



# LIFE AND WORKS OF NAWAL SA'DAWI: A STUDY

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## Abstract

This article aims to show how Sa'dawi became so familiar with the plight of women and girls in her culture via her job as a doctor in the 1960s that she decided to look into the causes of such pervasive sexism. Here, in chronological sequence, each of Sa'dawi's authentic writings is addressed independently. These pieces depict Sa'dawi protesting against social and sexual harassment of women, female circumcision, and morally dubious practices in her community. She blames patriarchal culture, economic constraints, and incorrect interpretations of science and religion as she tries to identify the underlying causes of Arab women's subjugation. Sa'dawi is restrained from criticizing political or religious organizations openly because of the prospect of censorship, which involves the risk of being imprisoned and subject to persecution.

Her dedication to assisting her compatriots in achieving balanced, healthy lifestyles from the psychological, bodily, and sexual dimensions, via open discussions of hotly debated topics, is a major factor in Sa'dawi's enormous popularity and the success of her literary works. Sa'dawi became well-known in the West throughout the 1980s, when she is justifiably considered as the primary spokesperson for Arab feminism.

**Keywords:** *sexual harassment, female circumcision, authentic, chronological sequence, pervasive sexism, plight, patriarchal culture, incorrect interpretations, subjugation, censorship, compatriots, lifestyles, psychological, sexual dimensions, feminism.*

## Introduction

Nawal Sa'dawi was a female Egyptian author, activist, and doctor. She authored a number of works on the topic of women in Islam, with a focus on the custom of female genital mutilation in her culture. She was referred to as "Egypt's most radical lady" and "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab World." She was the co-founder and first president of the Arab Association for Human Rights as well as the creator of the Arab Women's Liberation Association. She received honorary degrees from three different continents. 2004 saw her win the Council of Europe's North-South Prize. She received the Belgian Inana International Prize in 2005, and she also received the 2012 Seán MacBride Peace Prize from the International Peace Bureau.

The most intriguing and well-known Arabic author writing now is Nawal al-Sa'dawi. Her writings are significant now because they provide Egypt, where she was born, with the blueprint for social growth at a period of fierce conflict between reactionary forces represented by religious fundamentalism and progressive, futuristic socialism. Additionally, other Arab, Islamic, and Third World countries can benefit from her writings. Her output and popularity are unmatched among Arab women writers, either domestically or internationally. Sa'dawi has benefited from Western interest in the global sexism of women, which has come from publishers, the media, and feminist organizations. His work has been in high demand for translation since certain of his writings, like his memoirs from prison and *The Hidden Face of Eve*, have been available to English-speaking readers for some time. Except for Moroccan Fatima Marnisi, no other author has shown the same dedication to exposing phenomena that are not unique to Arab society as Sa'dawi has in understanding the social realities of the Arab family and the status of women in modern Muslim society, both to the West and to themselves.

In fact, to say about the unique position of Sa'dawi; he holds in the field of social reform as an educator and moralist, as well as her prominent position in Arabic literature as a writer who expresses the perspective of women and whose fictional criticism of her society has the power to influence future sensibilities. Salwa Khammash found that social issues were not considered a major concern by Egyptian authors in her socio-literary analysis of the Egyptian novel, that the authors had not investigated society to the extent that would have allowed them to convey the very depths of human sufferings caused by social evils, nor dude's hopes and dreams for a better future. Whole spheres of career were missing from the portrait depicted in the Egyptian novels, including kids, educators, workers, servants, and soldiers, all of whom were surprisingly absent.

Until 1986, the works of Sa'dawi are included in this article. She continues to write with the same level of productivity as she always has, and in the midst of the present resurgence of interest in Islamic beliefs, she is even more concerned about the well-being of Egyptian society. Following is a brief overview of Sa'dawi's early years, education, career, non-fiction writings, and literary contributions to Egyptian culture.

## Early life and Education of Sa'dawi

Reading Sa'dawi's fact-filled works can provide a wealth of information about her life. She is surprisingly open and unafraid to write about some of her personal experiences for an Arab lady. Many of her female readers, in particular, have confided in her because of this familiarity, which has drawn so many of them. Her novels and short tales also significantly depend on her personal experience, and as a result, some of them have a distinctively autobiographical flavor. Her sociological works are laced with encounters and insights from her job as well. Her writing is so distinctively her own that after reading any one of her pieces, the reader feels as though he has met the author. All of her writings, from her lengthy dissertation on women and sex to her briefest anecdotes, demonstrate her unwavering dedication to assisting people in improving the lives they lead by eradicating ignorance, and exposing hypocrisy.

