

## Remembering Nawal El-Saadawi: An Ardent Feminist and a Lifetime Dissident

by Fazzur Rahman

Any talk of gender equality or voices for equal space for women is always exemplified as growing influence of Western feminism across the world. In a very typical western and Eurocentric imagination, women of the non-western or more precisely of Arab and Islamic landscape are visualized as submissive, silent sufferers and devoid of any identity of their own. But it is merely a half-truth as the voices for gender equality and intellectual activism highlighting women oppression have been very pronounced in Arab world. Huda Shaarawi is a well-known name who fought for women's rights way back in the 1920s in Egypt and challenged the traditional veil system by taking off her veil at railway station of Alexandria. Later in 1950 Doriaa Shafiq had stormed along with 1500 women the Egyptian Parliament demanding the enfranchisement for the women.

Nawal El-Saadawi belonged to the second generation of Egyptian feminism and had rightly claimed that feminism was not a western nor American invention but it is an embedded phenomenon in female's consciousness given the male's eternal control over women's existence. In her masterpiece on feminism, *Women and Sex*, she states that women have been historically envisaged as bodies without mind, spirit and soul. She not only carried the legacy forward but further radicalized, indigenized and widened the scope and orbit of feminism in her part of world. She raised gender issues specific to the Arab society such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and religious justification for existing misogyny in her part of the Arab world. She passed away on March 21, 2021 after a prolonged illness.

She could never forget her own brutal experience of her own genetic mutilation at the age of six when she was carried to the bathroom and four women pinned her down and crucified her like Messiah and no one was there to rescue her against such an inhuman ritual. She always remembered how a knife was sharpened before her eye for the purpose which reminded her of the festival of Eid when butcher unusually do it before slaughtering the sheep.

Nawal El-Saadawi, a fierce advocate of women rights, a celebrated story writer and novelist, an intellectual activist and a psychiatrist by profession was born in *Kafr Talha*, a village outside of northern Cairo in 1931. Albeit she was inclined towards literature, like many of her contemporaries she was also pushed to pursue a career which could ensure her financial security

and subsequently pushed to study medical science and, in 1955, she completed her medical course with a specialization in Psychiatry. However her passion for writing continued and later, apart from earning an incredible name in her profession, she emerged as a great literary and feminist figure. She evaded many expulsions at secondary level only for her revolutionary writing and one of her first assignment was so seductive in nature that it was not returned to her and somehow discovered later and published only in 1990 as *Pages form My Life*

She was a born rebel and was not amenable to traditional wisdom or truth. Her concern towards her existence became obvious at an early stage of her life when she struggled as a child with the idea of her mother's name being removed as sir name. She was not ready to accept her mother's name to be buried with her. Her passion for feminism was very much driven by her astute observation of gender discrimination and her own suffering as a female child. Her lifetime thrust for gender equality was an outcome of her living in a male-dominated society. Since she was six, she rejected the idea of women being merely seen as object of sex or sexual property of her husband. She never accepted the teaching of her grandmother when she preached that a boy is worth fifteen girls when it comes to sex which appalled her. It was perhaps the trigger of her lifetime pledge not only to fraternize with the women cause but to fight all such impositions. She revolted against the idea girls play with dolls and boys with the pistol as she shares it in her memoire *Daughter of Isis*.<sup>1</sup>

She refused to give in when she was being coerced for marriage at the age of 11 because marriage for her was a mystery surrounded by secrets. But she later realized that refusal or boycott of marriage is not a solution and rather it is important to enter the institution and reform and preach the idea of equality between partners. She married three times but she spent most of her life with her third husband whom he called only feminist man on the earth. In another book of hers, *Women and Sex*, she narrates many cases of women who she visited as doctor that were directly linked to FGM, a practice which had ruined many marital lives in the rural areas. As a doctor and as a feminist, she fought the tribal practice of FGM and during her posting in rural areas; she determined to launch a nationwide crusade against this cruel practice which has nothing to do with Islam.

Her revolt against a male-centric society can be attributed to her own childhood experience which she sketches in *Memoir of a Doctor* as: “*All I knew at the time was that I was not a boy and so I was not like my brother. My brother cut his hair and left it free without combing it. My brother woke up from his sleep and left his bed as it was, and I had to make my bed and his bed. My brother could play without permission but I couldn't. I took out only with permission. My brother had a piece of meat bigger than mine and I had to hide my appetite to eat. He could drink soup with a voice but I had to drink soup silently.*”

She wanted to transcend all these odds dictating her social ambience and she took pen to defeat the history and subdue all those social customs and moors constructed to relegate the women.

---

<sup>1</sup> Isis is not to be confused with the today's terrorist forces called ISIS but it was major Goddess in ancient Egyptian religion.

