

Introduction

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The Arab world's leading feminist activist and writer, Nawal El Saadawi, died on Sunday, March 21, 2021. She was eighty-nine. Many events happened around the world to commemorate her life and work. Some consisted of poetic eulogies that emphasized Nawal's extraordinary contributions to the rule of justice in an unjust world; others criticized her for not being sufficiently feminist or academic or whatever they wanted her to have been. During a June 2 *Hiwar Mutamaddin* television panel, Hind Ahmad Zaki put her finger on the problem. Nawal could not be pigeonholed; she was not just a socialist, communist, liberal, decolonial, anti-imperialist feminist; she was all of them wrapped into one; she was an organic intellectual. Dismayed at the way the three academics on the panel with her criticized Nawal for being too multicultural, for trespassing on their territory without having the credentials, Hind Ahmad Zaki argued that this fully credentialed medical doctor with extensive practical experience in the Egyptian countryside focused on the body. The body in political, economic, social, and religious pain was at the center of everything she said and wrote. So true, but then Nawal and her husband, Sherif Hetata, had anticipated the criticism and prepared an eloquent response twenty-eight years ago. Consider the description of a course titled The Humanization of Medical Education that they taught at Duke University in 1994.

“At one time in history,” they wrote,

physicians who practiced medicine were also psychologists, musicians, writers, poets, sculptors or philosophers. The dichotomies between science and art, the body and the mind, practice and thought had not yet been established. The human being had not been divided into separate parts, and knowledge was still considered an indivisible whole. With the advent of the industrial, post-industrial and cybernetic eras resulting

in continued scientific and technological innovation, with the increasing commercialization of the professions, including medicine, with the ever finer specialization into branches, the links between the sciences and the arts, between the body and the mind, between emotions and thought were neglected.

Medicine suffered and so did the human being from this fragmentation of knowledge. Medical practitioners forgot about the arts, about the mind, they forgot that the patient was a human being who could be cheered and perhaps cured by music. Medical colleges now turn out efficient, smart doctors, clever at research, at repairing a cardiac valve or replacing it. Yet, they lack the sensitivity, the passion and the heart without which no profession can be great.

This course will explore new approaches to the question of medical ethics. So far the approach has been confined to doctor-patient relationships, or to rules and regulations aimed at ensuring greater protection against medical malpractice. We will examine some of the principles, assumptions and values which govern medical practice in an attempt to evolve a new perspective, a new medical ethic capable of protecting human beings and their human rights, capable to keeping them whole.

I have quoted the course description at length because it responds so powerfully to the carping of these academics nervously holding their arms around their disciplinary silos. Nawal could have responded just as eloquently to other such objections. There will be many more occasions for admirers and detractors to engage in debates about this extraordinary woman. That is as it should be. Nawal loved to debate, to provoke, and to anger but also to listen, to teach, and to learn.

Nawal spent the years 1993–97 at Duke University. With Sherif, she sheltered there after Islamists in Egypt published *Nawal El Saadawi in the Witness Box*, a widely available, cheap book that made the case that this “heretic” should be put to death. It was at Duke that she first taught undergraduates. Her Dissidence and Creativity classes inspired countless students. It was at Duke that she wrote *Awraqi Hayati*, the first two volumes of her autobiography, translated into English as *Daughter of Isis* and *Walking through Fire*, as well as her controversial play *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*. She was writing the third volume of her autobiography when she died.

This issue’s “Third Space” is based on two events organized to honor Nawal El Saadawi’s life and works. On Sunday, March 28, one week after her death, Fawzia Afzal-Khan brought together a group of friends, and the next day I invited colleagues from Duke University and elsewhere to speak. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, both meetings were held virtually. The first event was closed, and the second, cosponsored by the Association for Middle East Women’s Studies and the online journal *Jadaliyya*, was open, with hundreds attending. Afterward audience members were invited to post short tributes to the conference site. The tributes weave the inspirational speaker, the restless fighter, the ruthless critic, and the tender

friend into the fabric of their lives and times. The reader will notice how many considered Nawal their special friend.

The tributes are by ten women and three men, and that, too, is as it should be. While her main interlocutors were women, many men admired her, and she loved men enough to marry three of them, even if she ended up divorcing each one. The meetings that Nawal convened, as Margot Badran writes in this special section, always had men as well as people of all ages, classes, and nationalities in attendance. Nawal's feminism embraced all who yearned and fought for a better world.

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