Sa'dawi was born on 27 October 1931 in Kafr Tahla, an Egyptian village in the Nile Delta, the eldest of nine children, with one older brother. His parents were relatively liberal and open-minded for their time. They encouraged him to question beliefs and opinions, even religion to a certain degree. Sa'dawi considers herself a "lucky child" in that she was largely spared the traditional oppression to which girls of her class, the educated middle class, were usually subjected. Sa'dawi traces the strength of his personality to his mother and grandfather, whom he mentions in his writings. Sa'dawi's mother had been expelled by her father from the French school she had been attending in order for her to be married and be relegated to a wife and mother afterward. Sa'dawi's mother's attitude of animosity and irritation over being denied an education was evidently a factor in her behavior. In Sa'dawi's factual works, the right of girls to an education and the right to select a profession will eventually take center stage. Sa'dawi praises her mother for training her to write in '*Mudhakkirati fi Sijn al-Nisa*', her memoirs from jail.

Sa'dawi's father was a university graduate who served in a crucial role as the Province of Menoufia's General Controller of Education. She offers an example of the kind of conversation she had with her father on the sensitive subject of God's gender and how it relates to Arabic grammar in order to highlight his open-mindedness and her youth.

Sa'dawi hasn't participated in Egyptian politics, but she has maintained a significant role in society as a well-known opponent. She proudly attributes her interest in national issues to her parents' involvement in protests against the British occupation of Egypt as children and the support she received from them to get involved in student rallies. The horrifying story of Sa'dawi's circumcision at age six must make an eternal impact on the minds of Western readers while forging an instant sisterhood between her and any Arab female readers who have experienced a similar horror. Sa'dawi's strong sense of having been betrayed by her mother at the circumcision may have caused significant strain in their early connection despite her clear love and worry for her mother. She remembers how her mother had been silent throughout that time of agony and dread. Sa'dawi clearly acknowledges the degree of the psychological damage this encounter has done to her.

Sa'dawi was quite unprepared for the start of menstruation, which caused a disproportionate amount of anxiety to her developing psyche. She may recall, with a light hearted touch, how she had fantasized that she had suffered a night time attack or had developed belharsia. She is vehemently begging for Egyptian girls to be informed about the bodily changes brought on by puberty by recounting her own intimate experiences in this manner. We infer that she effectively resisted her parents' expectations of her as a youngster by refusing to prioritize her looks above her intellectual growth. Sa'dawi remembers having an insatiable thirst for knowledge as a little girl. She read widely from her father's library and ingested anything printed, including the newspaper wrappings of the roasted seeds she used to purchase to eat on the street. Sa'dawi went to Menoufia's English primary school, Cairo's secondary school, and Helwan's boarding school. She seems to have enjoyed school and had an equal interest in the humanities and sciences.

She earned her medical degree from Cairo University in 1955. She married Ahmed Helmi in that year after meeting him as a medical school classmate. Mona Helmi, their daughter, was born. Two years into the marriage, it was over. She noticed women's physical and psychological issues via her medical practice and made connections between them and repressive cultural norms, patriarchal oppression, class oppression, and imperialist oppression. Rashad Bey, a co-worker, served as her second spouse. In Kafr Tahla, where she was raised, she practiced medicine, where she saw firsthand the struggles and injustices that rural women endured. Sa'dawi was called back to Cairo after attempting to shield one of her patients from domestic abuse. When she shared an office in the Ministry of Health with her third husband, Sherif Hatata, she finally rose to the position of Director of the Ministry of Public Health. Hatata had spent 13 years as a political prisoner. He was both a doctor and a writer. They got hitched in 1964, and they had a son. After 43 years of marriage, Sa'dawi and Hatata got divorced in 2010.

It's possible that Egyptian society would have taken a different turn during the previous two decades if Sa'dawi hadn't incited the enmity of a few powerful political and religious people and hadn't been fired from her position as director of health education. Sa'dawi's first run-in with the law dates back to 1962, when she made a sensation by answering the question "Who is the peasant?" with "The one whose urine is crimson" in front of President Nasser at the National Conference for the Popular Forces. She obviously made reference to the ongoing issue of belharsia and accused the government of not doing enough to eradicate it.

Sa'dawi started working with the African Training and Research Centre for Women, based in Addis Abeba, as part of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in 1978. She was in charge of the training programs at the Centre in this distinguished role, which came with significant obligations. She was unsuccessful in her attempts to stop the employment of consultants and specialists who were exclusively white and male in reinterpreting the projects presented by women, and the next year she left. After that, Sa'dawi joined the Beirut-based United Nations Economic Committee for West Asia. She departed in 1980 after speaking at the Copenhagen International Women's Conference on the issues facing Palestinian women in the occupied areas, as she once more received little support for her ideas. Since 1980, Sa'dawi has devoted her time to writing, international public speaking engagements, and the organizations she is involved with,

including the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, which she founded in 1982, and the Association for African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), of which she was a co-founder in 1978. Sa'dawi is also active in the Egyptian Human Rights Organization, whose secretary general is her spouse.

