



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2017; 3(5): 869-872
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 16-03-2017
Accepted: 21-04-2017

Mridula Kashyap
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Nowgong Girls' College,
Assam, India

Nawal El Saadawi: The voice of Arab women

Mridula Kashyap

Abstract

This paper has attempted to read Egyptian feminist author Nawal El Saadawi from the vantage points of 'writing' and 'resistance', and in doing so it sought to explore the possibilities of Islamic feminism through a reading of Saadawi's works. It would not be erroneous to assert that the idea of 'Islamic feminism' suffers from an epistemic crisis. Whereas the Western feminists consider Islam and feminism oxymoronic on the ground that Arab women are veiled passive entities, on the other hand Islamic fundamentalists consider feminism as an alien import not fit for the milieu of Islamic society. While negating the extremities of these opposing views, it has been attempted to justify the relevance of Islamic feminism as a liberating force for Arab women. In subverting the prejudices attached with Islamic feminism and representation of Muslim women, this study attempted to analyse Saadawi's works as sites of negotiation between women and patriarchy in the context of Arab world. As a feminist activist and author, Saadawi's professed dictum of unveiling the minds of Arab women is reflected in her works. Her works, both fiction and non-fiction, act as sites of configuring the voices of Arab women, thereby working as a medium of emancipating women.

Keywords: Writing, resistance, Islamic feminism, gender

Introduction

Writing means expressing my self. It means that myself will not dissolve in any other self, be it my husband, God or the president.

(Saadawi 1988: 131)^[13]

From the moment the world of writing opened itself before me, I started to follow a route that was drastically different from the one preordained for me before birth.

(Saadawi 1988: 129)^[13]

Set in the backdrop of the Arab world her writing explored the oppression, prejudices and 'otherness' to which Middle-Eastern women had been subjected to. Her writing originated from her personal experience as a doctor, the exploration of her female identity and a resistance to the oppressive Egyptian regime which forced her to undergo a self-imposed exile. Her writing can rightly be considered as a domain where the predicament of Islamic women was vividly explored. In her novels, Saadawi sought to provide voices that had been repressed not only by the repressive state apparatus of the society but also by the dogmatic religious structures of the Arab world. Her writing, therefore, acted as a medium of resistance to the power structures of the Middle Eastern milieu on the one hand, and the Orientalist discourse of the West on Arab women on the other hand.

Born in 1931 in the village of Kafr Tahla in the Egyptian delta, Nawal El Saadawi was one among her nine siblings. Unlike the Arab women of her time, Saadawi was fortunate to have a father, holding a high official position in the Ministry of Education, who strongly believed in educating his daughter. She pursued her education in the field of medicine and graduated in 1955 with a specialization in the area of psychiatry and thoracic medicine. During her tenure as a physician, she perceived closely how a Muslim woman's body and sexuality became the focal point of religious fundamentalism.

Saadawi's works, though admired for its courageous and outspoken stance on the rights of woman, had also attracted severe criticism and even death threats from religious fundamentalist groups. She had to face censorship because she attempted to resist the system. In 1962, Saadawi's name was put on the Egyptian government's blacklist. She was removed from her post both as a director of education in Egypt's Ministry of Health and as editor of *Health* magazine in 1972 due to her radical writing on Arab woman's sexuality in her first book *Woman and Sex* (1972).

Corresponding Author:
Mridula Kashyap
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Nowgong Girls' College,
Assam, India

When Anwar Sadat became the president of Egypt in 1970, he imprisoned nearly sixteen hundred intellectuals who attempted to resist the political system. Saadawi was also arrested in 1981 and she had to undergo a period of incarceration from September 6 to November 25, 1981, during the Sadat regime. Again in 1991 the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) which was established under her leadership and the magazine *Noon* to which she served as an editor were officially suppressed by the authority. Her life was sandwiched between the threat of the religious fundamentalists who put her name on the death list and the government who placed armed guards around her house in Giza to keep her under constant surveillance. In the

Nawal El Saadawi Reader (1997)^[14], she wrote

My life was thus caught in the crossfire between the state security forces and the terrorist movements that concealed their aims behind the religious facade. I did not know where the bullets would come from, who would aim their guns at me, and to what end— to fulfil the desire of the state, or to serve the aims of the fundamentalist movement? Would the fatal bullet be shot in my back by a bodyguard, or from the front by a youth wearing a religious mask?

