

IN MEMORIAM

NAWAL EL SAADAWI (1931-2021): A FIERCE FEMINIST FIGHTER, NOT WITHOUT PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT: This article provides a critical examination of Nawal El-Saadawi's work: work that articulates the academic, the activist, the experiential, and the literary production. It begins with my own positionality in the context of acquiring/accessing El-Saadawi's books, as I reflect on the education system I and over one and half million Palestinian citizens have and continue to endure, under Israel's settler colonial Apartheid regime. Living under a system of racialization, we, Palestinian citizens, were deprived of a decent education at home, and were prevented from any contact with our Arab heritage, in neighbouring Arab countries. This meant we did not have any access to books or any knowledge production, published in the Arab countries, especially if the products were critical of Israel. The irony is that the books we Palestinian citizens could not individually access were accessible at the University Libraries, hence, reaching much of the Arab literature relatively late. This article reviews El-Saadawi's writings within the social, cultural, political, and patriarchal structure of Egypt and the Arab Middle East. Two specific topics which El-Saadawi focused on, namely, infibulation and the veil will be focused on in this article. The discussion of these topics will be critically assessed within an anti-Orientalist, anti-imperialist feminist framework.

تقدم هذا المقالة تقييما نقديا لأعمال الكاتبة نوال السعداوي: أعمال استطاعت أن تقارب الخطاب الأكاديمي والعملائي ومن خلال التجارب الشخصية وكذلك الأعمال الأدبية. تبدأ المقالة بتحديد موقع كاتبة هذه المقالة وتجربتها في ولوج الكتب الأدبية أو العلمية من الدول العربية المجاورة وتجربة الفصل العنصري وتأثيره على فلسطيني الـ١٩٤٨. وتناقش المقالة اثنين من أهم الموضوعات التي تطرقت إليها الأدبية والطبية السعداوي وهما: قضية الختان وقضية الحجاب حيث تناقش ان لا علاقة للدين الإسلامي بهما وانهما مجرد تقليد تفرضه الذكورية أو النظام الأبوي العربي (وبالذات المصري). جدير بالذكر هنا أن هاتين القضيتين تبحثان مع معرفة السعداوي المسبقة انهما تستعملان من قبل بعض النسويات الغربيات وبالذات المناصرات للإمبريالية والفكر الإستشراقي. ولهذا تقر السعداوي وبوضوح موقفها المناصر لحرية المرأة العربية/المسلمة ومعاداتها للعنصرية الرأسمالية، والإمبريالية، وكذلك الصهيونية.

KEYWORDS: El Saadawi, infibulation, veil, patriarchy, Orientalism, female sexuality

Accessing El Saadawi banned books

Before discussing Dr. Nawal El Saadawi and my critical appreciation of her work, it is necessary to take a quick look at how I first became acquainted with her books. Most of El Saadawi's books, particularly *Women and Sex*, were banned in Egypt during the Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak's rules (1970-2011). However, as El Saadawi stated in several interviews, one would find these same books in other Arab cities, especially Beirut.¹ I envied my Palestinian friends and sisters who knew El Saadawi from her writings when they were young. I envied them even when they were under the oppression of the Zionist occupation in 1967 because they had something called "public libraries" in their cities/places or at school.

I completed my primary and secondary education without knowing how a public library or a school library looks. Under Israeli settler colonialism, our education was

1. <https://www.facebook.com/Merry.Em.Biya18/posts/1339111259757536k>

deprived of the most necessary elements. Most of our classrooms in 1948 Palestine ⁽¹⁾ (I am referring to the towns where there were schools) consisted of rented rooms in people's homes. The proverb that we memorized as children: "We drown in the winter and burn in summer," has stayed with us for many years. This expresses the dire situation of education in the Arab sector or for Palestinians in 48 Palestine/Israel. Israel's racialization of the Indigenous Palestinians has deprived them/us of a normal life. The colonial state banned many books published in the Arab world. As explained in my "Women in Israel ..." (2011), the educational, cultural, health and economic conditions under which Palestinians in Israel have endured have been placed at the bottom of the settler colonial state's priority. (Abdo, 2011)

