Nawal El Saadawi: Defying Conventions, Challenging Oppression

"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak" (Saadawi 1).

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Abstract: Nawal El Saadawi, an Arab feminist writer and physician, fearlessly confronted societal hierarchies and patriarchy, facing threats and opposition. Her impactful works challenged taboos, particularly regarding women's rights and oppression. Through publications like "The Woman and Sex," "The Woman and her Mental Struggle," and her autobiography, Saadawi exposed the contradictions of Egyptian society, advocating for gender equality, justice, and love. She believed in the power of education and work for women's freedom, emphasizing the need to challenge societal norms and established boundaries. Saadawi's life and writings stand as a testament to her unwavering commitment to dismantling oppression and inspiring change. This paper will explore her anti-conventional and anti-hierarchical stance through the analysis of her writings.

Key Words: Nawal El Saadawi, Arab, Patriarchy, Oppression, Women, Injustice.

Almost across the world, some sections of people are regularly and systematically being marginalised, deprived of basic rights, suppressed, and oppressed. Such people have got no voice in their respective societies and whenever any such voice arises against the power structures, it is with all power suppressed either by killing or imprisoning the person. However, power doesn't always succeed in that. Some strong people with indomitable resistance overcome the suppressive tactics of the power. Thus rather than remaining silent, such voices become the roaring cry for their own oppressed selves and the suppressed people, in general, struggling to be heard. In the context of Arab, one such voice that didn't hesitate to unveil all kinds of the injustice in her society with an unquenchable desire for freedom for all people equally, especially for women who were the main victims of her society, was Nawal El Saadawi. She was born and raised in an affluent family in the Nile Delta tiny town of Kafr Tahla, where she started developing her understanding and penned her first feminist texts at the age of thirteen in a diary she concealed beneath her bed, after witnessing inequality existing between male and female students at her school (Hafidi).

Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner whose allegorical book, Awldd haritna, resulted in death threats against his life,' and Yusuf Idris, whose short story, Abu alrijal, actually proved somewhat controversial after its publication in the Egyptian magazine October, are among the renowned Arab writers who did find themselves in Rushdie-like situations in current times. Yet, these writers' woes may pale compared to those of Dr Nawal El-Saadawi, whose writings have been targeted and prohibited in Egypt and worldwide, prompting, among other things, the stationing of guards in front of her home in Giza to safeguard her from possible death attacks (El-Saadawi, "Overview" 71).

A significant incident in the history of contemporary socio-political movements was taking place in Egypt's Tahrir Square in January 2011. Nawal el-Saadawi was present to take part in the anti-Mubarak movement, which demanded a transition to democracy. In their struggle, she sided with the younger population. She was encircled by students and young women who praised her as a role model. Nawal El-Saadawi was a classic political figure who walked the path of struggle against dictatorship and the faults of modern capitalism. She died on March 21, 2021, aged 89.

Nawal el-Saadawi was part of a long legacy of Egyptian feminist movements and campaigning, including those led by Aisha al-Taymuriyya in the nineteenth century and Huda Sha'arawi and Dr Doria Shafiq in the twentieth. A new way of thinking about women's modern education emerged in the context of Muhammad Ali's modernist reforms and the establishment of Islamic modernism under the auspices of Muhammad Abduh in the nineteenth century. Women's rights to education were emphasised by female leaders such as Aisha al-Taymurriya. The early twentieth century saw the rise of substantial feminist agitation, culminating in the establishment of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923 under the presidency of Huda Sha'arawi.

She doesn't only become the voice for the Arab women but rather a voice for the women of the whole third world. While doing so, she doesn't let Western feminists demonise Arab culture or Islam that she even responds with a strong attack on their remarks saying that Christianity was the first that veiled women. In this way, she doesn't compromise on her patriotism as well. As a result, by doing so, she takes the onus of liberating women of all societies on her own shoulders: Arab women in particular and women of the other countries of the third world in general. This is what West Africa has to say about her, "Nawal El Saadawi speaks directly on behalf of many women in the Third World and the daily struggles they face." The unwavering gaze has been a defining feature of her demeanour for more than fifty years in public life.

