights given to women such as the rights to vote, to be nominated and elected to parliament, the acquisition of these rights does not necessarily mean that women are an actual force. In many countries, the laws do not allow women to become a force by limiting their social action, allowing them only to establish charitable or cultural organizations. When political figures speak about the masses they forget that women make up half, and only address them in times of crisis or election, when their votes are needed.

One of the biggest challenges that the AWSA initially faced was getting interested women to actually join the organization, attend meetings. This "simple truth," as El Saadawi puts it, is that women are faced with an obstacle which men do not have. They physically cannot leave the house. In Egypt (and other Arab countries), men usually do not object to women's working outside of the home—some see it as their wife's duty—they do, however, object to their wives' participation in public political or cultural activities, leaving many women with two choices: to practice their rights and be active in public life, therefore sacrificing their marriage, or to "choose the security of marriage" over public activity and stay in the home at their husband's request. This is an obstacle with which women from all classes and sectors are faced, and it is a problem that men do not have to deal with at all. By doing this, men can control both women's minds and bodies. This is an example of how women are restricted by both public political and private family challenges, how they are ruled by two authorities, outside and inside the home.
FAMILY LIFE

El Saadawi herself has been restricted in some ways by her own private life. Her current husband, Dr. Sherif Hetata, is not her first. El Saadawi has been married three times, first to a man with whom she had one daughter. About this man, who imposed restrictions on her and stood in the way of her creativity, El Saadawi writes, “I erased his presence from my life”.66 After that, El Saadawi married another man whom she also left, this time because he told her “You have to choose between me and your writings,” to which El Saadawi replied, “My writings”.67 When she left this man, El Saadawi was pregnant, and had an abortion. After two unsuccessful marriages, El Saadawi vowed never to marry again, but later changed her mind when she met Hetata, who she describes as “a truly liberated man”. The two married in 1964, and had one son together, making El Saadawi the mother of both a girl and a boy.68

El Saadawi and Hetata are still together; they work beside one another and also with their children. All four of them have been active in the founding of and have served on various committees of the AWSA, and El Saadawi’s daughter, Mona, and son helped form some of the most active committees of the organization, the educational and youth committees.69 In 1997, El Saadawi described the family as abiding “neither by the prevailing laws of marriage nor by the inherited traditions. He [Hetata] and I instituted our own law based on equality among us”.70

THE HIDDEN FACE OF EVE AND ITS GLOBAL INTERPRETATIONS

Since being married to Hetata, El Saadawi has produced some of her finest works, including her most famous book, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which Hetata translated. This book, which is divided into sections: The Mutilated Half, Women in History, The Arab Woman, and Breaking Through, is truly a groundbreaking piece of literature that enlightened women not only throughout the Arab World, but in the West as well. The reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve*,
which is hailed a "classic" by many, marks El Saadawi's official crossover to the West. As mentioned before, one can clearly see how El Saadawi's books are received differently in different parts of the world, and *The Hidden Face of Eve* is no exception. In fact, the "politics of location" especially affect *The Hidden Face of Eve*. El Saadawi herself makes differences between the two editions of her book. The Western text includes omissions and additions that the original edition does not, complete with a special "Preface to the English Edition".

In many cases, nevertheless, what El Saadawi actually says or writes is less important than either the places from which she speaks or writes, the contexts in which her words are received, the audiences who read and hear her works, or the uses to which her words are put. In the West, El Saadawi's work is taken in a context that is saturated by stereotypes of Arab culture; El Saadawi is not always in control of her own voice. She writes in Arabic for Arab audiences, but addresses English-speaking audiences in lectures and interviews in English, and although most of her work is in Arabic, she is mentioned most as a "foremother" of the feminist movement only when abroad. Because she is one of the most translated Arab authors (male or female), and because there has been a shift to major American presses and because the institutionalization of women's studies has increased over the years, El Saadawi's books are seen on more and more syllabi in both undergraduate and graduate courses throughout the U.S., making her one of the most well-known "celebrity and representative Arab writers".

