

## BOOK REVIEWS

Nawal El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. London, Zed Books, 1997, 286 pp., ISBN 1 85649 513 2 hb, 1 854649 0 pb

Nawal El Saadawi has been a very controversial person for most of her life, not only in her native Egypt but also in the West. This book will not change her reputation, but it should make her views available to a far greater audience than she usually reaches. The book consists of an autobiographical introduction and twenty-two essays arranged in six sections: Gendering North-South Politics; Women and Health; Women, Islam, and Fundamentalisms; Orientalizing Women; Decolonizing the Imagination; and Women Organizing for Change. Many of these essays are speeches given all over the world which have not been previously published. Some essays are articles previously published in newspapers, women's magazines, and academic journals. Some have been abridged, others have been revised, updated and even lengthened. More than half of them were written during the 1990's, and all but one of the others written during the 1980's.

A unifying theme across these essays is the author's call for a New World Order, one which is based on peace, justice, freedom, equality, and democracy for all the states and for all the people in the world. It is a call for an end to all forms of injustice. El Saadawi demonstrates a deep understanding of the international stratification of states and the political hegemony of the United States as well as of the international patriarchal capitalist global economic system controlled by multinational corporations in the North. She also provides great insight into how political and economic exploitation of the South by privileged elites in the North have affected the everyday life of people in the South, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. Structural adjustment programs imposed on poor countries by the World Bank are called "*potential economic genocide*" by El Saadawi because they are "*...breaking down everything that protects the weaker*" and providing "*protection when necessary for the stronger...Double standards have always been used to defend privilege*" (p120).

El Saadawi provides a socialist feminist theoretical analysis which is grounded in the praxis of her everyday life. Her words speak to us as individuals and make sense to us as individuals. She is candid, frank, honest, and scathingly sarcastic at times in her unravelling of many paradoxes to unveil the political and economic interests behind them. She speaks about the need to unveil the minds of people in the North, not just the faces of women in the South. As a psychiatrist and a feminist social activist, she demonstrates command of understanding social reality which

defies the artificial division of it in the disciplines of academia. *"The International Information Order is working together with the International Economic Order to veil the minds of men and women in the South as well as in the North"* (p138). The examples she uses are simple but powerful, such as her recounting of an incident in which her wise but illiterate grandmother was mistreated by an ignorant but supposedly well-educated intellectual; and the paradox of Americans being fiercely patriotic and nationalistic but puzzled that others feel the same way about their own countries — do Americans believe that their country is the only country worth being proud of? She also reminds us that *"women are [portrayed as] bodies without a mind" in the North as well as in the South because "veiling and nakedness are two sides of the same coin"* (p140).

Nawal El Saadawi is exceedingly insightful in her debunking of postmodernist intellectualism. She is scathing in her criticism of intellectuals who use post-modernist identity politics to deflect the focus of analysis of conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, from political and economic exploitation to culture, particularly religion: *"...as often happens, this economic and political conflict remains hidden under the guise of a religious or cultural conflict between the North and the South"* (p140). *"Swords and words are used to divide the people [of the world] in the name of diversity, while the neocolonialists globalize in NATO or in transnational corporations"* (p168). She characterizes such activity as *"a form of cultural fundamentalism"* (p166) and constitutes *"intellectual terrorism"* (p140) and she reminds us that these strategies serve to unify those who are privileged at the top while fragmenting others at the bottom (p121). She reminds us that *"...individual identity or individual responsibility is inseparable from social identity or social responsibility..."* (p166).

