THE LITERARY SCALPEL OF A FEMINIST

Mirela Radu
Lecturer, PhD., "Titu Maiorescu" University of Bucharest

Abstract:Defying the preconceived ideas of the Islamic world, physician, writer and psychiatrist Nawal El-Saadawi (1931-) was born in a small village in Egypt. Ever since she was young, she has clung to writing as the only way to survive mentally. Thus, in 1944, the author signed her first novel Memoirs of a female child called Su'âd as "the demons of writing inhabited her even as a child."[1] *In 1955 Nawal completed her medical studies at the University of Cairo. In spite of education quite open to the values of the West, Nawal suffered much in his childhood because of the inequities of a traditional society. Her first marriage to a medical colleague lasted only two years. The period when practicing medicine in their native lands - Kafr Tahla village - comes in contact with the daily suffering of women who had to suffer domestic violence and a tortured life especially in the rural area where lack of access to education was obvious. Her career begins to emerge when she was appointed director within the Ministry of Health. This is where she meets the next husband - Sherif Hatata - physician, writer and communist and translator of some of her novels. Her first book is a collection of novels, I Learned Love (1957). In the following years the author signed other short stories and novels A Moment of Truth (1959), Little Tenderness (1960), The Thread and the Wall (1972), Ain El Hayat (1973), She was the Weaker (1977), Death of an Ex-minister (1978), Adab Am Kellet Abad (2000).*

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As a result of the novel she published in 1972, *Woman and Sex*, in which she brought into the public's eye the abuses which the women of that time had to endure, including the practice of female circumcision whose victim had been even the author, she lost her job in the ministry and editor of a magazine published by her: *Health*. For three years, between 1973-1976, Nawal dedicates herself to research work at the Ain Shams University in Cairo. Studies and research on neurosis have brought her into contact with a prisoner in the women's prison: Qanatir. What she learned about living in the women's prison was to be the basis of the novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1975). Never losing the courage which taught her to survive as a doctor and woman in a profoundly unjust world, El-Saadawi initiated in 1981 the publication of a magazine that fights for women's rights - *Confrontation*. This defying of the regime would bring her incarceration for a short period of time. Two years after she regained her freedom, this experience inspired a new novel: *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. In 1988, seeing when she saw her life threatened, Nawal took the path of political exile in America from where she returned to Egypt eight years later.

In 2002, a trial for apostasy (the denial of Islamic faith) was instituted against Nawal. Fortunately, the solidarity of the society came to her aid. Five years later, her daughter, Mona Helmy, in her turn, writer, journalist, and militant for women's equal rights, was accused of the same thing. Mona has inherited from her mother the desire to overcome traditional customs, stigmatizing in her articles the profoundly unequal world in which women must live. Licensed in economic policies, Mona has approached areas of the most varied: urban studies as masters studies and environmental studies as doctoral studies but has not hesitated to address areas such as pharmaceuticals (being a researcher in a company) and even forensics and sociology. Whether it is the Islamic society that prevents the woman from reaching her intellectual potential through the explicit prohibition of rights, whether we are talking about Western society, where the imposture of

[1] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, University of California Press, 1995, p. 12

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equal rights is even greater as women are perceived as goods appreciated more for their appearance, the woman does not yet have a truly equal status with the man. Following Monei's lawsuit, one year later in 2008, the two: mother and daughter had the pleasure of winning not only the trial but also to force the adoption of a law that protects the rights of children born out of wedlock. Nawal was accused of heresy in 2007 when one of his books - *God Resigns At the Summit Meeting* - was banned.

As if years passed over Nawal did not diminish the infighting of youth, in 2004 she won the North-South Prize conferred by the Council of Europe and in July 2016 she led the literary festival in London, *Africa Writes*. Even the events in Tahrir Square in 2011 were not strange to her, for El-Saadawi took part in demonstrations. The power with which this woman has fought for her democratic and feminist beliefs is to be admired as much as she still continues this fight.