Sa'dawi and her family have recently moved to reside in the hamlet where her husband was raised, and she views their place as a writers' refuge. She also treats a few private patients who are unable to pay for medical care, in addition to writing and keeping her small house. Along with teaching them practical skills, she raises the political and social consciousness of the village women and works with them on numerous projects aimed at enhancing health care and altering antiquated ideas that limit women's advancement. In 1980, when she moved to Oslo, she discussed the significance of her relocation by stating:

*"I've come to understand that the many networks of ties and connections I've built over the years with the people of my city, Cairo, and my town, Kafr Tahla, are the only sources through which my literary or scientific innovation may grow. These connections have also provided me with support and safety, sparing me from the misery of loneliness and alienation caused by extreme individualism. My urgent need to be alone, away from others, so that I may think and reflect is coupled by an equally urgent need to be in contact with people. This is because I must live with them and touch with my hands the fiber of their support, not because I want to write about them."*

## **Her Imprisonment**

Sa'dawi assisted in the 1981 publication of *Confrontation*, a feminist journal that the Egyptian government had long regarded as contentious and dangerous. Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, jailed her in September. One time during an interview, Sa'dawi said, "I was detained because I had faith in Sadat. He stated that we have democracy, a multi-party system, and that you are free to voice your opinions. I thus began opposing his policy, which led to my arrest." Sadat asserted that the current administration was a democracy for the people and that it was always open to reasonable criticism. Sa'dawi claims that Sadat put her in prison because she criticized his alleged democracy. She continued to struggle against women's oppression when she was incarcerated. She founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association when she was incarcerated. This was Egypt's first official, autonomous feminist organization. She was refused a pen and paper when she was incarcerated, but that did not stop her from continuing to write. She jotted down her thoughts on a "small roll of worn and frayed toilet paper" with a "stubby black eyebrow pencil." One month after the President's murder, she was freed later that year. "Danger has been a part of my life ever since I took up a pen and wrote," she said of her experience. In a world of falsehoods, nothing is more dangerous than the truth."

She established the Arab Women's Liberation Association in 1982. She characterized her group as "socialist, historical, and feminist." One of the women housed at Qanatir Women's Prison was Sa'dawi. A memoir from the Women's Prison, published in 1983, and was inspired by her imprisonment (*Mazakirati fi*



*cizni Nisaae*). Nine years before to her imprisonment in Qanatir, she had a chance encounter with a prisoner there that served as the basis for an earlier book, *Woman at Point Zero* (*Imra'tu inda nuktati Sifre*; 1975).

## **Socialism and Feminism**

Saadawi herself as a socialist-feminist and she hold the view that the feminist fight cannot be won in a capitalist society. She developed this socialist viewpoint as a result of abuses she personally experienced. The personal status laws in Arab nations must be a top concern for socialists because, as she argues in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, people's sexual and psychological lives cannot be isolated from their economic lives and production. She said in an interview that she is not a Marxist after reading some of his writings and discovering certain issues.

## **Religion**

In a 2014 interview, Saadawi said that "the global post-modern capitalism system, which is reinforced by religious fanaticism, sits at the heart of women's enslavement." The Muslim pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 2015 resulted in the death of hundreds of people in what has been dubbed a "stampede," to which she responded: "They speak about altering the way the Hajj is handled, about making pilgrims go in smaller groups. They don't include the fact that these individuals were trying to stone the demon when the crush occurred. Why is the devil required to be stoned? Why must they kiss that black stone? However, nobody will say this. The media won't publish it. What is this hesitation to criticize religion about? This is not liberalism, this unwillingness to question religion, Censorship in action. According to her, the Black Stone kiss and other aspects of the Hajj have pre-Islamic pagan origins. Throughout her literary career, Saadawi was active in the scholarly investigation of Arab identity. The Islamic veil was referred to by Saadawi as "an instrument of tyranny of women."

## **Her Works**

Early in her profession, Sa'dawi started writing. Her debut book, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, and a collection of short tales titled *I Learned Love* (1957) are among her earlier works (1958). She thereafter produced a large number of books, short tales, and *Narrative from the Women's Prison*, a personal memoir (1986). In addition to having her work published in several anthologies, Sa'dawi has had it translated into more than 30 languages, including English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Italian, Dutch, Finnish, Indonesian, Japanese, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and others. *Women and Sex*, her first piece of non-fiction she released in 1972, sparked the ire of powerful religious and political figures. She was also fired from the Ministry of Health as a result of it. Other works include *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, *God Dies by the Nile*, *The Circling Song*, *The Fall of the Imam*, and *Searching*. The fall of the Imam is hailed as "a striking and emotional exposé of the horrors that women and children may be exposed to by the precepts of faith."