(Saadawi 1997: 123-24)^[14]

However, these circumstances could in no way cease her pen. The period of Saadawi's incarceration, though short, that is, only two and a half months, proved to be the most productive period of her life, in terms of her literary output. Her prison experience facilitated her to write about her account in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1984), a play entitled *The Human Being* and the novel *The Fall of the Imam* (1987).

Immediately after her release from imprisonment in 1982, Saadawi founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), a non-profitable international organization dedicated to working for the rights of Arab women through interrogating the patriarchal measures of 'veil' and 'genital mutilation'— broadly the coercive domesticity. In June 1991, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) which was closed down by the Egyptian government on the pretext that the activities of the Association were leading the Arab women astray, the entire fund was diverted to the women's religious organizations. Despite the despotic measures of the Egyptian government and death threat from fundamentalist groups, Saadawi's indomitable will to emancipate Arab women from the bondage of Islamic patriarchy cannot be held back. Her vocation as a creative writer kept on challenging the politico-religious governance of Egypt intensely.

Saadawi's influence on Arab feminism was profound. She was one of the most widely read Egyptian authors, and her books had been translated into no fewer than 12 languages, taking her influence beyond Arab lands and to the whole world. One of the major themes of her work was the Arab woman's sexuality, which she tackled as part of a wider socio-political problem. Even though the woman's sexuality is a taboo subject in many Islamic countries, Saadawi's views on the subject were frank and uncompromising. Her writings — both fiction and non-fiction — confronted the subject head-on, forcing a reconsideration of sexual politics and reclamation of women's sexual rights. It was not for nothing that prominent feminist critic Fedwa Malti Douglas in her book-length study on the life and works of Nawal El Saadawi entitled *Men Women and God(s): Nawal El*

Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics (1995)^[12] classified Nawal El Saadawi as the most radical woman voice from the Arab world: "No Arab woman inspires as much emotion as Nawal El Saadawi. No woman in the Middle East has been the subject of more polemic. Certainly, no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El Saadawi."

Saadawi's gamut of literary output was not a result of any self-imposed creative insularity or exile; rather her fictions and non-fictions were the powerful manifestations of her feminine voice to lift the veil from the minds of the Arab women. The coercive domesticity to which Arab woman is confined to and the agencies through which this subjugation is achieved— this entire systematic procedure, something that is culturally sanctioned, was severely attacked in Saadawi's venture as an activist and as a writer. The way veil is an agency to relegate woman to the state of anonymity, the heinous practise of clitoridectomy, as a physician Saadawi experienced, manufactured a docile body in women to be a silent recipient of the dictates of patriarchy. Saadawi's relentless endeavour, as an activist, to reclaim the rights of Arab women, and her committed writings, as a creative author, to facilitate self-awareness in Arab woman as conscious subject established Saadawi as one of the most powerful feminist voices in the Arab world. Saadawi's career as a feminist activist and author can be characterized by her 'dissidence' and 'creativity. In her

Essential Reader, she wrote

Creativity and dissidence will continue to be linked as long as we live in a world built not on justice and real freedom but on force, false democracy, coercion, obedience and submission to the oppressor, false consciousness and fragmented knowledge, and the utilization of religion to play politics and reinforce a free market. Creativity flourishes when the mind and the imagination are freed from the chains of taboos and traditions, from the false consciousness and knowledge generated by the media and educational systems, and from the commercialization of values and morals.