While the West Bank and Gaza Strip were open to the Arab world and its publications, that was not the case for Palestinians in Israel as they/we were deprived of this cultural heritage or even of meeting families in Arab countries. Until the late 1970s, all leftist cultural books were banned or confiscated, including the collections of resistance poetry, such as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim and Tawfiq Zayyad. Even though all three poets mentioned were citizens and lived all their lives (except for Mahmoud Darwish, who spent many years in exile) in Israel. Tawfiq Zayyad was even a member of the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) and served as the Mayor of Nazareth between 1975-1994. The ban on progressive publications included the books of Ghassan Kanafani and Nawal El Saadawi, among others.

Women and Sex

The book *Women and Sex* (the first edition, published in 1968) is considered one of Saadawi's most important books, if not the most important. In 1972, I got a copy of it from the university library and brought it home (to

Nazareth). There was a group of us, friends, who took turns reading it, then we held several sessions to discuss the book. I do not remember, after all these years, if the remarkable "glow" that afflicted us at that time stemmed from the content of this book or from its title, which bears one of the most critical taboos in our Arab society: Sex. There is no doubt, however, that we all agreed on the significance of the book's information.

It is not essential now that we delved into the depth of our ignorance, at that time, of our bodies and sexuality: society in general was and continues to be traditional, patriarchal, if not socially backward. This traditionality has been evident in the home, at school, by the teachers, and in society at large. I remember that the only place where some of us, boys only, enjoyed "freedom of expression in matters of sex" was the street, where female sexual organs were (and still are) mentioned in insulting expressions aimed at degrading the other (women).

The book deals with essential topics in the closed patriarchal society, including female circumcision/infibulation, virginity issues, especially around the hymen, even if its removal is an inevitable issue after marriage, or if the hymen takes the same shape or thickness for all women. Like the rest of her books, this book aimed to challenge social and sexual ignorance in Arab society and criticize outdated social values. As far as I can remember, none of these subjects was taught in schools, raised at home or publicly discussed at all. In this book, El Saadawi, as in the case of her other books, provided scientific data to support her statements, using her professional experience as a doctor and psychologist and her personal experience as a feminist social activist.

El-Saadawi studied surgical medicine, specialized in thoracic surgery, and then in psychiatry. She worked as a medical doctor for a long time in her village, Kafr Tahla, in Qalyubia Governorate. She also held the position of Director-General of the Health Education Department at

the Ministry of Health in Cairo, the General Secretary of the Medical Syndicate in Cairo, and founded the Association for Health Education. All these roles must be added to her work as a doctor in the university hospital. El Saadawi was also a member of the Supreme Council for Arts and Social Sciences in Cairo. In addition, she founded the Egyptian Women Writers Association; worked for a period as editor-in-chief of the Health Journal in Cairo and editor of the Medical Association Journal.² In other words, El Saadawi enjoyed a busy career in the profession of gender and women. Her overall experiences enabled her to explore and analyze these topics with confidence.

Infibulation: another form of rape

The World Health Education defines infibulation, or "female genital mutilation," as "a process that includes the partial or total removal of the female genitalia without a medical or health reason for that. This practice is found in more than 27 countries in Africa, and smaller numbers in Asia and the rest of the Middle East." Infibulated females in 2016 were estimated at 200 million living in the countries mentioned above and a few other regions and societies worldwide³.