## Novels

- *Mudhakkirat tabiba* (Cairo, 1958). *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, trans. Catherine Cobham (Saqi Books, 1988)
- *Al ghayib* (Cairo, 1965). *Searching*, trans. Shirley Eber (Zed Books, 1991)
- *Imra'tani fi-Imra'a* (Cairo, 1968). *Two Women in One*, trans. Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough (Saqi Books, 1985)
- *Maut ar-raġul al-wahīd 'ala ,l-arḍ* (1974). *God Dies by the Nile*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Zed Books, 1985)
- *Al-khait wa'ayn al-hayat* (Cairo, 1976). *The Well of Life and The Thread: Two Short Novels*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Lime Tree, 1993)
- *Ughniyat al-atfal al da iriyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1977). *The Circling Song*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Zed Books, 1989)
- *Emra'a enda noktāt el sifr* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1977). *Woman at Point Zero*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Zed Books, 1983)
- *Mawt Ma'ali al-Wazir Sabiqan* (1980). *Death of an Ex-Minister*, trans. Shirley Eber (Methuen, 1987)
- *Suqūṭ al-imām* (Cairo, 1987). *The Fall of the Imam*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Methuen, 1988)
- *Jann āt wa-Iblīs* (Beirut, 1992). *The Innocence of the Devil*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Methuen, 1994)
- *Ḥubb fī zaman al-naft* (Cairo, 1993). *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, trans. Basil Hatim and Malcolm Williams (Saqi Books, 2001)
- *Al-Riwayah* (Cairo: Dar El Hilal, 2004). *The Novel*, trans. Omnia Amin and Rick London (Interlink Books, 2009)
- *Zeina* (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 2009). *Zeina*, trans. Amira Nowaira (Saqi Books, 2011)

## Short-story collections

- *Ta'allamt al-hubb* (Cairo, 1957). *I Learned Love*
- *Lahzat sidq* (Cairo, 1959). *Moment of Truth*
- *Little Tenderness* (Cairo, 1960)
- *al-Khayt wa-l-jidar* (1972). *The Thread and the Wall*
- *Ain El Hayat* (Beirut, 1976)
- *Kānat hiya al-aḍ'af* ["She Was the Weaker"] (1979). *She Has No Place in Paradise*, trans. Shirley Eber (Methuen, 1987). Includes three additional stories: "She Has No Place in Paradise", "Two Women Friends", and "Beautiful".
- *Adab Am Kellet Abad* (Cairo, 2000)

## Plays

- *Ithna 'ashar imra'a fi zinzana wahida* (Cairo, 1984). *Twelve Women in a Cell*

- *Isis* (Cairo, 1985)
- *God Resigns in the Summit Meeting* (1996), published by Madbouli, and four other plays included in her *Collected Works* (45 books in Arabic), Cairo: Madbouli, 2007

## Memoirs

- *Mudhakkirat fi Sijn al-Nisa* (Cairo, 1983). *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, trans. Marilyn Booth (The Women's Press, 1986)
- *Rihlati hawla al-'alam* (Cairo, 1986). *My Travels Around the World*, trans. Shirley Eber (Methuen, 1991)
- *Memoirs of a Child Called Soad* (Cairo, 1990)
- *Awraqi hayati*, first volume (Cairo, 1995). *A Daughter of Isis*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Zed Books, 1999)
- *Awraqi hayati*, second volume (Cairo, 1998). *Walking Through Fire*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Zed Books, 2002)
- *My Life, Part III* (Cairo, 2001)

## Non-fiction

- *Women and Sex* (Cairo, 1969)
- *Woman is the Origin* (Cairo, 1971)
- *Men and Sex* (Cairo, 1973)
- *The Naked Face of Arab Women* (Cairo, 1974)
- *Women and Neurosis* (Cairo, 1975)
- *Al-Wajh al-'ari lil-mar'a al-'arabiyy* (1977). *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Zed Press, 1980)
- *On Women* (Cairo, 1986)
- *A New Battle in Arab Women Liberation* (Cairo, 1992)
- *Collection of Essays* (Cairo, 1998)
- *Collection of Essays* (Cairo, 2001)
- *Breaking Down Barriers* (Cairo, 2004)

## Compilations in English

- *North/South: The Nawal El Sa'dawi Reader* (Zed Books, 1997)
- *Off Limits: New Writings on Fear and Sin* (Ginkgo Library, 2019, ISBN 978-88-87847-16-1)

## Death

At the age of 89, Sa'dawi passed away at a Cairo hospital on March 21, 2021. The obituary program Last Word on BBC Radio 4's paid tribute to her life.

## Conclusion

As a summary, I'd like to mention that Sa'dawi was a doctor, psychiatrist, author, and supporter of women's rights who practiced public health in Egypt. Sa'dawi was a feminist whose writings and professional



career were devoted to political and sexual rights for women, earning her the moniker "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world."

## Refences

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