(Saadawi 1988: 67-68)^[13]

Saadawi's dissidence was not only the result of Islamic patriarchy's coercion of Muslim woman's rights; moreover, it was further accentuated by how Western Feminists perceive the phenomenon of Arab feminism from an Orientalist perspective. To most Western Feminists Islam and feminism, more or less, cannot go hand in hand, and even if they accept the existence of Arab feminism, they perceive it as a slavish imitation of Western feminism. Therefore, Arab or Islamic feminism has been strategically relegated as the 'other' by Orientalist discourses. The incapability of Arab women has been overemphasized by the Westerners as they still perceive Arab woman as an exotic and veiled entity, entirely confined to the four walls of domesticity. Arab women's incapability, a construct of the Western style of thought, establishes the argument that feminism in its fullest sense of the term cannot be realized by Arab women. On the other hand, those who are inclined to the Islamic fundamentalist principles go to the extent of arguing that, since feminism is an alien import to the Arab world, it is not relevant to Islamic society and its people. The emergence of Nawal El Saadawi as one of the powerful female voices was facilitated, as it is evident, by the subjugation of woman by the fundamentalist state apparatus

of the Arab world on the one hand, and the Orientalist prejudice towards Arab woman by the Western feminists on the other. Therefore, to Saadawi, writing was a vocation, a politically fraught activity to reclaim the rights of Arab woman thereby marking a comprehensive reordering of Islamic society.

Saadawi's entry into Western academia problematized the reception of her works. With the growing universal readership on Saadawi, it was not merely significant what she wrote or spoke, rather how and in which context her works were read and to what ends her works were being appropriated. Within the arena of the Arab literary world, Saadawi as an author marked her imprint during the 1970s, whereas her mobility to the Western literary world was recognized only in the 1980s. Her first and one of the most controversial non-fictional works *Al-Wajh al-'ari lil-mar'a al-'arabiyy* was published in Arabic in 1977, and subsequently, it appeared in English as *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* in 1980. However, gradually the gap between the Arabic and English versions of her works got minimized, and in the 1990s Saadawi's memoir *A Daughter of Isis* (1999) was published in English almost simultaneously with the Arabic version. The wider circulation of Saadawi's works within the Western reading public was facilitated by Western academia's insistence to reinforce the stereotypes of Arab woman, and in this context, Saadawi had been incorporated as one of the deviant and radical voices of the Arab woman. The problematic negotiation between what Saadawi sought to convey through her works and how her works were mediated in the English-speaking world figured out a potential foundation to assess Saadawi as a powerful Islamic feminist, who resisted both Western Orientalist stereotypes of Arab woman on the one hand and the Islamic fundamentalism on the other. Western interest in Saadawi can be deciphered from the way her works were initially published by small publishing houses but gradually she had been picked up by international publishers. She was first introduced to the English-speaking world by Zed Publishers of London, a publishing house which had since been publishing several works of Saadawi. Her debut in America was facilitated by Beacon Press in Boston, a small left-leaning press that published *The Hidden Face of Eve* in 1982. Later on, her new edition of *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* was picked by prestigious academic Publisher University of California Press, which also published her *Innocence of the Devil* in 1994. The growing readership was also supplemented by Saadawi's teaching assignments at the University of Washington and Duke University. The shift of production of Saadawi's works from England to America, from the production of her books by small publishers to mainstream and internationally acclaimed ones marked the dissemination of Saadawi as a powerful voice of third world woman in the Western world on the one hand, and the reinforcement of Western prejudice on Arab woman on the other.

It would be quite pertinent to note here that two major international events facilitated Saadawi's high visibility in the Western world: the United Nation's "international decade of women" and the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath. A period from 1975 to 1985 had been declared officially by the United Nations as the decade of women to promote international interest in the predicament of third-world women, a conscious effort to envisage the paradigm

of global feminism. In the 1980 U.N. sponsored Copenhagen conference, Western feminists deliberated a conspicuous interest in the practice of clitoridectomy in the Arab world. Though Saadawi in her writings represented serious issues relating to third-world women such as education, political and economic rights, the proceedings of the conference, quite reductively, associated Saadawi's literary output with clitoridectomy. In this context, the Western readers completely misappropriated *The Hidden Face of Eve* as solely a critique of clitoridectomy. Saadawi was dismayed by the Western feminists' effort to sensationalize a medieval and marginal issue, instead of perceiving the contemporary predicament of third-world women. In her preface to *The Hidden Face of Eve* Saadawi observed: "I disagree with those women in America and Europe who concentrate on issues such as female circumcision and depict the mas proof of the unusual and barbaric oppression to which women are exposed only in African and oppose all attempts to deal with such problems in isolation."

