

Nawal El Saadawi: The Daughter of Goddess Isis who Fought for Justice

How can anyone encompass the life of Nawal El Saadawi, a woman whose passionate pursuit of justice continued unabated until 21 March 2021, the day she died? It is not enough to cite the dozens of books she wrote that were translated into multiple languages, or to list the international prizes, awards and honorary doctorates she received, or to recall the many feminist, justice-seeking organisations she founded and supported. To do justice to the life of this extraordinary woman, one would have to fill several tomes. Accordingly, this essay will focus on Nawal's autobiography, her own account of how she remembered her life and assigned it feminist meaning.

Erasing the Divide between Personal and Political

In early 1993, after learning that the Egyptian Islamists who accused her of heresy had put her on their death list, Nawal El Saadawi found shelter at Duke University in North Carolina, USA. During her four years there, she wrote *Awraqi Hayati* in Arabic ("My Papers, My Life"). The first volume was published by Dar al-Adab in 1995. In 1999 London's Zed Press published an English version of the book, translated by her then-husband, Sherif Hetata, and titled *A Daughter of Isis*. From the perspective of a feminist physician, activist and writer in her early sixties, Nawal constructs brick by brick the life of a fearless fighter for women's rights across religious, ethnic and national boundaries.

For over half her life, Nawal often told me, her autobiography had lain in wait under a sea of novels. Why? I would ask, and she would answer that soon after picking up her pen to write about her life, she would realise that she could not go on because the demand to adhere to some form of truth might damage others – as well as herself. This time, however, she stuck with the autobiographical project to the very last page. To her surprise, the project she had thought so different from the art of fiction was not: "In some ways autobiography

is more real, more true than fiction, more creative, and more steeped in art..."¹

For Nawal, being creative means connecting. Creativity brings body, mind, and spirit together and abolishes the gap between fiction and non-fiction. Creativity is also linked to memory. Since memory is never complete, one must draw on creative thoughts to retrieve the parts that time has erased. Linking is a key concept, not only in this autobiography but in all of her thinking. Her personal philosophy, life choices and life writing refuse division and abstract theorisation. For Nawal, theory distances the object of study, but the imaginary rooted in reality brings the object close, where the struggles, joys and challenges of a particular individual can be examined. Theory obscures the particularity at the heart of the universal.

A Journey of Resistance

In her autobiography, Nawal traverses the years to reach the child she thought she had lost. She connects the past to the present to the future, the individual struggle to the collective one, the self to the other.

Written in an almost mystical state, the book traces the life trajectory of a deeply spiritual Arab feminist activist committed to contesting colonialism, capitalism and the patriarchy.

In the book, we read her dedication to changing gendered values and norms that extends beyond Egypt to the many cultures and societies she encountered in her numerous world travels.

Diving down through more than sixty years, she retrieves her childhood in Kafr Tahla, a poor village by the River Nile. Meandering through the village pathways and trusting the events that present themselves in all their wild woolliness, she chronicles

¹ Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 293-4.



miriam cooke is Braxton Craven Professor Emerita of Arab Cultures at Duke University. Her writings have focused on the intersection of gender and war in modern Arabic literature, Arab women writers' construction of Islamic feminism, contemporary Syrian and Khaliji cultures, and global Muslim networks. She is the author of several monographs that include *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (1987), *Women and the War Story* (1997); *Women Claim Islam* (2001), *Nazira Zeineddine: A Pioneer of Islamic Feminism* (2010), and *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution* (2017). She has also published the novel, *Hayati, My Life* (2000).

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the phases in her defiance of the gendered expectations of her rural society. Rejecting systemic gender injustice, she signals the first moment in her feminist trajectory: her refusal of a proposed suitor. Unlike the girls around her who tended to their femininity, young Nawal could not understand why women would tear the skin off their bodies as they removed hair from their arms and legs with sugar wax. Unlike many girls

in her village who were considered eligible for marriage before puberty, Nawal refused to be married at the age of eleven, turning away suitors with her deliberately unkempt appearance and offensive actions.

Nawal does not write of this feminist awakening as a deliberate process. She pours stories into the stream of days: "Writing became a weapon with which to fight

the system, which draws its autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family. The written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love.”² Creativity in life and writing mirrored each other in the battle to seize the rights owed to her as a woman who took up arms.