El Saadawi's rise in the English-speaking areas has been documented through the translation of her works during the last two decades. Although her writings were well-received in the Arab world in the early to mid-1970s, they were not well-received in the Western literary marketplaces until the 1980s. The date of Arabic publishing and the date of its translation into the English language can differ by a decade or two (2). However, the chasm has been gradually shrinking. Now, Nawal El Saadawi's works are quickly translated, with the English edition following the Arabic version, if not simultaneously.

There has also been a significant transition in the types of publishing houses releasing her work. Zed Books of London was the publisher that first exposed El Saadawi to the English-speaking audience, and they have subsequently published many of her novels as well as an anthology of her writings and an autobiography. El Saadawi made her American debut with Boston's Beacon Press, a small, left-leaning publishing house. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* was published in 1988 and 1989 by independent publishers Saqi Books in London and City Lights in San Francisco. The University of California Press, a major, renowned academic publisher that also released *The Innocence of the Devil* in 1994, picked up the new edition of Memoirs from the Women's Prison, which was first published by the Women's Press in London in 1986. Certainly, the appearance of El Saadawi's works for the English-speaking market has shifted from England to the United States, and from tiny, activist presses to major, academic presses. The move to great American presses corresponds to El Saadawi's rising popularity inside the American academy, where she has been branded as a celebrity, as well as arguably a representative Arab author.

Socially, politically, and economically, she had focused on 'unveiling' and putting the facts of inequality at the forefront. In a recent interview, El Saadawi stated unequivocally: 'If I don't tell the truth … I don't deserve to be called a writer' (World Literature Today, January–February 2008). So what is the truth she clings to? She writes in the prologue to the English edition of *The Hidden Face of Eve* in 1979: The oppression of women, the exploitation and social pressures to which they are exposed are not characteristic of Arab or Middle Eastern societies, or countries of the 'Third World' alone. They constitute an integral part of the political, economic, and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world — whether that system is backward and feudal in nature, or a modern industrial society that has been submitted to the far-reaching influence of a scientific and technological revolution (Adele Newson-Horst, 21).

Nawal EL Saadawi's works dealing with taboos and the issues of women outraged Egyptian authority which arrested her for her audacious exposition of injustices embedded in Egyptian society. She was an outright critic of the hierarchical, oppressive system. Her fight for the rights of women was constant until she dies. Even her arrest didn't stop her from working against all sorts of oppression. She called for the attention to the need of analyzing the role of women in Islamic history and demanded that all genders be treated equally in school texts. She worked with rural women to help them be financially independent and break free from the chains of oppression of the patriarchal and hierarchical system. Until the beginning of the 19th century, education for girls in Egypt wasn't on the political agenda. It was only when Mohammad Ali came into power that he understood that without enough investment in the education of both boys and girls, the proper development of Egypt is not possible. Therefore, many girls were admitted into the schools which he established across the urban areas of Egypt. He also established a special school with the aim of training women specialists in the gynaecology field. During his tenure, many industries were constructed, and he brought many changes to the administration of the country. As a result, these changes also had an impact on the status of women. Despite these alterations, girls were still admitted to only separate or missionary schools and not to state schools. The British conquest in 1882, influenced the development of the women's movement for rights in Egypt. Many schools for girls were founded by Britain and this boosted parents' interest in girls' education. And thus, education became one of the pivotal means for liberating Egyptian women to a great extent from the shackles of oppression (Russell).

Unlike in the works of other Arab writers, the protagonists in Saadawi's works are all Muslim women whose sufferings and plight she unveils aptly. Saadawi's criticism of such hierarchical and patriarchal elements in society made her many enemies who became threats to her life and wanted her to be silent. But she, on the contrary, kept fighting which consequently influenced many Arab female writers to write on taboos. In 1969, she published her book, *The Woman and Sex*, wherein she chastises the notion that the preservation of women's hymen is the maintenance of the family's dignity. This book made most of the people hate her immensely wanting her either dead or silent on such taboos. Authority dismissed her from her governmental position against her will, considering her threat to social order. She worked on the mental health of Egyptian women. Therefore, she wrote *The Woman and her Mental Struggle*, in 1975. This was actually a research conducted on different female prisoners and patients of the hospital. After its publication, she was imprisoned but this didn't obstruct her from writing on these issues so she in prison wrote a memoir, *Memoir from Women's Prison*.