She tells in her *Daughter of Isis* how she loved the touch of the pen more than broom in her hand and the pen was the only mean to express the plight of the poor women who were not more than slaves in their house. She always claimed that revolution and writing do not know secrecy and abhorred the dichotomy in life: one in public and the other in secret. She revolutionized the idea of gender equality in a society where the socio-cultural space was largely occupied by the Islamist forces for whom women were the source of all perversions. Except pen and fight on the street, she found no antidote against an embedded inequality where every male is privileged in one way or other. She pledged to change the history itself because the historical role of society is only to oppress women.

In a beautiful testimony published in an Arabic Magazine *Fusool* in 1992, she wrote that she chose to challenge the authority that Pharaoh had entrusted in the brother, father and the husband in the small family. Her notion of feminism was different from the western notion of feminism as she always saw an element of market capitalism has entered into Western feminist movement and that gradually evolved into a new tool for women exploitation. To her , the western idea of sexual freedom never appealed and never represented the true freedom because nakedness ( allegedly western) and veiling( allegedly Arab )are two sides of the same coin.

She wrote about 55 books including novels, memoirs and various other social, cultural and political accounts in Arabic language which have been translated into around 30 languages. Some of her celebrated works include *Women at Point Zero* and *Women and the Sex*. *Women and the Sex* is her first non-fiction novel depicting the brutalities involved in the act of FGM. This book led to her removal as General Director of National Public Health Service and the book itself remained banned for a long time. *The Absent One* is credited to introduce for the first a female character in Arabic literary genre where female was presented as a sexual victim which was aimed to break all social taboos regarding women. Once she had said that religion, sex and power had animated her intellectual oeuvre. *The Naked Face of Women* is another of her literary masterpiece where she points out that heritage has no meaning if it is devoid of role of women. *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is her another literary work which again revolves around the theme of women's sexual exploitation by husbands which she sarcastically phrases Above God, Below Husband.

Most of her literary works were devoted to highlighting how males have refused to see women as contributors to social, cultural and mental strength. One common theme of all her writings is her expression of the pain of being women in male-dominated society. Her pen was an echo of her fearless and free conscience which she sued to combat the idea of woman's natural culpability that has been almost canonized in the spirit of Mother Eve who is held guilty for provoking Adam in the Heaven which she candidly takes up in *Hidden Face of Eve*. She never blamed religion for women's' plight and subjugation in the Arab society but she was of the view that it was lopsided interpretations of exegetist which never allowed women to move shoulder to shoulder with men. She was opposed to idea of monopolization of religion by selected clergy who, according to her, always manipulated religion to perpetuate the patriarchal dominance. Even her participation in 2011 Egyptian revolution was primarily meant to target the Islamist which she never hesitated to brand as radical fanatics.

In 1992, she had to leave Egypt for US when she was under fire for her novel, *Fall of the Imam* and during same period many failed attempts were made in the civil courts to declare her marriage nullified because of her heretic writing. She in 2008 also won a case against an attempt to deprive her of nationality and ban her all writing. She filed case in court against mandatory mention of one's religious denomination on ID and was not in favor of Islam being declared as state religion in Egypt.

Under the presidency of Anwar Sadaat (1970-81), she was thrown into jail for short stint in 1980 under the pressure of Islamist where she wrote her another masterpiece *Women at Point Zero*. She wrote it first on a toilet roll with the help of eyebrow pencils which was smuggled in her cell by an inmate. During her stay in prison, she started Arab Women's Solidarity Association with the objective of uniting the women form across the Arab world. She did not want to be known merely as an intellectual activist and so participated in many protests and was very much visible in Tahrir Square during anti-Mubarak protest. She later somehow became apologist to El-Sisi's Egypt and failed to denounce El-Sisi for being counterrevolutionary on several occasion and went to extent of defending him just for the sake of expressing her anger against the Islamists. For her, El-Sisi became a greater hero that Sadat and Mubarak for the simple reason that El-Sisi weakened the MBH while ignoring the unconstitutionality of many of El-Sisi's political actions.

Her intellectual activism or her writings were not merely confined to the issue of sexuality but she looked beyond that like once she supported mines strike of 1984-85 in UK and joined the protest against the NHS cut. Here she inspired by the resistance movement of 20<sup>th</sup> century third world intellectual and her resistance towards the open door neo liberal policy persuade by of President by Sadat drove her to write that “ she was feeling alienated from her homeland. She also saw capitalism and subsequent market as another mean to exploitation of women what their realization. She always favored a socialist system for the liberation of women. She coined a new term ‘patriarchal class society’ pointing to the new political and economic factor emanating form the capitalist system which further leads to women's oppression.

She was among very few Arab women to have the honor of getting a place on the cover of the American Time Magazine in 1981. In 2020 the Time Magazine named her among the hundred most influential women of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2005, she won Inane International Price from Belgium and in 2006 she received North-South Price from Council of Europe. Until her last breath, El-Saadawi remained a combative and formidable voice of Arab women for almost half a century and would be known not for only condemning patriarchy but fighting to elevate the status of women. She used to say that everyone will die but important thing is that how to live until you die. Perhaps she has told a generation of women how to live in this world where the man of East cannot tolerate a woman smarter than him.