Whether perpetrated on children or adults, female infibulation is a form of sexual rape accompanied by violence and brutality. It differs from male sexual violence in that the perpetrator, in most cases, is a woman with a scalpel or razor. Infibulation is usually wrapped in the name of religion, honour or chastity, and one of its aims is to demonstrate that the female is virgin and her body has never been touched by a man before her husband. However, El-Saadawi believes that infibulation is not

²https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A

³ <https://www.facebook.com/100034375700181/videos/532285671260618>

related to religion. It is only to prepare the female for complete submission to the man. In *Woman and Sex*, El Saadawi argued that "virginity is a lie," adding that thirty percent of females are born without a hymen. (Antar, 2021)

In her *كسر الحدود* (breaking the borders, El-Saadawi (2006) affirmed that there is no legal text that approves of infibulation, that this act is illegal, and that there is the absence of any health reason calling for this "heinous" act that is harmful to women. The issue of infibulation has accompanied El Saadawi throughout her life: in her novels, in her education, in interviews, in her public speeches, and on every other occasion. In 2007 she raised this topic again with great force, following the death of the 12-year-old girl, Bodour Shakir, during infibulation, commenting: "Bodour, should you have died to enlighten these dark minds? Did you have to pay this price with your life? Doctors and clerics should know that true religion does not command genital cutting." El-Saadawi continued, "As a doctor and human rights activist, I reject this procedure. I also reject male circumcision. I believe that all children, male and female, should be protected from this kind of operation." (Shaarawi, 1993)

However, despite the banning of these acts and indeed their criminalization, they are still practiced in different regions in Egypt, especially in Upper Egypt. The death of the 12-year-old girl, Nada, during infibulation in 2000 caused a sensation on social media pages. It is also painful to hear the story of three girls (under the age of eighteen) who were infibulated under anesthesia and at the request of the father who lied to his daughters and convinced them that they were being tested for the Corona Virus! (See Mernissi, 1987 on such ploys)

The issue of infibulation did not bother us in Palestine because it was and still is known to be an African tradition/rite common in Egypt, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan and never existed among Palestinians, or various other Arab countries. However, even in academia, this

social phenomenon did not receive sufficient attention and analysis until the nineties. In the late eighties and early nineties, the issue became quite popular as many Somali people immigrated/were smuggled to Canada, escaping the harsh living conditions in their country. Most of the immigrants took Toronto and Ottawa as their refuge for the presence of other Somalis there. One of the thorny and disturbing topics for my Somali students in graduate studies has been infibulation, followed by the veil. My students participated in some of the demonstrations they held against FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). The problem was, as expected, that the Muslim (Somali) woman here in Canada would stand on the side of Western women and feminism, and even on the side of the Western system itself - as the Canadian government banned and fought infibulation. This ban was approved by many Muslim women (especially young Somali women). Despite Islamophobia, which used female circumcision as a reason for their hatred of Islam, Muslims, especially educated Somali women, took a stance against infibulation in Canada and defended their position against Islamophobic feminism.

The Veil and the Patriarchal Religious Institutions

El-Saadawi treated the phenomenon of the veil with the same strength and iron will with which she confronted the issue of female infibulation. These two issues relating to women's sexuality, infibulation and the veil, represented the strong *sumoud* (steadfastness) within which El-Saadawi faced and combatted patriarchal authoritarianism and brutal capitalism in her country. This struggle has also caused her the enmity of many individuals and institutions alike. For El-Saadawi, body covering (using the Niqab, Hijab, Jilbab, veil and so on), on the one hand, and nudity in Western societies, on the other, represent two very similar modes of

behaviour/attitude. Just as she rejected any connection between Islam and infibulation/circumcision, she also rejected the veil as a religious matter, or an issue related to Islam. El-Saadawi insisted that the veil is one of the repressive patriarchal methods that limits women's roles and activities and removes them from their natural place in society: keeping them away from the public realm and in the private one.

It is difficult to cover the wide-ranging and complex issue of the veil, which was strongly debated in Western academic circles (both by Arab and Muslim feminists and Western feminists alike) in the 1990s and seems to be ongoing. In this discourse/debate, one finds the intersectionality of very many different political positions on the veil. This includes the secular and the religious; the proponents of the veil and its opponents; the Orientalists and the Arab/Muslim; the feminists with the non-feminists; etc. Moreover, the debate presented the opinions of those who considered donning the Hijab/veil as a matter of individual freedom of choice, alongside those who believed that most veils were/are donned by force or under socially constructed forms of coercion.