Saadawi believes that Egypt is a paradoxical society where many contradictions are existent. Men there are involved in sex with the women to whom they are not married, who take much interest in pornography, but these men simultaneously talk about morality and imposing Sharia- Muslim orthodox laws. And they are the same people who want women to be in full cover. She believes that such illness can only be eradicated by scientific research methods and in order for the disease to be cured, it is not required to eradicate the patient. She also says that our society is filled with double standards where men, in front of the public, act morally well while, clandestinely, they break all these morals. Saadawi says that the feeling of strangeness has always been there with her since her childhood which was caused by enforced gender inferiority and subordination of her to male counterparts in her society. She believes this feeling can only be eradicated by bringing equality, justice, and love. Saadawi asserts that we need to cross the red line that is put before us. Two sorts of women are depicted in her works: one who can fight for her freedom like the one in her work, *The Memoirs from a Woman Doctor* and the one who doesn't take care of herself when she is exploited and driven

into unhappy ends like Firdos in her work, *A Woman at Zero Point*. One of el- Saadawi's most well-known pieces is Imra'ah 'inda nuqtat al-sifr (1975; translated as *Woman at Point Zero*, 1983). The reader might well be inclined to perceive this novel as adhering to the realism style at first sight; nevertheless, additional examination reveals that this work—which has the characteristics of a realist novel—soon transforms into a piece of writing that is not realist whatsoever. It's difficult to categorize as a single genre of Arabic literature because of the various frames in its dream-like, recurring narrative. Firdaus (a common name in Arab nations that means paradise) is a lady who has been sentenced to death for murdering a man, as told by a fictional narrator who visits her in prison. She is about to be executed. Firdaus' life has been marked by relentless pain and battle against a system that has oppressed her at every turn. She is born into a lower-class peasant family, is mistreated by her father, and has a clitoridectomy when she is young, an episode she will never forget. She is subsequently married off to an older man she despises and is continually betrayed and assaulted by many people throughout the narrative. Despite earning a secondary school qualification, she is rarely given the opportunity to put it to positive use by a culture that refuses to view her as anything but a body designed to exist solely for the enjoyment of males. As a result, and possibly in an attempt to obtain power, Firdaus turns to become a prostitute. But, like every previous time in her life when she tries to attain independence, Firdaus' efforts are thwarted by a pimp who tries to take control of her life, assault her, and steal her earnings. She murders the pimp in self-defence and is sentenced to death for her conduct. This novel's story appears dreamlike, setting a tone that departs from the realism that one might expect at first. The reader is introduced to two women, Firdaus and the narrator, who are trapped in a small space in one of the narrative frames. Yet it isn't long before one of their stories succeeds in transcending geography and transporting the narrator on a dreamlike voyage. This notion is reiterated near the novel's conclusion when the narrator herself says, “Firdaus' voice suddenly fell silent, like a voice in a dream. I moved my body like someone moving in sleep. What lay under me was not a bed, but something solid like the ground, yet with a coldness which did not reach my body. It was the cold of the sea in a dream” (Woman 107). Such assertions by the narrator raise doubts about the existence of this imaginary narrator who acts as a bridge between Firdaus and the reader. They emphasise how the narrator plays a vital role in the novel's multi-frame story. At first sight, the frame narrator appears to be there only to mystify and generate an audience for Firdaus' story. When trying to understand Firdaus's relationship with herself, her role becomes even more important. When Firdaus declines to visit the narrator at the start of the story, the latter feels ignored and insignificant (3). This can be understood by her own words as she says, “It was a feeling I had known only once before many years ago. I had fallen in love with a man who did not love me. I felt rejected, not only by him, not only by one person amongst the millions that peopled the vast world, but by every living being or thing on earth, by the vast world itself” (4). The storyteller eroticises the relationship of the two women who have yet to meet by comparing Firdaus' rejection of her to that of a former lover. This sensual exchange, along with the narrator's urgency to tell Firdaus' story, has such a significant effect on the former that she starts to rely on Firdaus to justify herself. As a result, Firdaus' control is established, and the storyteller is transported into a condition of waiting for permission to fulfill her wish for the affirmative response that suggests sexual acceptance for her. Barbara Harlow sees the narrator's relationship with Firdaus as a strategy for maintaining “authorial distance... by means of which the writer is able to interpret the woman's individuality as politically significant” (Resistance Literature 137). *Woman at Point Zero*, according to Harlow, “merges the requirements of fiction and narrative form with the historical and sociological demands of biography” (137), a remark that is proven true when one considers the link between the narrator and Firdaus, and Saadawi's relationship with the 'real' Firdaus, who she saw in 1973 while investigating psychosis in Egyptian women. This similarity is established by placing a fictitious storyteller in Firdaus' cell who, like el-Saadawi, helps to engrave the tale of the 'murderess' in a style that would survive Firdaus' demise.

