

*Nawal el Saadawi: Writer and Revolutionary**miriam cooke*

“We live in one world under patriarchal capitalism. I am opposed to anything that divides us. The differences between people and cultures that literature erases, theory generalizes and abstracts.”

This is how Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi articulated her personal philosophy and life choices during a September 2014 meeting with Chinese women writers at Beijing Normal University. Whereas theory specializes and distances the object of study, El Saadawi argued, the imaginary brings the object close in order to deal with the particular individual in her daily struggles, joys, and challenges. “I write what I lived in my village Kafr Tahla,” El Saadawi elaborated. “When with a sincere intent a writer dives deep into their reality the story will become universal.”¹ Theory loses the particularity that is at the heart of the universal. Diving deep into her reality means returning again and again to her birthplace by the Nile, even while traveling the globe.

Like Henri Bergson’s binary epistemology that distinguishes between intuition and analysis, between grasping the motion of an object from within as opposed to from without, between the absolute and the relative, El Saadawi contrasts the creative impulse with the theoretical endeavor. Description, history, and analysis, Bergson writes:

[L]eave me in the relative. Only by coinciding with the person itself would I possess the absolute . . . an absolute can only be given in an intuition, while all the rest has to do with analysis. We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it. Analysis, on the contrary, is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known. . . . There is at least one reality which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own person in its flowing through time. . . . In so far as abstract ideas can render service to analysis, that is, to a scientific study of the object in its relations with all others, to that extent are they incapable of replacing intuition. (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 4, 6–7, 9, 17, 18)

While Bergson's intuition – that transports us into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it – is not synonymous with creativity, it is suggestive of the pure apprehension seized in El Saadawi's understanding of creativity. For El Saadawi, creativity brings body, mind, and spirit together: "When you are creative, when you are writing," she once said, "you don't feel limited because your imagination can transcend anything (Simpson, "She Came," 2005).

In what follows, I explore El Saadawi's life and writings to show that although she marks a separation between theory and creativity, they are in fact interconnected in all that she does. Two sides of the same coin, theorizing lived experience is inseparable from the realm of the imaginary because each feeds and enriches the other. Many of her literary works were written in tandem with a scholarly study informed by a medical or religious or geopolitical research project in which she was engaged. These literary projects emerge directly out of her work as a medical doctor or a self-taught scholar of religions, especially Abrahamic religions, or a human rights advocate. Medicine, fiction, and activism intertwine in all that she does.

From Medicine to Literature

El Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla, a poor village on the banks of the Nile. Like all village girls, she was considered nubile before puberty and when she was eleven, suitors began to knock at the door. The young Nawal knew that if she was to escape tradition and the fate of her cousin Fatima who married at fourteen and spent the rest of her life in Kafr Tahla devoted to family and fields, she had to leave the village. In 1943, the girl got on a train headed for the capital where she lodged with an aunt. Twelve years later in 1955, she graduated from Cairo University's medical school and went on to become the director of public health and ultimately a world-famous writer and human rights activist.

Although she did leave the village, Kafr Tahla stayed with her as a source of inspiration and a moral compass. It appears in harrowing novels like *God Dies by the Nile* (1974) where peasant women are relentlessly policed for violations of stringent codes of village honor, they are raped, and their genitals are cut. To give birth, they leave the field briefly, deliver themselves, and return to their furrow, baby strapped to the back. Invitations pour in from the world's capitals, from remote towns, from international organizations, and from local women's cooperatives, and the village girl

hops on the next plane, hoping that her deeply ethical and richly cosmopolitan voice will touch someone and make a difference.

Theorizing data from medical, social, or political research often accompanied a creative project. One of her first novels, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (*Mudhakkirat tabiba*), came out in 1958 while she was practicing medicine near Kafr Tahla. The product of three years of psychiatric work, this early attempt at crafting fiction evokes the impoverished state of her women patients. Presenting her clinical experience in literary form allowed El Saadawi to tell a particular story that universalized the conditions in which rural Egyptian women lived, subjected to harsh gender codes and the devastating outcome of decades of British colonial rule. During the following decade, while she was still practicing medicine, she published only one novel. *Searching* (in Arabic *al-Ghaib* or *The Absent One*) appeared in 1968, and it told the story of Fuada, a chemist whiling her life away in the Ministry of Biochemistry. Mirroring her disillusionment with her profession at the Ministry of Health, the novel presents a caste of unattractive male officials and the women who have to cope with them. At that time, fiction had functioned cathartically; it was an avocation.