By vitiating the Western agenda of categorizing her as a non-conformist to Islam, Saadawi broke away from the Western feminists' limited agenda on non-Western women and configured the exclusive domain of Islamic feminism based on the teachings of Quran and Islam. This stance on the part of Saadawi highly coincided with the philosophy of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, a mass movement that was highly anti-imperialist and skeptical to Islamic fundamentalism. She celebrated the Iranian Revolution as an attempt to revive Islam with its scientific spirit through subverting the Islamic dictators and Western imperialist interest in the Arab world. Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* asserted that "the Iranian Revolution of today ... is a natural heritage of the historical struggle for freedom and social equality among Arab continued to fight under the banner of Islam and to draw from the teachings of the Koran and the Prophet Mahomet". Though the Western readers over-emphasized Saadawi's treatment of the issue of Arab women's genital mutilation, however, they could not come to terms with her celebration of the Revolution due to their Islamophobia. Saadawi's ambivalence, therefore, was a reflection on how she was cornered by both the worlds: at home, she was targeted by the fundamentalists, and in the Western world, her works were reduced to mere anti-Islamic propaganda.

Saadawi's works brought to the fore that Arab women, like women elsewhere in the world, suffer from patriarchal interventions, and they are capable of raising their voices against patriarchy through negotiation and resistance. Through her works she attempted to reshape the image of Arab women, thereby facilitating a feminine subjectivity based on assertiveness and free will. Reading of Saadawi's works justified the point that in the Saadawian scheme of things 'writing' was essentially embedded with 'resistance'. To Saadawi writing was not merely a manifestation of aesthetic sensibilities, rather it was fraught with the political purpose of unveiling the minds of Arab women from the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism. To write, according to Saadawi, was to express dissidence.

References

1. Amireh Amal. Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World in Signs, The University of Chicago Press. 2000;26(1):215-249.

2. Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
3. --- "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem" in *Feminist Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, Inc. 1982;8(3):521-534.
4. Abu-Lughod, Lila. Ed. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
5. Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.
6. Fahmy, Khaled. *Women, Medicine and Power in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* in *Remaking Women*. Ed. Lila Abu-Lughod. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, 35-72.
7. Jayawardena Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London: Zed Books, 1986.
8. Kaplan, Caren. *Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects*. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 115-38.
9. Malti-Douglas Fedwa. *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
10. ---. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Prince University Press, 1991.
11. Royer, Diana. *A Critical Study of the Works of Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian Writer and Activist*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001.
12. Saadawi, Nawal El. *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Trans. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books, 2007.
13. ---. *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi: A Reader*. Ed. Adele Newson-Horst. London & New York: Zed Books, 1988.
14. ---. *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. London & New York: Zed Books, 1997.
15. ---. "Nawal al-Sadawi and Empowerment through Medicine". *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Prince University Press, 1991, 111-129.
16. Saba, Mahmoud. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.
17. Saiti, Ramzi, Ramzi M Salti. *Paradise, Heaven and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El Saadawi* in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Brill. 1994;25(2):152-174.
18. Saliba, Therese. *On the Bodies of Third World Women: Cultural Impurity, Prostitution, and Other Nervous Conditions* in *College Literature*, *College Literature*. 1995;22(1):131-156.
19. Vinson, Pauline Homs. *Shahrazadian Gestures in Arab Women's Autobiographies: Political History, Personal Memory, and Oral, Matrilineal Narratives in the Works of Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Ahmed* in *NWSA Journal*., The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008;20(1):78-98.