In this work, the idea of "writing" is also essential. Firdaus' idea of 'writing' as a way of spreading lies and deception is established from the start. The narrator pictures it in her words, “Each time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them [kings, princes, and rulers], I would spit on it. I knew I was only spitting on a piece of newspaper which I needed for covering the kitchen shelves. Nevertheless, I spat and then left the spit where it was to dry” (11). The quoted lines emphasize the narrator's symbolic act of defiance, spitting on images of kings and rulers in newspapers, representing her resistance against oppressive authority and manipulation. This unconventional form of "writing" serves as a means of expressing dissent and rejecting false narratives. Despite its seemingly trivial nature, the act holds personal empowerment as the narrator consciously challenges established norms. The contrast between this symbolic act and the practical use of the newspaper for everyday purposes underscores the juxtaposition of resistance within the mundane. This highlights the narrator's awareness of her defiance and reinforces the theme of individual agency in the face of larger societal forces, emphasizing empowerment and resistance in the narrative.

The majority of el- Saadawi's works focus on the socio-political facts that control Arab women's life, rather than Islam or religion, as other Arab feminist writers frequently do. When reading Imra'ah'i nda nuqtat al-sifr, for example, it is clear that Islam does not play a significant role in the story. Nevertheless, one is left with the understanding that, far from being confined to Muslim countries (as the West would have us believe), women's subjugation occurs frequently outside the domain of religion, and that Firdaus' narrative is, in many respects, the story of Woman, not exclusively Muslim Woman. Critics such as Issa J. Boullata have viewed El-secular, Saadawi's feminist writings and her individual advocacy for events like the Iranian revolution of 1979 as inconsistent. Boullata criticises el-Saadawi's, “thought with regard to the role of Islam in the scheme of things as seen from a feminist perspective,” in his work Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought. Because el-Saadawi believes that economic aspects have moulded Islam throughout history as el-Saadawi discusses it in her work, *The Hidden Face of Eve iii*, Boullata criticises her for not being decisive about whether Islam is a revealed religion or a creation of human society in history (130). How could she indicate that the religion of Islam is formed by the economy instead of the divine revelation in the Qur'an if she proclaims to be a Muslim or a defender of Islam, argues Boullata? Indeed, Boullata appears to be condemning el-Saadawi for doubting, if not outright debating, key tenets of Islam. The religion of Islam, he claims, does not accept the submission of revealed rules to democratic supervision and hence, she does not add anything good to the debates over the function of divinely revealed texts in modernising societies (131). What Boullata appears to disregard is the possibility of a third option in addition to the two conflicting sides that he

portrays as the only two possible options. When he advises el-Saadawi to "make up her mind" about whether she wants to follow "Marxist" ideas or Islam as a "revealed religion," he appears to be unaware of the possibility of a distinct interpretation of the religion of Islam, one that considers Islam to be a revealed religion that has been misused, wrongly interpreted and frequently used to persecute women. If el-Saadawi proposes a distinct understanding of Islam, this does not automatically imply that she does not comprehend Islam or that she is anti-Islamic. Local Egyptian censorship may have been one of the reasons that el-Saadawi avoided highlighting religion in her writings (Badran 403). Another factor could be her desire to distance herself from the more fundamentalist and religious current that she perceives to have swept over current Arab works of literature.