The turning point came in 1972 when El Saadawi published *Women and Sex*, her analysis and condemnation of the injustices Egyptian women suffer, notably excision.² This scholarly exposition of the failure of the state to provide medical services to its most needy citizens caused a scandal, and she was dismissed from her position as editor in chief of *Health* magazine and the director of health education. The official end of her medical career launched her into the world of literature and political activism.

Even before her dismissal in 1972, El Saadawi had entertained serious doubts about her medical career. In conversation, she often repeated that her writings healed more people, especially women, than her clinical work ever could. With one novel she could reach thousands of girls and women whose bodies and minds she would have had to treat individually and over extended periods and even then not known if they were better for the treatment. With a novel, the cure was quicker, more effective, and more widespread.

Woman at Point Zero (*Imra'a `inda nuqtat sifr*, 1975) proved her point. The novel was an immediate success. The night before her execution for murder, a prostitute called Firdaus, or Paradise, tells a psychiatrist of her seriatim-sexual exploitation at the hands of those she had trusted, especially men in her family. Like so many women around the world whom sexual abuse drives to murder, Firdaus kills her pimp. At a time when incest was not generally acknowledged, the novel indicted all men, not

only Firdaus' male relatives, who feel entitled to abuse girl relatives. Like Betty Friedan's "sickness without a name," the revelation of the trauma of incest named a disease so many girls had suffered without understanding it. Like *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, this novel was intertwined with medical research she had been conducting at Qanatir Women's Prison in 1974. She had interviewed more than twenty women in the prison's mental clinic, including a woman called Firdaus, and she published the data in *Women and Neurosis in Egypt (Al-mar'a wa al-sira' al-nafsi)* in 1976.

The composing of these two books exemplifies the ways El Saadawi's approaches to writing reflect the distinction that Bergson made in psychology between analysis and intuition. Psychology, Bergson wrote:

proceeds by analysis. It resolves the self, first given to it in the form of a simple intuition, into sensations, feelings, images, etc. which it studies separately. It therefore substitutes for the self a series of elements which are the psychological facts. . . . Although they place states side by side with states, multiply their contacts, explore their intervening spaces the self always escapes them, so that in the end they see nothing more in it than an empty phantom. . . . [T]o the detached psychological states, to those shadows of the self the totality of which was, for the empiricists, the equivalent of the person, rationalism, to reconstitute the personality, adds something still more unreal, the vacuum in which these shadows move. . . . Analysis operates on immobility, while intuition is located in mobility or, what amounts to the same thing, in duration. (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 22, 23, 29, 31–2, 43)

Analysis works with numerous, separate facts and elements; intuition grasps the inexpressible self – the subject of creative writing – that escapes the empiricists. Bergson insisted on the primacy of intuition because from it "one can pass on to analysis, but not from analysis to intuition" (44). It is worth noting that El Saadawi wrote the novel before completing the psychological study, having passed from the intuition characteristic of the creation of literary figures to analysis of several women's narratives of abuse and violence. The psychological study is virtually unknown in contrast with its literary counterpart.

The difference between these two texts appears in the passionate portrayal of a single individual whose traumas stay with the reader long after closing the book, as opposed to the cold enumeration of symptoms. Firdaus is the product of El Saadawi's ability to place herself but also the reader "directly, by an effort of intuition, in the concrete flowing of duration," to cite Bergson's vivid articulation of the creative process (*Bergson, Introduction to Metaphysics*, 56). This duration is the sense of continuity

inherent in individual existence that cannot be analyzed but only intuited, and from that intuition comes analysis.

Concise and raw, the novel *Woman at Point Zero* hit a nerve, and with its translation into English in 1983, El Saadawi was launched as an international feminist writer. The messages from around the world after its translation into more than thirty languages and the fact that the novel has become required reading in women's studies courses more than justified her decision to exchange her scalpel for a pen.

Islam

El Saadawi's literary prominence gave her a public voice that she used to decry injustice in Egypt and to attack the Islamists' draconian policing of women's appearance and behavior in public spaces. During the 1980s, not only Egypt but also other Muslim-majority countries witnessed the emergence of political Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran presaged the Islamists' growing influence. Ironically, like the Islamists she critiqued, El Saadawi opposed President Anwar Sadat and his policies at home and abroad, notably the 1978 Camp David Accords with Israel. In 1981, the Sadat regime imprisoned El Saadawi. A year later, the Muslim Brothers' long-term opposition to Sadat culminated in his assassination.

