



## CASTING OFF THE VEIL

Eileen Phillips

**'With each of the men I ever knew, I was always overcome by a strong desire to lift my arm high up over my head and bring my hand smashing down on his face. Yet because I was afraid I was never able to lift my hand . . . Now my hand was no longer incapable of lifting itself high up in the air to land with violence on one of their faces . . . death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them.'** (*Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi)

Telling the story of a woman condemned to death for killing a man, publishing the first public attack in Egypt of female circumcision (*Women and Sex*), writing her memoirs of her imprisonment under Sadat as a subversive, are all part of Egyptian writer, feminist and doctor Nawal el Saadawi's powerful and irresistible indictment of patriarchal class society.

In person she is as powerful and irresistible as in print. Meeting her in a London hotel this June was like encountering a positive energy source. She was here to launch her book *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. She was able to negotiate with enthusiasm and apparent ease the competing demands of a friend who is in political exile, an Arab woman doctor making a documentary, women from Wages for Housework and an interviewer. Her openness to people and the world is something she understands as crucial to her writing: 'As a writer it's as if I am all the time

writing in my head. I have a hunger for knowing everything, to experience everything.'

This appetite allows her to speak positively of her experience of prison, despite both its material deprivation and the numbing uncertainty about regaining her freedom. (She was in fact released when Sadat was assassinated after 'a relatively short time in prison - three months'.) She describes it as 'a very acute phase in my life, all these heights and depths of life you felt. Acute pleasure and acute pain, acute hope and acute despair - the extreme moments of life fascinate me.'

Nawal describes her political priority as organising women to defeat 'the power of men which comes mainly from the husband having political, legal power over his wife. Also the man goes out to work and gains money and usually this gives him power.' Her sense of the difficulties and contradictions facing Egyptian women is complex, involving both progress and 'a relapse backwards. With the revival of religious fundamentalism there is a pull back, putting women back in the home, veiling women. This sector is supported politically and economically by different powers.'

She sees most of the positive changes as occurring in the lives of educated women and includes herself in this category: 'I am a product of my society, an Arab woman. Sharif is married to me and we were able to create a new family with no division of labour according to sex. He gave me support when I was in jail. Some of my colleagues came out of jail and they didn't find their husbands, their husbands had divorced them.'

She stresses the importance of economic



Nawal El Saadawi: feminist, writer and doctor.

independence if women are to have control over their own lives and understands this as more easily gained by educated women: 'Change in the life of peasant women is very slow. First of all this is because they work in the fields and they work very hard but they are economically dependent. Some work and sell their own produce and have money. As long as women have women in their pockets then they can leave their husbands if they beat them.'

Nawal's commitment to changing women's lives, which involves her dividing her time between Cairo and her village, Kafr Tahla, and working with the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, meshes with her commitment to socialism. But she is adamant about her refusal to subordinate women's struggle to that of the Left's. She rejects the label of marxist because: 'I hate to be labelled according to any man, Marx or Mohammed or Allah. I belong to my own thinking. I like to call myself socialist because I believe in equality.'

She is sceptical about the Left's ability to address the problem of patriarchy unless women are organising separately. 'There

are some women who are socialist and also feminist who joined the left parties and what was then experienced? They were a minority, they were kept marginal, the party was thinking about the working class and the peasant and the class differences. They were unconscious more or less of the patriarchal problem and male domination, or they put it aside, something like 'after the revolution women's problems will be solved automatically' etc.

Her certainty about the need for autonomous women's organisations is mirrored by her insistence on the need for Egypt's political autonomy: 'I believe in self-reliance and independence of the country, in order really for Egyptian people to be strong enough to stand in front of any colonialism, neo-colonialism, any invasion, any paternalism whether it is political or ideological or economic or anything'.

'We should depend on our power, that's number one. But this does not mean that in this big jungle of politics you don't cooperate with the Soviet Union or with the socialist bloc, rather than with the capitalist bloc. But I don't like to be allied with the Soviet Union, I might say "well, the

Soviet Union did this good but this bad," and I criticise the Soviet Union the same as I criticise Thatcher or Reagan.'

However, rejecting labels and refusing both personal and political dependencies which curtail her freedom to criticise are not unproblematic. Nawal sees this as involving her in never joining a political party, a position which she recognises can be criticised: 'Maybe this is wrong because politically speaking you cannot change the state without a political party. But still I'm not a politician. I'm a novelist, I'm a writer. I like to be free to break any frame. Maybe I'm very individualistic but still that's my constitution.'

It is clearly a constitution which enables her to communicate rebellion against repression in a way which takes her readers and listeners with her. Her categorisation by a repressive state as a 'subversive' is unsurprising. When asked if her fictional writing was a conscious attempt to attack and analyse women's oppression, in a similar fashion to her non-fiction, she replied: 'My fiction writing is part of my whole life. I don't sit and plan I'm going to write *Woman at Point Zero* to confirm

women's oppression. No. When you write a novel it comes out of you, it comes from the unconscious and the conscious together. You don't have certain goals like when you write a study'.

'When you write a novel you don't know why you are writing, a very vague urge pushes you to write it. But the end result is that fiction serves your conviction and that's the honesty of the writing. There is no paradox or separation between fiction and non-fiction because it's all one person, they serve each other.'

Yet her strongest commitment within her writing is to fiction: 'I'll tell you something very strange. If I write successful books, studies and am not writing fiction, I become frustrated, I feel a failure. I don't feel real self-realisation except when I write fiction.'

It is hard to imagine anything stopping her pursuit of the 'dangerous truth', or to see her as ever becoming complacent about either the world or her own work. At 55, Nawal el Saawadi has all the strength of maturity mixed with the urgency we often expect to see only in the very young. She remains an inspiration.

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