*The Hidden Face of Eve* has certainly played a major role over the years in El Saadawi's growing celebrity status. Because of this book, El Saadawi was seen as a real exception to the mainstream group of feminists and studies in the Middle East. When faced with resistance about exploring culturally taboo areas such as clitoridectomy and women's oppression as sexual beings, El Saadawi confronted these women's issues and raised questions about them.
In the first section alone of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi tackles nearly all of these taboo issues. Part 1: The Mutilated Half, includes chapters on the inequality that exists between young boys and girls, sexual aggression against female children, incest, rape, the extreme importance of "the very fine membrane called ‘honour,’” the hymen, female circumcision, contradictions within Arab culture, illegitimate children, prostitution, abortion, and generally "Distorted Notions about Femininity, Beauty, and Love".77

El Saadawi uses her experience and knowledge as a physician along with her experiences as a woman when she writes. She combines personal accounts, studies and information from scholarly journals, and stories from patients, exposing incidents and actions such as rape and incest that may have been assumed to be rare and unusual but in fact, are only hidden, spoken of to no one by either the child or the brother, uncle, relative, neighbor, or teacher that committed the crime. Put together, all of these factors give El Saadawi’s writing a unique perspective.77

In chapter three, for example, El Saadawi relays the story of a young girl who had a “grandfather with bad manners”. Starting when this girl was a mere five years old, her grandfather took her to a secluded place in the garden, and sat her on his lap. After she became drowsy, but not yet asleep, she told El Saadawi that she could feel his hand "creeping tenderly and stealthily under my clothes, and his finger disappearing to a hidden spot under my knickers".78 Besides El Saadawi, the girl never told this story to anyone. She kept it hidden from her mother, even after her grandfather died when she was ten. Like many girls, this one was hesitant at first, and felt comfortable sharing her story with El Saadawi only when she believed that she would not pass (a moral) judgment on her and when a confidence and trust were established between the two.79
Along with stories such as this one, *The Hidden Face of Eve* includes El Saadawi’s personal opinion and professional analysis of occurrences and practices such as this. She berates the education that female children grow up with in the Arab world which teaches them only the things that are considered harmful, forbidden, shameful, or outlawed by religion, forcing these young girls to suppress their desires and wishes, and reducing their personalities and mind until they become “a lifeless mould of muscle and bone and blood that moves like a wound up rubber doll”. 80 This “brainwashing of girls” paralyzes their ability to think and destroys any ability that they may have to see the exploitation to which they are subjected. 81

Regarding incest or sexual assault, El Saadawi writes that “most female children are exposed to incidents of this type,” and that they may occur without any force being used and may happen while the girl is asleep or while she is awake. Either way, she writes, it does not matter because the girl will not speak out against her assaulter, whomever he may be, because if there is any punishment given out, it will always be given to her, regardless of her argument or the circumstances. Even if the male is caught in the act, the family will “hush up” the incident and refuse to go to court in order to preserve their good name and keep its reputation intact. 82

Upholding her own honor and that of her family is of crucial importance to any Arab girl, and this can only be done by preserving her hymen until the night of her marriage, when it is pierced by either her new husband or by the dirty finger of a *daya*, the same woman who years before may have cut off the girl’s clitoris, all while family members eagerly wait to see the white towel stained with blood which is then held up by the proud father, the honor of this family and of his daughter intact. As for the male, the worst punishment he could receive (were her not a family member) is to be forced to marry the girl. 83

Unfortunately, however, many girls do not control the destiny of their own hymen. If she is raped and the aggressor escapes punishment, she alone is responsible for her lack of hymen on
her wedding night. Or if her hymen is the type that is thick and elastic and will break under the pressure of neither a man’s finger or penis, she is accused of not being a virgin, only because she will not bleed. According to El Saadawi, 11.2% of girls are born with this type of “elastic” hymen, 16.16% are born with one so thin that it is easily torn, 31.32% are born with a hymen so think that it cannot be penetrated, and a mere 41.32% are born with what is considered a “normal” hymen.84

It is this kind of information which El Saadawi presents in her books and conclusions such as the following that have made El Saadawi known as “the most famous, even notorious exponent of the more aggressive ‘Feminist’ stage”.85 When reviewing the status of women in the Arab world, El Saadawi wrote in 1980:

“Arab men, and for that matter most men, cannot stand an experienced and intelligent woman. It would seem as though the man is afraid of her because...he knows very well that his masculinity is not real, not an essential truth, but only an external shell, built up and imposed on women by societies based on class and sexual discrimination. The experience and intelligence of women are a menace to this patriarchal class structure, and in turn, a menace to the false position in which man is placed, the position of king or demi-God in his relations with women. This is essentially why most men fear and even hate intelligent and experienced women. Arab men shy away from marrying them, since they are capable of exposing the exploitation inherent in the institution of marriage as practiced to this day”.