After Husni Mubarak assumed power, El Saadawi was released. In her 1985 *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (*Mudhakkirat fi sijn al-nisa'*), she described the emotional rollercoaster of prison swinging frantically between grief and joy, "pain and pleasure, the greatest beauty and the most intense ugliness . . . In prison I found my heart opened to love – how I don't know." Love fought loathing in the cell she shared with Islamist women sternly covered even though they were with women only. The Islamists might have been the enemy of her enemy Sadat, but that did not make them her friends. She turned her voice and pen to their iniquities.

Soon after her release, while writing her prison memoir, she founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), the first independent feminist organization in Egypt that soon developed a parallel international association. El Saadawi had two mottos for AWSA: the veil shrouds the mind; women's bodies are not shameful until they are veiled. She called for joint action against the growing intolerance of men, especially those oppressing women in the name of Islam. She invited Arab women from all twenty-two Arab countries to share their stories and strategies and thus empowered them to contest political parties that used Islam as a front for their grab for power at home and in the nation. In 1991, El Saadawi

led AWSA International's protest against the Gulf War (Stephan, "Arab Women's Solidarity Association International"). Mubarak's men closed AWSA along with its magazine, *Nun*.

Even before mobilizing international action against the president and also his enemies the Islamists, analyzing their power and danger in newspaper articles and in her speeches at home and abroad, El Saadawi was writing a novel that lyrically linked her twin struggles. *The Fall of the Imam* (*Suqut al-imam*, 1987) deals with the hypocrisy of faux Muslims who seem to be opposing secular regimes but are in fact in cahoots with them. The novel indicts Islamic and secular male authorities who feel entitled to rape, exploit, and punish women for crimes they have committed. The heroine Bint Allah is the illegitimate daughter of a religious leader who had raped her mother and now wants to kill this emblem of his sin. She is called Bint Allah, meaning in Arabic Daughter of Allah, a concept deemed heretical, yet the only possible name for a girl in a country where mothers cannot give their offspring their names. The circular narrative keeps returning to Bint Allah running from her father and his agents. Almost liturgical in its formulaic repetitions, the novel takes readers through an increasing crescendo of fear and loathing.

El Saadawi distilled the cruelty and hypocrisy of religious leaders in her creation of the imam even while she was fighting those same leaders in her Association and in newspaper articles. Never afraid of controversy, she put herself in Bint Allah's mind and heart and body, turning around in terror as the imam's men chased her in life and in her dreams. Intuitively, she had begun her campaign against the erasure of the mother's name that she would later pursue in the law courts. *The Fall of the Imam* infuriated the Islamists who recognized themselves in this fictional story. They put her on their death list. Far from being cowed into silence, she was provoked into publishing an even more trenchantly critical novel entitled *The Innocence of the Devil* (1992). Her only concession to her nervous publisher was not to use the title that she later insisted on for the English translation but to name it *Gannat wa Iblis* (*Gannat and the Devil*). The action takes place inside a psychiatric hospital – emblem of Egypt in thrall to fanatics. A modern fable, the novel revolves around a woman patient called Gannat, like Firdaus meaning Paradise. In the interaction among the patients (two of the patients imagine themselves to be God and Satan), nurses, and guards, we read about the dangers of Islamic extremism for women.

This novel promoted El Saadawi to number one on the Islamists' death list. Some self-appointed judges had staged a mock heresy trial

that they published in late 1992. *Nawal El Saadawi in the Dock* was quickly and cheaply distributed in major Egyptian cities. Mimicking Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie for heretical passages in his 1988 *Satanic Verses*, their open call to punish a writer for what they called heresy endangered her life. Disingenuously claiming to "protect" her, the government sent guards to her apartment, where they remained around the clock. Always connecting the dots between oppressors and their common agendas, however divergent they might seem, she distrusted the arrangement. A mere ten years earlier, such guards had held her captive in Qanatir Women's Prison; it was time to leave. In January 1993, she moved with her husband, Sherif Hetata, to Duke University.