El- Saadawi says in an interview with Fedwa Malti-Douglas and Allen Douglas that she observes Arabic letters are growing more conservative, particularly in writings by men and progressive authors, who now begin their writings with bismillah and close them with alhamdullila ar-rahman ar-rahitm (404). With the publishing of her latest novel, Jannat wa-Iblis (1992), the secularism that rules el- Saadawi's writings might have become a thing of the past. This appears to be the first writing to consistently stress, examine, and question religion. The writer explores concerns affecting both Islam and Christianity in this work, which was published in Beirut rather than Cairo. She employs passages and references from the Bible and the Qur'an in a manner that may be evocative of *Rushdie's The Satanic Verses* (1989) without favouring one religion over another. The narrative's title alone gives away what the story is about. Iblis is one of the names for the Devil, while Jannat is the plural of Jannah, the Arabic word for paradise. Despite the fact that the title implies that the novel would be about contradictions, extremes, and two apparently contradictory sides, the two names in the title are the names of two characters in the story.

The story begins with a female named Jannat being taken into what we ultimately learn is a psychiatric hospital. Iblis, one of the mentally ill patients who is being misled and mistreated by the male director, observes her while she is being examined. Iblis is characterised as having dark complexion and black curly hair, two characteristics later linked to the Devil (97). Jannat is promptly medicated and placed in a bed, where Nirjis, the commanding matron, and the male director, who views himself as Lord, ensure that she is kept in her medicated state against her choice. Jannat has a sequence of non-chronological memories and repetitive past episodes and dreams in her semi-conscious condition, which help her escape from the restricted area in which she has been detained.

Jannat's capacity to transcend her constrained surroundings is akin to Firdaus' story in *Woman at Point Zero*, which carries her and her narrator outside the prison cell. In both cases, the protagonists are physically trapped in a confined place but ultimately reject and overcome their imprisonment to gain some sort of success. The characters of *Janat wa-Iblis* are similar to those in *The Circling Song*, where twins Hamida and Hamido learn to symbolise each other without gender boundaries. However, as el-Saadawi seeks to invert normally ascribed gender roles, the memories of several male and female characters become entwined in this endeavour.

The objective of the gender and role reversals in this work for El-Saadawi is to place the oppressor in the position of the persecuted, to show the coloniser what it's like to be colonised, and to question the different bases on which people in power maintain their alleged authority. It's worth noting that the oppressors in this piece include a woman, Nirjis, who has internalised the colonizer's values and thus betrays her friendship with Jannat, who becomes her colonised target. Likewise, the persecuted include a man who is Iblis himself, as exposed at the conclusion. One of the reasons for these additions could be Saadawi's attempt to answer many critics in the Arab world like George Tarabishi, who have accused her of having an unshakeable bias towards all men.

In her constant attempts to develop a "less sexist" vocabulary, el-Saadawi distorts words and phrases throughout the novel to highlight the degree to which language adds to women's subjugation. She masculinizes adjectives that have historically been employed to define females and feminises phrases that are employed only to refer to men, for example. As a result, the word "saqitah," which means "fallen woman" from the verb saqata, to fall and which the women characters have heard repeatedly throughout their childhood, becomes "saqit," which means "fallen man" a term that does not exist traditionally.

In the asylum, the characters who appear as part of the memories of the past, provide a strong commentary on religious extremism, wrong interpretations of the sacred scriptures like the Bible and the Qur'an, women's subjugation, and discrimination towards anyone who is thought to be different from the rest. The Christian grandmother, married to a Muslim man, keeps her Bible beneath her pillow and reads it to her granddaughter intermittently. Finally, returns to it openly after the grandfather dies. The narrator says, “Before her grandfather's demise, she used to remove her boots before worshipping. The Qur'an, not the Bible, would be in her hands. He has trained her way to purify herself for worship and to read the Qur'an ever since he married her. She did, however, hear her recite Christ's name late at night. She would conceal the Bible beneath her bed” (71). The quoted lines offer a nuanced exploration of religious identity, cultural conflict, and personal agency within the context of an asylum. The character of the Christian grandmother, married to a Muslim man, symbolizes the intersection of different religious traditions and the complexities that arise from such unions. Her discreet practice of reading the Bible beneath her pillow reflects a hidden defiance, as she oscillates between her Christian faith and the expectations of her Muslim husband. The act of removing her boots before worship, in accordance with her husband's teachings, showcases her adaptability and respect for his beliefs. However, her occasional recitation of Christ's name at night signifies a subtle assertion of her own religious convictions, done in secrecy to avoid conflict. The concealment of the Bible beneath her bed serves as a metaphor for the suppression of her personal identity and religious freedom within the confines of her marriage and societal norms. The lines thus underscore themes of religious extremism, cultural conformity, and the struggle for autonomy. It highlights the impact of patriarchal norms on women's agency, as well as the broader societal discrimination against those who deviate from accepted norms. Through this character's internal conflict, the narrative critiques the limitations imposed by religious interpretations and the social pressures that hinder genuine understanding and acceptance across diverse beliefs. There may be a note here about how the non-Muslim must usually convert to Islam in order for a marriage between a Christian and a Muslim to be recognised. However, there is no obvious preference for one religion over another. Misogyny is also present in the novel, as men explain their attitudes toward women to their kids. The book examines Islam, Christianity, and the worship of numerous deities in order to give insight into the manners in which they have been utilised to persecute women and others. For instance, Nirjis' father used to teach her the tale of Adam and Eve, emphasising that only Adam