Woman at Point Zero is the remarkable book that brings together the experience of the writer as a psychologist, researcher and novelist. Published in Beirut, in 1973, the novel is "an intense and seamless narrative, spare, graceful, and elegant"[2] carrying the reader in an unpredictable and cruel world, physical suffering and soul torture, loss of esteem, but also the regaining of the power to counteract the evil of a profoundly religious, almost feudal society. The novel is based on the author's experience during the counseling of the women who had suffered the imprisonment. One of the most disturbing cases is that of a woman who awaits the execution of the death penalty she was convicted of killing her pimp. The story reveals the trauma experienced by the main character: Firdaus. Raised in a poor family, with an abusive father, the woman suffers the first trauma: physical one – female circumcision. Orphan from a young age comes to be cared of by the uncle, and the only education brings her relief. The patriarchal society in which she lives requires that she be married after the end of her school, against her will, with a far-off and much older relative. Victim of domestic violence, Firdaus escapes and finds what she thinks her great love is. It turns out that this odious man is far more cruel than she could imagine: not just physical violence is the one that humiliates her but also her use as a sexual slave for her lover's friends. The only way she thinks she can choose in this terrible life is prostitution. Frustrated by the situation in which she indulges in, Firdaus chooses an honest life in an office, but realizes that the lives of women who earn their bread through honest work is even worse than of the life of prostitutes. She returns to her old profession and ends up being condemned for stabbing her pimp. The oppression of the system does not come as a punishment in itself, but as an attempt to prevent Firdaus from revealing the lived nightmares and truths she has come to know.

The narrative in the first person that the author uses as a witness to the disclosure of the life story of the convicted makes this novel gain a high veracity. We understand from the author, that both women: the psychiatrist (the author herself) and the former prostitute (Firdaus) are subjected to the same oppressive forces of patriarchal society even if their social status differs significantly. In the end of the novel, the author confesses the nature of her feelings, the state of helplessness that takes hold of her whole being, and the rebellion that grows facing the fate of millions of women who end up terribly, anonymously, suffering from physical suffering and psychological humiliation. The more the author reveals of the cruel realities of the society in which she lives, the more we feel her repulsion, but also the force that grows in her soul, the strength to carry on the story of the convicted woman, to fight against the injustices of an oppressive society where the woman is only seen as a carnal object, a good that can be traded, or whose decent life is refused. The options of the woman in the society that El-Saadawi portrays are limited: either live according to the rules imposed by religion and the patriarchal society giving condemnation to the loss of self-esteem or to choose the way of prostitution in which there is no room for recognition of the status in society. The woman, as a general character of the novel, seems to be a perpetual outlaw who is not given the freedom to build her own destiny. The cruelest truth that the novel reveals to us is that the self-respect itself is destroyed; left without self-esteem, the Islamic woman can only transform into an

[2] Juliet O'Keefe, *The Vision of Nawal El Saadawi*, in *Democratiya* 15, winter 2008, p. 125

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object. Even sadder is that this acceptance becomes part of the woman's being. The opposition to the forces which bend her begins to decline and, ultimately, she is forced to assume a lower social role. The lack of education and viable choices transforms any spirit, however free it may be born, in a simple machine, in an empty body that is merely satisfied with survival.

If we could draw the parallel with the dictatorial regimes that have existed through human history or still exist in our society, we will notice that the same principle - the annihilation of individuality - is applied systematically but at the level of society. To kneel the human being, with all its beautiful values, the first step is to destroy confidence in its own value. What the novel brings into discussion as the main theme is the idea of exercising power. It is the ability to break the will of souls, to humiliate them so much that nothing that is odious is no longer felt unnatural. Overcoming psychological drama can only be done by getting out of victim status. Once this path chosen, ahead of any soul thirsty for freedom there are two ways: the active struggle or death. If we analyze the author's life, we come to the conclusion that she chose the first option. The character of the novel, Firdaus, chooses the second way: going out of this existence because she refuses to switch the death penalty to a life in prison. The message she sends is a tough one: better death than a defeated life. Both forms of revolt involve, instead, a painful first step: awareness. The themes of the novel are numerous and the questions raised are timeless: the freedom to decide our own fate, the exertion of power on another as an escape to the fight with our own weaknesses, the power of truth spoken and conscious, and the recapture of pride lost through the ability to oppose the abuse. If she cannot destroy the evil that infests society and oppresses some of her peers, Firdaus chooses self-destruction. Death seems, for the central character of the novel, the only way to get out of the bitter maze in which life threw her: "Firdaus is in fact at the point of zero: she moves towards her erasure from the world, and her refusal to live in the end leaves her as a literal zero: non-existent."[3]