Autobiography

It was the first time she had taught in a university and it was during her four years in Durham, North Carolina, that El Saadawi theorized the connections between dissidence, women, and creativity in the classroom and also in her literary autobiography. Other attempts at writing her life had turned into novels as she realized that she was exposing herself and those close to her to a scrutiny she was not yet prepared to endure (202). However, in this exile, *Daughter of Isis (Awraqi Hayati or My Papers My Life)* never veered from the autobiographical pact.

She tells the coming-of-age story of a feminist who already as a child knew that she should not marry and that God was unfair to mothers because he did not allow them to pass their names on to their children – written as though the memory had once been a reality, the name of the mother recurs in this campaign to honor mothers. Little Nawal realized that God is the God of men and that He approves of female genital mutilation; why otherwise would women invoke Him while they cut and bury the clitoris (11, 26–7)? Her God, who is also her grandmother's God of justice, comes to her once in a vision (135) when she is a child, but she loses Him. Religious men undermine her spiritual life; they "betrayed" the Qur'an; they made her hate religion (216). Cutting through the intervening years, she touched the child she thought she had lost: "anger had never stopped accumulating in me since the day I was born . . . I do not know how the child in me remained alive" (163, 206). Somehow, and probably through writing, the child rebelling in the sixty-five-year-old woman had survived to prevent her from compromise in what became a lifelong demand for justice.

In contrast with her academic and fictional writing, the narrator in *Daughter of Isis* is surprisingly vulnerable. When she had her first menses she was afraid that people would know that her body was in a state of shame; years later, in the Duke University library, she wanted to hide her aging body. She narrates her genital cutting at her mother's hands and the shock of betrayal by those she loved. She laments social disapproval of expressions of affection that inhibit mothers from openly expressing love for their children even if this maternal love burns "like a flame but held back" (152). Long after her mother dies, her longing for the tenderness of her touch aches on the page. Throughout the autobiography and usually after describing a tender moment, the memory of her mother's hand on her child's face returns. In such a world of repressed love, women become cruel to each other: "It was the cruelty that had grown in them through suppression, the steam held back under pressure until their bodies were filled with it to bursting point. It was a black cruelty under a smooth skin from which the hair had been ripped off to leave it with the smoothness of a snake" (195). Vivid visual imagery turns repressed emotions into dangerous animals.

Contradictions reveal the ambivalence in the text and of course in her life, indeed in all of our lives. She loved school and then she hated it (217); it represented freedom and a future (164) but also a torment. At Nabawiya Musa Secondary School in Abbasiya, she could not stand the school's headmistress and namesake Nabawiya Musa, who had pioneered Egyptian feminism and women's education.

For me she was never a pioneer or a model ... (she) was like German headmistresses under Hitler, or French headmistresses in schools run by nuns. And she hated the girls. When our eyes met I could read the hate in her look, read hate for the self she carried around in black. School under her had become for me like a funeral where everything was the color of mourning. (161)

The child's hatred did not diminish in the memory of the sixty-five-year-old who might have been expected to recognize the courage and daring of this disappointed woman.

As for the medical profession, she cannot come to terms with her feelings: "The word doctor had a magical ring in my ears. It seemed to rescue me from the stares of the men, carry me up to the heavens, where I soared like a winged bird ... I hated the doctors, especially the medical inspector" (100; see 172–3). The idea is magical; the reality – especially the need to deal with cancer – quite other (204). She mocks medical students flirting over the cadavers they were dissecting. She criticizes doctors who

cannot recognize the links between sickness, poverty, and politics (291–2). It is through the writing of this literary text that *both* writer and reader can better understand why El Saadawi left the medical profession.

These contradictory emotions reflect the particular reality of her life, but also of ours everywhere. Love of our parents may mix with hatred and frustration. Her father who excludes her from God's sacred circle was also the nationalist who had participated in the 1919 revolution. He reassures her when her Arabic teacher denounces her (215–16) and insists, against his wife's remonstrance, that Nawal and her sisters be educated. Then when she succeeds he wants her to leave to help her mother at home. Her father is not the model for the dreadful fathers in her fiction but rather a conflicted person trying to work out how to mesh his hopes for his daughter with his anxieties about social expectations. He was, we learn toward the end of the autobiography, "a very gentle father" (207).