She denounces the different treatment that her brother received at home, although she was the smart one who had succeeded at school while he had consistently failed. Unlike her cousin Zaynab who married young and remained in their birth village,³ Nawal left for Cairo to attend school, later earning a medical degree in psychiatry at Cairo University. From a young age and throughout her life, Nawal expressed her anger at gender injustice. In high school, she led a student uprising, shouting: “Long live Egypt in freedom.... My country, my country, I give you my heart and my love...” When the demonstrators appointed her the school’s delegate, her headmistress accused her of “causing a riot,” and she realised proudly how powerful she had become.⁴

She rails against men’s deliberate misinterpretations of religion. As a child, she had been puzzled by the idea of God. Is He the God that her father and brother think they own? Does their God punish girls? Surely He must, because already as a six year-old child, she noticed that when her clitoris was pulled out from between her thighs and cut, the women invoked Him, so He must approve.⁵ In the year of her excision she made a terrible connection: “I learnt these three words by heart and they were like one sentence: ‘God, calamity, marriage.’”⁶ With time she realises that this misogynist god is not God, for her illiterate grandmother taught her that the real God is the God of justice. Religious authorities had undermined her

spiritual life and “betrayed” the Qur’an by choosing “meanings that one’s reason refused.”⁷ They made her hate religion, but not Islam.⁸

Embracing Contradictions

Her autobiography is surprisingly vulnerable and contradictory. The feminist we expect not to need her mother needs her right up to the end. Even as she is writing the autobiography when she is over sixty, she recalls through an act of daring imagination her mother’s despair when she hears that she has given birth to a girl.⁹ Almost twenty years older than her mother was when she died, Nawal still mourns her mother’s inability to express love for her children even if this love burns “like a flame but held back.”¹⁰ Her longing for her mother’s touch aches on the page.

In a world of suppressed love, she writes, women become cruel to each other. The midwife who cuts the clitoris of young girls seemed to feel satisfaction in the action: “a mixture of joy and revenge.”¹¹ This cruelty “had grown in them through suppression, the steam held back under pressure until their bodies were filled with it to bursting point.”¹²

Nawal is no advocate of simple sisterhood. She sees that women do not always support each other in the global, class-patriarchal system.

This love-hate relationship spills over into the world of medicine that is both magical and weak. In sections referring to her medical profession, Nawal deplors the gap between her idea of medicine and the reality. Boxed into their specialisations, doctors can neither treat the whole body nor discern the links between

² El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 292.

³ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 128.

⁴ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 228-32.

⁵ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 11.

⁶ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 40.

⁷ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 247-52.

⁸ When she wrote an endorsement for my *Women Claim Islam. Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2000), she was happy to be in the book. Yes, she accepted the label of Islamic feminist, but she chided me for putting her side by side with Zaynab al-Ghazali, the Egyptian fundamentalist founder of the Egyptian Ladies Association.

⁹ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 18-22.

¹⁰ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 152.

¹¹ El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 61.

¹² El Saadawi, A *Daughter of Isis*, 195.

sickness, poverty and politics.¹³ Nawal's autobiography provides clues for understanding why she left the medical profession.

She chafes against her wavering emotions, especially concerning her parents. While her father excludes her from God's sacred circle, he also insisted, against his wife's remonstrance, that Nawal and her sisters be educated. However, no sooner had she started to succeed at primary school than he wanted her to come home. She was to help her mother, who now refused to take her daughter out of the school she had not wanted her to attend in the first place. When Nawal turned eleven it was time to go to secondary school, and her parents quarreled over whether this child could go to Cairo alone. Her mother insisted she could, since she would stay with her aunt. Whatever quarrel Nawal had with her father pales in comparison with her pride in his nationalist activities, especially during the 1919 Revolution against the British.¹⁴ This father is the man who reassured her of her creativity after her Arabic teacher discouraged her from writing. He was, we learn toward the end of the autobiography, "a very gentle father."¹⁵

Liberating the Mind

Nawal is not the only Arab feminist to have tackled the autobiographical project. But none has been able to access the child that inhabited her until the day she died quite as directly as she did. Stirring her creativity, this rebellious child shaped the shapeless into compelling narratives and inspired her to challenge her readers to dream.

From childhood Nawal had had dreams of flying, even if without a known destination: "the truest of my dreams was born with childhood... It is reborn

as [the years] go by, gives birth to itself, for like the gods it is self-creating." This dream transformed itself into a more concrete vision and hope for herself and the world: "I dream of facing the world openly, being myself as I really am... I dream of a different world, of a time when I will break through my shell, through the walls that hold me back, and prevent me from speaking, from saying what I want to say."¹⁶

But, of course, her dreams did come true, because no one, however powerful, could prevent her from speaking, from writing.

miriam cooke 

¹³ El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*, 291-2.

¹⁴ El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*, 107.

¹⁵ El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*, 207. Her novels are full of dreadful men, mostly father figures. When I once asked her about her father, she laughed: "people think that because I am critical of men in my writings that my father must have been a terrible man." No, he had always supported her.

¹⁶ El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*, 116, 186.