Although it is partly a fiction, the novel is based on the life story of a convict that the author met in his work of psychiatric research. Even if the action develops around just two central characters: Nawal (author) and Firdaus (the one who narrates her trauma), the depth of the novel is a special one. We understand from El Saadawi's writing that human society is a complex structure. We are all interconnected. When one of us suffers an injustice, we all suffer. And the price of suffering individual is paid by all of us. The book not only unveils cruel truths about the status of women in the traditional Islamic society but can be extrapolated to the human universe in which, whether we admit it or not, we can all be the executioner or the victim. Which part of the barricade we are located is the only act of human finality and the reporting of our entire existence starts from this "zero degree", that of the awareness of the power we carry in ourselves: the free will.

In 1974, the author returns with a new novel, *God dies By the Nile*. This time, the context of the action is placed in the rural area of Kafr El Teen village. Major members of the society: the mayor, the Imam, the physician and the local healer, instead of defending the inhabitants they lead, exploit, rape or throw them in prison as they wish. If in the previous novel the women's drama is revealed in the difficult world of men, in *God dies By the Nile* the register widens so that we witness the misery of a whole community controlled politically, religiously and economically at the mercy of the executioners. The way to control is fear. If in the previous novel humiliation is applied to a narrow class - women - now inequity and evil extend over the entire village. Men are tortured, imprisoned or killed, and women humiliated. We painfully discover that man can be the victim, and executioner at the same time. Even if they all suffer, some villagers may be as cruel as their peers, as they are those who abuse them. An image is like in Dante's inferno, a world of concentric layers of evil that does not let anything escape. Evil can only act by exerting fear and manipulation. Like Firdaus, Zakeya - the feminine character of this novel - reaches awareness. The awakening from religious darkness with which the whole village is manipulated is done through awareness. In this novel as well, the author reiterates the theme of awakening to reality as the first step on the path to opposition to evil. The same motif for getting out of darkness that ignorance casts on people's

[3] Ibidem

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consciousness seems to be the central idea in most of Egyptian psychologist's novels. The characters almost do not realize what happens to them, being mere puppets in the hands of their oppressors.

Accused of excess thesism, El-Saadawi's prose does not fall into exaggeration. Nawal does not apology to simple ideas or unnecessary propaganda. The writer deciphers souls whose evolution from the state of victim to action is analyzed under a microscope magnifying glass. Her writing is like the job she embraced in the first part of his life, medicine, a tough one. Accustomed to the strenuousness of medical studies, Nawal does not disappoint readers with hypocrisy and sweet talk, but on the contrary, with a tough tone that seems to be tailored to the revelations she makes. The writer's speech is an analogy with medicine:"a scalpel (…) never far from the pen."[4] The precision and determination with which the author makes incisions into the society's enmity resembles the work of a surgeon who exposes tumors. For this former practitioner of medicine, the noble profession is located "at the intersection of social power and corporal consciousness."[5] El-Saadawi writes not only to the oppressed women of the Oriental world, it writes for all the oppressed of life, no matter the geographical area, time or religion: "I write for people everywhere who believe in justice, freedom, love, equality, peace, and creativity."[6]

Memoirs of a Woman Doctor (1955) reopens the issue of gender inequality. This time it is a lack of professional equity because the main character discovers that although she graduated from medicine and should be equally professional with men, society marginalizes her because she is a woman. Building a career in medicine, overcoming preconceptions and witty mentalities and struggling to find the identity as a female doctor in a man-led world are the main themes. The practice of medicine is the one that ensures release, "the escape from the social and professional roles."[7] The world in which the physician lives her life is where men can have everything they want while women are destined, by birth, to play a single role: to perpetuate the species. The medical studies of the author, as in the case of the central character of the novel, give her the strength to overcome the inferiority in which she was grown and to understand that, at least biologically, all people are equal, regardless of gender.