El Saadawi does not write of this feminist awakening as a deliberate process that can be followed because it is not. She weaves stories into the stream of days, *ayyam*, Arabic for days but also battles³: "Writing became a weapon with which to fight the system. . . . The written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love" (292). Creativity in life and writing mirrored each other in the struggle to seize the rights due her as a woman. The autobiography ends as it began with the intensity and passion of the dreaming child who has her life ahead of her and who relishes the challenge of writing her dreams into stories. This literary form reflected and developed her feminist thinking:

autobiography is more real, more true than fiction, more creative, and more steeped in art . . . My pen has been a scalpel which cuts through the outer skin, pushes the muscles, probes for the roots of things. Autobiography has lifted me above the daily grind to see my life emerge under a different light. . . . As I write, I experience moments of thrill, of deep pleasure never experienced since I was a child. (293–4)

For more than twenty years after her dismissal from the Ministry of Public Health, she continued to represent her literary career in medical terms. The scalpel shapes the strokes of her pen to probe for the roots of things and to create and meet the person she thought she was and, perhaps, should be.

Controversy and Provocation

In 1997, during the last weeks of her sojourn at Duke University, El Saadawi watched a puppet show written and performed by some students. It engaged her as a puppet character with Thomas Merton, Simone Weil,

and Mahatma Gandhi in a debate about the role of God in human lives. At a crucial moment from beneath the stage boomed God's voice telling them that He was sick of their quarrels and that He was resigning. To everyone's amazement, El Saadawi was thunderstruck. She had never before heard God's voice, she exclaimed. During the following four days and nights she wrote her play *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting* (*Allah yastaqil fi al-qimma*) that summons prophets and women for a meeting with God. When Satan offers to resign none of the prophets is willing to replace him. Instead, God resigns. Theater allowed her to stage her angry refusal of religious pretexts to deprive women of their rights, rights that these very religions – Islam, Christianity, Judaism – guarantee. Although she said that she would not, could not publish the play in Arabic, she did in 2008. She smuggled it into a bundle of her complete works that her publisher Madbuli had agreed to put out. *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting* created pandemonium. The Islamic university and supreme court of al-Azhar accused her of apostasy and prosecutors called for the destruction of all her books and initiated a lawsuit demanding the revocation of her Egyptian nationality. In 2008, she defeated the case.

This court case was not the first that the state and religious institutions had mounted against her. In 2001, she gave an interview in which she called the kissing of the black stone of the Kaaba in Mecca a pagan act. Islamic scholars were up in arms against this woman who had blasphemed one of Islam's most sacred rituals during the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. They appointed an Islamist lawyer who demanded that as an apostate she be divorced from her husband, Dr. Sherif Hetata. She won the case.

In 2007, she was again accused of apostasy, this time with her daughter Mona Helmy, a poet and writer, for their demands to honor and legalize the right to carry the name of the mother so that illegitimate children like Bint Allah could be named. Not only did they win the case in 2008, but they were also instrumental in the promulgation of a new law giving children born outside marriage the right to use their mothers' names. In that same year, FGM or female genital mutilation was banned after El Saadawi's fifty years of campaigning against it in fiction and nonfiction forms.

The Revolution of 2011

In late December 2010, under the aegis of the revived AWSA, El Saadawi convened a conference entitled *Women and the 21st Century – Feminist Alternatives*. Women from twenty-five Muslim-majority countries gathered in Cairo to discuss solutions to the religious violence plaguing their

societies. Although the conference took place a few days before the people rose up against President Mubarak, there was no intimation among the conferees that the kind of popular, pro-peace, democratic uprising that they were demanding would break out on January 25, 2011.

Within eighteen days, the people had toppled Mubarak from a throne he had prepared for his son. Many filmed and photographed the mass demonstrations that took place all over the country but notably in the iconic Tahrir Square. El Saadawi published two books about the revolution: her 2013 memoir, *Arab Revolutions (al-thawrat al-'arabiya)*, and a 2014 novel, *Indeed It Is Blood (Innahu al-dam)*. Whereas the memoir celebrates the first heady days of Tahrir, the novel explores without romanticism the impoverished lives of a few of the participants.