was pardoned. When she says she's tired of males and wants to be with females, the director accuses her of being a follower of Lot. To which she responds that lesbianism is not addressed in the Qur'an (135).

As a result of these examples, Jannat declares that even Lord seems to have become their possession. They construct homes for Him out of brick and cement. They confine Him within lofty walls and inscriptions carved in stone (151). She is capable to notice that males use religion to regard females as one of two opposites, and anything in between, after this realisation. A woman is just either a virgin or a slut to the majority of the men characters who appear both outside and inside the asylum.

When the supervisor concludes that Jannat's memory is lost as a result of the medicines, he declares that she is now ready to be taken to home. He believes that a woman who has no recollection of being persecuted and who is incapable of fighting is no longer a danger to the community. He is incorrect because Jannat claims that nothing can cause her to forget the persecution of years after her emancipation. After departing from the asylum, she expresses a liberating declaration to herself, indicating that she has now reached a higher level of consciousness and is able to enjoy herself as she genuinely is "…Jannat/I'm neither the Virgin Mary nor the guilty Eve/I'm neither a corrupted woman nor a good woman/I'm a female (a human being) and my heart is my Deity my sin is my poetry" (156). The quoted lines encapsulate a profound transformation in Jannat's character and identity, challenging societal norms and asserting her newfound liberation after leaving the asylum. The supervisor's misguided belief that Jannat's memory loss makes her safe for the community reflects a simplistic view that undermines the lasting impact of trauma and persecution. Jannat's assertion that she cannot forget the years of persecution even after her release challenges this notion, highlighting the enduring emotional and psychological scars that remain. As she departs the asylum, her self-declaration signifies a radical shift in her self-perception and worldview. By rejecting binary roles imposed by societal expectations, such as the dichotomy between the Virgin Mary and the guilty Eve, Jannat asserts her multifaceted identity beyond conventional categorizations. Her proclamation that she is neither a corrupted woman nor a good woman defies moral judgments, revealing a defiance against restrictive norms. The declaration of being a "female" rather than simply a woman emphasizes her human essence, transcending gender roles and embodying a universal identity. The metaphor of her heart as her "Deity" and her "sin" as her "poetry" encapsulates her embrace of her authentic self, including her imperfections and creative expressions. This line underscores themes of empowerment, self-discovery, and the rejection of societal constraints, portraying Jannat's journey towards self-actualization and asserting her agency in a world that has sought to confine and marginalize her.

Iblis notices Jannat leaving the asylum and has a strong desire to pursue her. Despite this, he is encircled by towering walls and razor-wired fences and is unable to go. His flesh is caught in the barbed wire in his attempt to jump over the wall, and blood starts gushing from his wounds. As a result, he bleeds to death on the floor. The supervisor later discovers him dead and covered in blood. The supervisor, overcome by the feeling of guilt, regrets torturing Iblis throughout the years. He knows that all those nights of waking him up and forcing him to propagate an evil word among the patients had had their repercussions on Iblis. The warden then declares Iblis' innocence, emphasising that, instead of being the root of all evil, Iblis has constantly been a sufferer whose evil is imagined rather than present. While having his eyes fixed on the dead body, the supervisor keeps repeating the term "Innocent," and realises that he, who had constantly been insistent on being called God, is in truth Iblis' murderer. At this juncture in the book, the reversal of roles is truly complete. Conventional and religious notions of 'good' and 'evil' have been deconstructed, and the claimed cause of all evil is revealed to be exactly who he is—a mistaken victim of controlling societal values which find their origins in religion. The supervisor's (God's) declaration of Iblis' (the Devil's) innocence is essential to the female characters in the book, who had been described as the "Devil's supporters" throughout (105). The recognition that Iblis is not, and never has been, the root of evil, that he has been compelled into that situation by those in power who believe themselves to be all-seeing, is similar to the stigma that Woman has carried for millennia. Stigma that must be ended, if Woman is to be independent and free finally. In this case, free of religion-based persecution.