Several Muslim academic feminists, especially among Arab women, took Huda Shaarawy and her experience in removing the veil in 1923 as an example of individual freedom. Her book, *Years of the Harem: Egyptian Feminist Memoirs 1879-1921* (translated and introduced by Margot Badran), was quite popular in the West, used to validate the point of individual choice in donning and taking off the veil. (Shaarawi, 1993) It is worth noting that the book's title might suggest an Orientalist perspective, especially with the term, harem, but this term which is a class term, was originated by the Turkish Empire, which controlled the Arab countries. The Harem belonged to the sultan and the wealthy classes who could support several women with their children. The upper classes, such as Shaarawy and

other well-to-do women, used to wear the Hijab while in their homes.

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El-Saadawi adopted a historical approach in researching the phenomenon of the veil, insisting that this phenomenon was not purely Islamic but existed before Islam, among women of other religions such as Christianity and Judaism. To this day, religious Jews still cover their hair with black cloth or wear a wig; Also, Christian women in parts of our Arab homeland still cover their hair when they go to church. (El Saadawi, 2006)

In my opinion, El-Saadawi's position on the veil was not an attack on Islam but rather was directed at the patriarchy within the Arab culture, particularly the patriarchy of religious institutions in Egypt, including Al-Azhar and its teachings. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth and longitudinal study on the extent of the impact of El-Saadawi's works and precisely her position on the veil on Arab, Muslim, and Western feminists. However, the veil issue has been at the forefront of Eastern and Western feminists' work for decades. Therefore, I considered it appropriate to address the discourse of the veil, even if only briefly.

In *Women and Gender in Islam* (published in English in 1992), Laila Ahmed argued that Islam had nothing to do with the veil and that the latter was the result of patriarchy or patriarchal authority in Egypt. Ahmed grew up in Egypt, into a well-off family during the days of Abdel Nasser, and in a primarily secular society. Her position here is very similar to that of El Saadawi.

As for late Fatima Mernissi, who was referred to as the "founder of Islamic feminism," she clarified her position on the veil in her in-depth study of the role of women in the Qur'an and hadith. She was, like El-Saadawi, and later Laila Ahmed, opposed to the veil and the interpretations that try to link it to Islam (Mernissi, 1987).

However, after the US imperialist attack on Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), feminists, globally, were divided on the issue of Islam, the veil and so on. The division was between those who strongly opposed the veil, seeing it as a reactionary act and one of Islam's methods of oppressing women; and those who defended donning it, considering it part of the Islamic tradition, or a matter directly related to women and their freedom of choice. In the first case, in addition to the Western Orientalist feminists, we also witnessed the emergence of those "feminists", who also advocated for imperialism and Zionism, and joined the imperialist and Islamophobic onslaught to elevate their positions and achieve fame at the expense of Islam, and Muslims. Among these, we mention Irshad Manji and her books: *The Problem of Islam Today* (Manji, 2003) and *Allah, Freedom and Love* (Manji, 2012).

Indeed, Manji was not an academic, but her fame as a Muslim critic of Islam preceded her in most Western countries. She attained various academic positions because of her hatred and contempt of Islam and her frequent media appearances. This sudden fame of an Orientalist Muslim feminist requires a pause, albeit a short one. A reader of Manji's books, especially the first one, will be surprised by her hatred of Islam and her racism against Arabs and her anti-Palestinian racism. The most shocking thing about this book is its keen interest in considering Israeli (Jewish) feelings and the right to "historical Israel" in Palestine. The writer accused Muslims of hating the Jews [sic]. But, of course, the book fails to provide any explanation for her statements.