Reflecting on El Saadawi's experiences during her country's revolution, *Arab Revolutions* tracks the interaction of fear, anger, and strength. She situates Tahrir in a long line of family activism going back to 1919 when her father demonstrated against the English. She recalls the 1946 girls' demonstration against the English that she had led. In 2011, she is again "that schoolgirl walking in the demonstration and shouting: Down with the king! Down with the English! As though time did not exist" (97–9). Protesting injustice and corruption was a way of life for her but also, she insists, for the Egyptian people. Tahrir was merely another, if more exciting link in a chain of revolutionary events that made all of her struggles worthwhile: "I can scarcely believe that this is the same Egypt that caused me so much sadness and hardship. . . . Tahrir became my *watan* for which I have been searching since childhood" (112–13). In detail, she records meetings in her Shubra Gardens apartment with young men and women dreaming of a new world where justice would reign. Every morning, one or two men would pick her up – sometimes on a motorbike – and take her to the Square. At night, late, she would return exhausted but elated to collapse into bed. She ridicules the thugs who rode into the Square on camel and horseback to disperse the crowds. Empowered by childhood memories of courage, anger, and fearlessness, she fights them with words and her child's anger that pushes the adult to break the wall of fear.

Blood, the novel she was writing at the same time as the memoir, tackles the revolution from a very different angle. Weaving the tapestry of social relationships out of which the revolution emerged, the narrative begins in Tahrir Square with shouts of "Down with the regime," then enters the Mother Tent where the leaders camp out for days, and then unpeels the lives of a few of its occupants. It ends back in the Square with the hypocrites unmasked (at least to the reader) and their victims lionized.

Unlike the memoir, the novel is less about the revolution and more about the revolutionaries and their commitment to changing the world. Fuada and Saadiya dominate. For different reasons, they had spent time in prison together, Fuada as a political prisoner, and Saadiya as a common criminal called “The Murderer.” She killed her husband for stealing her money and letting their baby son die while she was working in the fields (144). Both women gave birth to daughters on the cell’s cold, hard floor (145). Equality inside, however, did not persist beyond the prison walls. Fuada, the brilliant journalist, rejoined her journalist husband, Shakir, in their bourgeois apartment and their lackluster newspaper. When she was fired for incendiary political writing, her colleagues and even her boss tried in vain to persuade her to moderate her rhetoric. El Saadawi undercuts this apparently principled behavior in her description of Fuada’s condescending relationship with her former cellmate – repeating on several occasions when Saadiya was distraught: “don’t worry, we’re family” (143, 204). Fuada uses the memory of prison to connect with Saadiya because her political pretensions depend on being close to someone from this class. Saadiya, on the other hand, lives in a hovel in Cairo’s infamous City of the Dead and makes a meager living cleaning Fuada’s apartment. The dream that keeps her going through the humiliation of serving her cellmate is to earn enough money to send sixteen-year-old Hanadi to college whence she might hope to overcome her status as daughter of a servant (III).

Shakir is the villain of the novel and El Saadawi’s most elaborate theorizing of the empty rhetoric and utter depravity of armchair leftists and pseudo-feminists. Shakir resents his wife for her international reputation and refusal to moderate her political stance that exposes him to danger (39). After patronizingly telling Saadiya’s daughter Hanadi to make time for the revolution, “This regime cannot fall without everyone participating in the demonstrations,” he rapes her, secure in the knowledge that his secret is safe with his servant’s daughter (207–16). He plagiarizes passages from an unreviewed book by a feminist colleague at the newspaper where he and his wife work. His book comes out to great fanfare and no one, not even the author, denounces him (256–7). When his psychiatrist realizes that he is a closet Islamist, Shakir lashes out at the sensuousness of women and neglect of their prescribed duties under Islam. When confronted by the contradiction between his spoken and written words, he remains cool: “Yeah, real life is quite other than words in books” (261). The denouement that the reader has been led to expect, that Shakir will admit or be forced to admit his crimes or mistakes, never happens. The plagiarized book, the rape, and his secret affiliation with the Islamists remain

hidden. He has committed these crimes with impunity. El Saadawi has not written a moralizing melodrama but rather portrayed the different personalities who participated in the revolution.

Hanadi will not find justice but she does find strength through her participation. Despite her post-abortion hemorrhage, she stays for days in the Mother Tent in the Square (263). Fuada pays her and her mother a tentative, voyeuristic visit bearing food and fruits – she has done her bit for the revolution. Having learned who raped her daughter, Saadiya refuses the gifts and resigns although her situation has become so desperate that she cannot afford even the meager rent of her room among the graves. She imagines a confrontation with Shakir. However, when she meets him, she says nothing (203, 220–3).