EL SAADAWI THE WRITER

El Saadawi is more known for being a writer than for any other thing, including being a woman physician, mother, or the founder of the AWSA. Unlike some of her contemporaries like
Fatima Mernissi, El Saadawi uses “accessible language that is neither literary nor technical,” and her laid-back journalistic style appeals to a wide range of readers. Her writing is different because it focuses on poor and rural women; it shows their exploitation and oppression. Other Arab feminists write about only the interests of the middle and upper-classes of which they are members. And although she acknowledges the strength of media such as television and radio, El Saadawi still believes that writing is the best way to reach people. She writes, “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 is more important to El Saadawi than any other thing. To her, it is more important than marriage, which she proved when she left her second husband, and it is more important than medicine. Although she has not rejected the two completely, she refuses to let anything (or anyone) hinder her writing. Often, she is asked how she manages to combine medicine and writing, usually with an undertone of disapproval or disbelief. Because she is one of the few people to pursue both medicine and literature (the few male Egyptian doctors who practiced both quickly abandoned medicine and turned to writing completely), El Saadawi is surrounded by what she calls “an aura of strangeness”. Strange, however does not mean bad for El Saadawi; instead, her loves of both science and art nourish one another.

Even when dismissed from various positions because of her writing, or when put into jail, or blacklisted and forbidden to publish, El Saadawi has never stopped writing. Instead of yielding to the opposition that she faces, El Saadawi practices the politics of the “tireless pen”—the more the ban, the more must be written. During her short time in prison, every morning prison guards searched her cell and the chief would shout, “If we find a paper and a pen, that would be more dangerous for you than if we found a gun”. This, of course, made El Saadawi yearn even more for such a forbidden pen, and by the end of the day she had it. The pen was
uncomfortable and shorter than her fingers. If she pressed down too hard it ripped the lightweight paper, but if she did not use enough force, nothing showed up. The light in her cell was dim, and suspicious eyes stared at her as she wrote, yet EI Saadawi continued to write, even while imprisoned for the very “crime” which she was committing.  

Although her nonfiction has brought her much more attention than her fiction, a style that crosses the genre of fiction with autobiography, El Saadawi’s novels are also widely read, mostly outside of the Arab world. In Western classrooms, her novels are treated more like history than literary works, and are often the only Arab texts that Western students see (Arabs believe that El Saadawi’s work is praised by Westerners not based on merit, but because it fulfills their assumptions and stereotypes about Arabs).

**VIEWS AND BELIEFS: PATRIARCHY, RELIGION, HISTORY, the WEST (U.S.)**

EI Saadawi works and writes for and about only those causes in which she truly believes. She does not believe in the United Nations, for example, because after working there for two years, she quit, disappointed because once more, she was “trapped in the logic and the rigid chains of a bureaucratic establishment built on patriarchal class relations…” Throughout her writing, one can see these themes and ideas in which she truly believes embedded in numerous pieces of her work. Four of these themes are her opinion on patriarchal society, her view that religion must not bee seen as an oppressor of women, her insistence that one must understand the past, history, before moving forward toward the future, and her often contradictory statements and views on the West, with particular emphasis on the United States.

The fight against patriarchal oppression has been a constant part of El Saadawi’s life. To the West, El Saadawi is seen as one of the lone crusaders against patriarchy, a victim of Islam’s fundamentalist repression of women. Her critique of patriarchy is one of the most relevant, even
more complex and relevant, says one writer, than that of Mernissi. Patriarchy, El Saadawi believes, and society's patriarchal structure should be changed without destroying the strength of the Arab family. They system is historically based on a double standard which still exists today, a double standard that forces women who wish to obtain recognition for their work to be extremely productive and expand much greater efforts than their male colleagues in order to do so.

Unlike others, who blame Islam for the oppression of women, El Saadawi rejects the use of religion as a tool of oppression and fights the Western (mis)understanding of Islam. She acknowledges the “undeniable progressive elements” present in early Islam, and warns other Arab feminists that they should not fall into the trap of opposing religion. This, she says, is a trap set by imperialists. Religion, El Saadawi says, does not oppress women; patriarchal society does. In today’s society, Personal Status Laws curtail women from experiencing the many freedoms and power that women possessed during the earliest stages of Islam. However, these Personal Status Laws are not, according to El Saadawi, based on Shari’a, but on patriarchalism instead. She points out that Islamic Shari’a is much more progressive than Egyptian law, which she describes as “the most backward in the Arab world”. Because Islam is used so often as a political weapon, she encourages women to study religion, interpret it, form their own opinions about it and see it through their own eyes rather than through the eyes of others. By studying religion, El Saadawi says, perhaps women can replace the “blind adherence to the literalness of the text”.