What El-Saadawi writes is generally valid. It is not only addressed to Arab readers, but also takes into account general human mistakes. For the desire to take possession of one's body and to psychically kneel are human beings defects regardless of race, religion and country. What the author reveals through the introduction of religious dogmatism is a universal fact: the struggle of the human being to unravel from terror. Just as we have lived the dictatorship and know unpredictable ways of other peoples to be psychically annihilated, so the Arab writer also refers to the traditionalist, patriarchal and dogmatic character by which spirituality is brought into amorphous state, being unable to fight back. Totalitarianism or any constraint, whether it is social, religious or customary, only deny individualism and kill initiatives. What can be more damaging than destroying what makes us unique!

Accused by her own society, El-Saadawi is, beyond the rare ability to assume an open opposition to the Islamic system, a living link between the West and the Orient. She goes beyond mere ideological struggle because speaks in the name of Arab women but addresses the general consciousness of humanity. The themes of reflection she proposes are arhietipal and aim at the freedom of the individual, confronting the oppression and coming to a state of awareness. The writer proposes that, regardless of the opposition she is facing, to continue to reveal the true identity of the woman: "My pen will continue to lay bare the facts, clarify the issues, and identify what I

[4] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, University of California Press, 1995, p. 12
[5] Idem, p. 20
[6] Adele S. Newson-Horst, *Conversations with Nawal El Saadawi*, în *World Literature Today*, Vol. 82, No. 1, 2008, p. 55
[7] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, University of California Press, 1995, p. 22

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believe is the truth."[8] This mission of faith has as analogy the practice of medicine: that of medicine whose purpose is precisely to identify the diseased part of the body. The body is, by extrapolation, society, and any harm done against one of its members poisons the whole, spreading as cancer. The writer's duty is for El-Saadawi to identify the disease that attacks one of the cells of society: the woman. The practice of medicine after graduating from the university has brought her closer and closer to the nightmare of Egyptian women, mutilation and childhood loss. During this time El-Saadawi finds out that even more unfortunate women exist: Sudanese girls suffer total mutilation. The horror of experiencing these things and discovering even greater atrocities followed the writer throughout her life.

The fact that El-Saadawi was a doctor has a great influence in her writings. Used not to look at the human body with the reticence specific to the society in which she lived in, the author has far surpassed the taboos associated with the woman's body. Detained and relieved of this contradiction of the inability to speak openly about human physiology, release due to his medical studies and the active profession of this profession, El-Saadawi was able to concentrate much more effectively on the more important themes that society gave her: "in her work, medicine allows the female physician to question games of power and social hierarchy. El-Saadawi's medical eye is never far from her literary pen."[9] The body of the woman that Nawal presents is a pretext for portraying more important concepts grafted on social and political conflicts as background themes. The corporeality to which the author often makes references is the fine fabric that incorporates the fundamental social and religious issues. Nawal's feminine characters are desperately trying to recover the body that society has proclaimed itself as a master. The rape to which some of her heroines are subjected, their physical mutilation and the inability to decide on their sexuality are not just facts but signs of the disease of a society that forces individuals to obey blindly: "the violations in El-Saadawi's textual corpus are more than literary and metaphorical. They are also social."[10] Like revenging on the patriarchal society that condemned her not only ideologically but even thrown her into prison for her beliefs, the writer violates almost all the rules imposed by this dictatorial society. Thus, she has the courage to divorce twice, to travel abroad on her own (something impossible according to Islamic customs), writes freely and, most seriously according to the Egyptian traditions, pushes other women to claim for their place in community.

The Hidden Face of Eve (1977) starts with a statement of how the book was created. Again comes into discussion the author's medical studies and the strong connection between her literary work and her healing powers: "Long years of medical practice in both urban and rural areas, and men and women who day after day rang my doorbell and stepped across the threshold of my house, carrying their load of psychological and sexual problems, have led me to write this book."[11]

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[8] Nawal El Saadawi, *Introduction* to *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, Zed Books, 2007, p. 5
[9] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, University of California Press, 1995, p. 2
[10] Idem, p. 6
[11] Nawal El Saadawi, *Introduction* to *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, Zed Books, 2007, p. 1

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