This novel introduces us to the bourgeois pretenders but also to the real revolutionaries who pay a high price, a price that is symbolized in blood. After leading “the largest demonstration against the corrupt regime that had made her life a misery,” Saadiya disappeared (274). In a state between dreaming and waking, Hanadi imagines her mother bleeding on the tarmac and the narrative flashes back to prison where, in like manner, Saadiya had bled on the concrete floor after giving birth. This blood, Hanadi proclaims, will nourish the revolution. The police kill the charismatic student leader Jalal Asad by slashing his leg and leaving him to bleed to death. They use tear gas, water hoses, and live ammunition to attack another revolutionary, a young collector and seller of forbidden books that he hid underneath the tent: “Muhammad lost his left eye to a skilled sniper, but he survived and the books survived and he sold them to whoever wanted them” (256). It will take more than gouging out eyes to deter real revolutionaries.

Blood is a dark novel that keeps circling back to prison with its smells, sounds, and eerie resemblance to life outside. It spares none of the opportunists like the morgue doctors who take bribes for autopsies, and the nurses who sell unclaimed cadavers to medical students, and at the end of the day they share the spoils (12). Then there are the Islamists who prowl the Square looking for opportunities to harass secular demonstrators.

What are we to make of the radical contrast between the memoir of the revolution and its novel? Is El Saadawi presenting a chronological assessment of the fate of the revolution? Did she meet people at a later stage of Tahrir who shook her faith in the revolution? Or should we read the two texts together without trying to resolve their apparent contradictions? Is this not how real revolutions evolve with their spectacular highs and desperate lows? El Saadawi wrote, “The revolutions are all aborted including

Occupy Wall Street. But creativity is never aborted that is why we write. God wrote his books for the same reason.”⁴ Underlying such pessimism of the will, however, is the optimism of the mind: the revolution is ongoing, even if underground; it will return.

Conclusion

Literary form has played an important role in El Saadawi’s feminist trajectory. Circular narratives, repetitions, and oneiric landscapes through which women wander in search of safety from predatory men reappear in many of her stories. She sometimes creates spontaneous and passionate texts responding to a need to write and communicate immediately what she is examining in the clinic or in a scripture or in the streets. She wrote *Woman at Point Zero* in a week and *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting* in four days and nights. When writing her prison memoirs, she expressed openly the anguish, the torment of giving birth to the book:

I’ve freed myself completely to write it, letting everything else go for its sake. It’s intractable, like unattainable love. It wants me, my entire being, mind and body, and if it can’t have that it will not give itself to me at all. It wants all or nothing – it’s exactly like me. . . . It wants no competition for my heart and mind – not that of a husband, nor a son or daughter, nor pre-occupation of any sort, not even on behalf of the women’s cause.

This relationship with creative writing exemplifies Bergson’s effort of intuition that experiences and renders the concrete flowing of duration within the individual, in this case the individual prisoner: “Whoever has worked successfully at literary composition well knows that when the subject has been studied at great length, all the documents gathered together, all notes taken, something more is necessary to get down to the work of composition itself” (Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 81). Composition requires the intuition that opens up the heart of the subject in a way that analysis cannot.

El Saadawi has also crafted slow, careful texts that tease out a problem that must be explicated and resolved. Taking up the major themes that have characterized her writing and her life, *The Novel (Al-riwaya)*, 2005) rehearses the ways women cope with sexual violence, marital infidelity, the hypocrisy of religion, and the corruption of national and international politics that inevitably harm women the most. Unlike the novels or autobiographical works, *The Novel* is an experimental study of the intertwinement of writing in the creation of a feminist self: “Her

life became her first novel” (1). We might add that all of her novels have become her life.

Connecting the dots between sex, class, gender and politics informs her life. She has never veered from a postcolonial feminist multiple critique that remains vigilant toward her many different readers and their sensitivities and responds to their objections (cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 107–38). Keenly conscious of the critique of feminism as an arm of Western imperialism, she always links her criticism of homegrown misogyny with imperial ambitions in the region. She has not wavered from her central message: the battles against colonialism, class prejudice, and patriarchy both secular and religious are so intertwined that if one is emphasized over the others the struggle will fail.

Intolerant of those who give up, El Saadawi declared shortly before her eightieth birthday, “I am becoming more radical with age. I have noticed that writers, when they are old, become milder. But for me it is the opposite. Age makes me more angry” (Khalilee, “Nawal El Saadawi: Egypt’s Radical Feminist”).

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