The importance of history as a theme is no less apparent than the other two. Rereading one’s history and understanding one’s culture, El Saadawi writes, is absolutely necessary for any nationalist, socialist, or feminist movement (or any combination of these movements) in order to “build themselves on a firm base, to discover their roots.” Historical identification is important
for any progressive movement in order to maintain its perspective, specificity, and originality.\textsuperscript{105}

It is also important for women to understand the background and historical significance of those things that they want to see changed, such as female circumcision. Again, El Saadawi encourages women to read and understand history, to see that they have not always been dependent on men or slaves in their own households. Women should use heritage and history “for the sake of freedom and justice,” as a means of change.\textsuperscript{106}

Another topic that is commonly addressed by El Saadawi in her speeches, essays, and interviews is her like and dislike of the West. She criticizes the West, but is grounded in intellectual and political ideas that were formed in the West.\textsuperscript{107} In this way El Saadawi is no exception from any of the members of the many different groups of reformers—militant Islamists, Marxists, and those who embrace the West, just to name a few—who all differ from one another politically, but all draw on Western thought and Western political and intellectual languages (whether or not they acknowledge it).\textsuperscript{108} During her self-imposed exile from Egypt, El Saadawi lived in and worked in the United States, teaching at the University of Washington, Duke University, and at Florida State University, yet she criticizes America’s hypocrisy, citing the fact that through Saudi Arabia, the U.S. supports and encourages some of the most right-wing fundamentalist groups, resulting in the oppression of women, but at the same time speaks of democracy and human rights.\textsuperscript{109}

**CONCLUSION**

To sum it all up, Nawal El Saadawi is one of the world’s most important female activists who has worked relentlessly in order to educate both men and women on many issues such as rights and sexuality, even in the face of opposition, and to inspire and encourage women all over the world to unite and fight the oppression with which they are faced, all without ever compromising her own beliefs or values. She is a truly amazing woman whose multi-faceted life
and works, which have been translated over the years into more than 30 languages all over the world, deserve nothing short of the many national and international literary prizes and recognition that she has gained. As an activist, hers is one of the strongest voices in the growing movement for human rights and women’s rights among Islamic feminists. It is a passionate and inspiring voice that has moved and encouraged hundreds of thousands of students, wives, women, and men across the world. To some, El Saadawi has reached an almost celebrity status, yet to others, she remains a constant thorn in the side, both through her own work, through the work of the AWSA, and through her uninhibited writing in books like The Hidden Face of Eve.

“My only remaining weapon is the pen, with which I defend myself, my freedom and that of people everywhere,” El Saadawi writes. “I have only the pen with which to express my thoughts on the tragedy of the poor, of women and of all those enslaved...I obey only my mind, I write only my opinion...”¹¹⁰ This she does with courage and credibility, stopping at nothing and often paying a heavy price for doing so in both her public and private life.

Notes


6. Ibid., p. 48-49.
7. Ibid., p. 84.
8. Ibid., p. 155.
10. Ibid., p. 251.
18. Ibid., p. 3.
20. Ibid., p. 4, 24, 142.
23. Ibid., p. 7.
24. Ibid., p. 6.
25. Ibid., p. 27.
26. Ibid., p. 146-147.
27. Al Saadawi, p. 203.
29. Ibid., p. 7-8, 62.
30. Ibid., p. 63.
33. Ibid., p. 183.
38. El Saada, p. 132.


42. Al Saadawi, p. 203.


47. El Saadawi, *Reader*, p. 3.


49. Ibid., p. 78.

50. Ibid., p. 77-78.


52. Al-Ali, p. 77.


56. Ibid., p. 155.


58. Ibid., p. 1.

59. Talhami, p. 82.

60. Hijab, p. 154-155.


62. Ibid., p. 17.

63. Ibid., p. 16.

64. Ibid., p. 13.

65. Ibid., p. 8-9.


67. Ibid., p. 5.

68. Ibid., p. 5.

69. Ibid., p. 6.

70. Ibid., p. 6.


72. Ibid., p. 270.
73. Ibid., p. 270.
74. Al-Ali, p. 78.
78. Ibid., p. 17.
79. Ibid., p. 18.
80. Ibid., p. 13.
81. Ibid., p. 5.
82. Ibid., p. 19.
83. Ibid., p. 29, 14.
84. Ibid., p. 25-26.
88. El Saadawi, Reader, p. 4.
89. Ibid., p. 217.
91. El Saadawi, Reader, p. 6.
95. El Saadawi, Reader, p. 219.
96. Saliba, p. 5-6.
97. Hijab., p. 58.
100. Hijab, p. 58.
101. Amireh, p. 76.
102. El Saadawi, Viewpoints, p. 80.
103. Ibid., p. 80, 87.
108. Ibid., p. 236.
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