*A philosopher who is not an activist in a struggle ends up as an empty shell: as a shelf of books in academia. S/he struggles in closed rooms, using words to fence with other users of words. S/he has a love-hate relationship with poor oppressed women and men who are struggling to live. S/he worships them, calls them the "subaltern", glorifies their authentic identity or culture, but at the same time looks down upon them, considers them as docile or struggling bodies unable to produce philosophy or as local activists but not as global thinkers. S/he abolishes subaltern philosophies and replaces them on the global intellectual scene; s/he becomes the philosopher or the subaltern who knows more about them than they know about themselves.* (p169)

*Both postmodernists and tourists consume the other or use the other as a tool for consumption. To them, everything (including the subaltern) becomes a commodity to be used materially, culturally, or intellectually. Multiculturalism, diversity, cultural difference, religious difference, ethnic*

*difference, authenticity, specificity are the new commodities. The postmodernists even go back to glorifying blood relations, feudal patriarchal family ties and tribal societies. Like pagans, they worship the gods or statues which they have created out of stone or words or images...We Egyptian women are considered ignorant of our culture. We have to be guided by American experts. (p170)*

While in exile teaching at Duke University, El Saadawi felt silenced and marginalized, though in a different way than she had been in Egypt. She writes about the alienation and difficulty of trying to teach creativity and dissidence, which she believes cannot be learned from books or other media. *“The relation between self and others becomes simple and clear when we struggle, but it becomes very complex, very vague, very difficult to understand when we read books or listen to lectures, especially by so-called postmodern philosophers... We are drown in these words; we are suffocated by them. It is a zero sum game of words in which you lose your power to understand”* (p163). *“Thinking that is isolated from real life is not part of the struggle”* (p169). Rather, *“[w]e need to discover new ways of exposing the paradoxes or double meanings in the many new and old words that are endlessly repeated...[which] veil our brains with one myth after another”* (p160). According to El Saadawi, this can only be done through questioning our experiences in everyday life, *“...in the daily struggle against those [exploitative] powers globally, locally, and in the family”* (p160). Declaring that she has been a dissident since childhood, El Saadawi explains that being creative means becoming innovative, *“[d]iscovering new ways of thinking and acting, of creating a system based on more and more justice, freedom, love, and compassion...discover[ing] what others have not yet discovered”* (p160). For El Saadawi, *“struggle”* is dissident when it refers to action, but not when it is just a word, because *“...words do not change the systems of oppression and exploitation at any level”* (p164). She challenges us all to *“...direct a critical gaze at the self as well as at the other”* in this endeavor to liberate ourselves individually and collectively from oppression and exploitation (p165). El Saadawi believes that:

*Dissidence is a natural phenomenon in human life. We are all born dissident and creative. But we lose our creativity and dissidence partially or wholly through education and the fear that we shall be punished here or in the hereafter. We live in fear and we die in fear. Dissident people liberate themselves from fear, and they pay a price for this process of liberation. The price may be high or low but there is a price to be paid. Non-dissident people pay a price, too: the price of subordination. So if we have to pay a price anyway, why not pay the price and be liberated? (p172-173)*

Adult educators will find ample food for thought here in reflecting on their own professional practice as well as on the dialectic between their own privileged positions in academia and the everyday life of most people in their local communities. El Saadawi takes us far beyond the postmodernist critique of critical adult education posited by Elizabeth Ellsworth, Freire's criticism of the ideology of individualism inherent in self-directed learning of modernist critical adult education which idealizes "self-liberation", and Habermas' naive concept of communicative action in the lifeworld. El Saadawi warns us to look beyond the self-serving ideologies of dominant and subordinated groups alike to recognize, understand, and challenge the exploitative social relations each of us experience in the concreteness of our everyday life and to recognize how we are all linked by global hegemonic forces centered in the privileged North.

Thus, education as a social institution is deeply entrenched in hegemonic practices. From kindergarten through post-graduate education, in public as well as private schools, educators are key players in the shaping of students' subjectivities but how many of these educators address the basic unfairness of the complex hierarchical organization of society, let alone their relative privilege in it? El Saadawi challenges us all to confront ourselves.

There is almost no subject left untouched in this collection of essays. El Saadawi is gifted at linking the personal with the public, the individual with the collectivity, the local with the national and the international, and the South with the North. She demonstrates intellectual rigor of analysis without sacrificing the affective understanding of human behavior rooted in real life experiences. In doing so, El Saadawi is able to reach all of us, regardless of our nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, class, religion, education, and occupation. This is, indeed, a book for all of us.

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