Manji's accusation of Muslims practising anti-Semitism is grave and concerning for Arabs and Muslims alike. Simultaneously, though, her anti-Islam and pro-Zionist views have gained her a free visit to Israel by a Zionist organization which she accepted. One of those commenting on her work said: "She is a free thinker,

beautiful in appearance, and a very acceptable 'Muslim' in the West...But does she know Islam from within? Does she raise issues with their complexities and problems?" He continues: "However, many Muslim women in the West do not take [her] seriously and place [her] in the crucible of hostility to Islam."(Todd, 2008)

At the beginning of the twenty-first millennium, specifically after 9/11/2001 and the imperialist attack on Iraq and Afghanistan, extreme feminist positions have crystallized. The common logic in the feminist discourse on the veil and Islam revolved around two fundamental opposites: the first is Orientalist-culturalist, and the second is anti-Orientalist and anti-imperialist. Some Western Orientalist feminists supported the war on Afghanistan and justified it by claiming that eliminating the Taliban would liberate Afghani women from the arbitrariness of this movement's rule. I have argued elsewhere that these women forgot that it was American colonialism that brought the Taliban movement to the scene to help it get rid of the socialist rule supported by the Soviet Union at the time. The fact is that killing the Afghani people and destroying their economy and their lives did not eliminate the Taliban or the veil (Abdo, 2002: 372-392).

Today, after over two decades of war, destruction, devastation, and death of many Afghani people by the Americans and their allies, nothing has been achieved; American troops are withdrawing, and the Taliban is back in control! What is worse is that all those Afghanis who supported the American invasion and were promised U.S protection are left behind.

On the other hand, Laila Abu-Lughod took it upon herself to fight against Orientalist feminism. She singled out Laura Bush (the wife of U.S. President George W. Bush) and some of the feminists and academics who defended U.S. colonial wars. And in a famous article titled "Do Muslim Women Need Rescue?"(Abu-Loghod, 2002),

published in 2002 and redeveloped into a book with the same title in 2013 (Abu-Lughod, 2013), Abu-Lughod developed her honest and deep critique of Orientalist feminism and saw in it an arm of Western imperialism aimed at securing its interests at the expense of Muslims. Abu Lughod showed that the hijab and the niqab are a Pashtun tradition that existed before the Taliban and remained after the U.S. attack. Abu Lughod exposed the orientalist feminists who blamed the persecution, violence, and exploitation of Muslim women on Islamic religion, patriarchy, and culture and ignored the role of U.S. imperialism and war.

This also applies to the imperialist attack on Iraq under the lie of 'the Iraqi regime acquiring weapons of mass destruction' and the pretext of ridding the Iraqi people of Saddam Hussein's tyranny. We all witnessed, and continue to, the mass destruction of Iraq and its civilization, the theft of its historical treasures, and the extermination of more than a million Iraqi children, women, and men.

It must be recalled that the Orientalist feminist attack on Muslim and Arab women to this day was and still is confronted by solid academic work by Muslim and Arab feminists. Some Arab/Muslim feminists have changed their positions and reinterpreted the veil as a personal matter for the woman herself. Hence, the case of Leila Ahmed, who in *A Quiet Revolution: The Resurgence of the Hijab, from the Middle East to the U.S. (2011)*, has changed her position and turned her focus on the fact that the veil is not imposed on women but rather taken up by their choice (Ahmed, 2011) .

In conclusion, it is essential to remember that El Saadawi's work on women's issues, body, and sexuality, unlike in the case of some Arab/Muslim feminists, was not conducted within the framework of Western knowledge or epistemology. Still, her position against capitalism and Western imperialism was very clear.

Yes, Nawal El-Saadawi was against infibulation/circumcision, against the veil, against religious rituals, against the patriarchy of religious institutions, as well as against the authority and the capitalist system in general and in Egypt in particular. But, in my opinion, she was not orientalist at all and did not collude with Western neoliberalism. In fact, whether we agree with her assertions or not, there is no doubt that El Saadawi had a clear and explicit position: No to colonialism, no to capitalism and no to Zionism, and yes to women's rights and the oppressed.

To Nawal Saadawi's Soul, we say: أرقدى بقوة وسلام (Sleep in Power and Peace).

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