If earlier writings by el-Saadawi, which appear to engage with religion only in the background, have enraged critics and religious fundamentalists alike in the Arab region, one does not dare to reckon of the critical and otherwise reactions that Jannat wa-Iblis will elicit. However, if the literary responses to the book take the shape of discussions and debates, as in her earlier works, pertaining to feminism and faith, the novel would have made a significant contribution to feminist discourse and to the Arabic literature in general.

Of course, the perilous thing is outrightly banning and suppressing the book, thereby silencing any literary discussion. Nawal El-Saadawi herself reflects this idea when she shares her displeasure at being barred from appearing on Egyptian television saying, "I am black-listed on television. I cannot appear on television or on the radio. I am also censored in the newspaper-they cut three quarters of an article, and then they publish it" (Badran 400). Although censoring el-Saadawi's writings could well have added to their success so far in this, given the responses they have elicited, it is hard to ignore that a dearth of artistic responses for writers like her in the Arab region often ends in oblivion. The authorities might be reckoning that by permitting her to get her writings published without criticism or critique, her writings will somewhere get shelved and that oblivion will make them innocuous. Several of el-works Saadawi's have been permitted to be released. However, they also have suffered due to the dearth of critical feedback. She voices her annoyance with what she perceives as a novel method to quiet her, in an interview with Zahrata l-khalOi'in November 1990, hinting that she would much rather like to be banned and assaulted than published and ignored. She asserts:

> The truth is that I have been writing in the past few years more than ever before, and the number of my published books has doubled. You should be asking the Egyptian media that question since they continuously overlook my works. Has anyone heard of my novel Suqut al-imam? Of course not. This novel has been published three years ago in Cairo, yet no one has acknowledged it yet. ("Hadith mac imra'ah ghadibah" 35)

She continues to mention a number of published dramas, short stories, and articles that have met the same end. Although, these pieces of literature may not be completely destroyed, for the time being, they have failed to elicit the surge of protestations and other reactions that have led to the fame of earlier writings such as Imra'ah 'inda nuqtat al-sifr. Any criticism, according to el-

Saadawi, is preferable to none, as she made clear in her interview. This is exactly why one would be optimistic that Jannat wa-Iblis will receive the critical consideration it deserves in order to make contribution to the on-going and very important discussion about religion and Arab feminism. Although there appears to be an abundance of Arab critics, authors, and other people by whom Nawal el-Saadawi was attacked for everything from her style of writing to her western-influenced opinions, the truth that her writings are bought by lakhs of Arab readers indicates that the public seeks her opinions. Furthermore, many authorities and thinkers appear to be in accord with el-Saadawi, even if they cannot express so openly (Malti- Douglas 111-113).

This is probably partially because of this immense readership of supporters that Nawal el-Saadawi has not ever stopped getting her writings published on a regular schedule, experiencing imprisonment for her ideas, and never faltered from the purpose to which she had devoted her life. However, it may be ideal to let the author herself articulate the sense of power and courage that she gets from her readership:

> Of course, I sometimes feel not only exhausted but discouraged, frustrated, and angry. Yet I have never felt that what I am doing is futile, for when I experience moments of regret, I am always rescued by a young man or woman who has read my books and who, by informing me of the influence they have had on his or her life, revives my old enthusiasm and optimism. It is to young people that I owe my continual state of mental defence. ("Hadith" 36)

In conclusion, it can arguably be said that Nawal El Saadawi from a very early age had an inquisitive nature towards all established conventions and norms. She fought against all types of oppression, particularly the one against women. And by becoming a physician, she proved to her family that she is better than her privileged brother, and through her example, it becomes obvious that women aren't less than men in all respects of life. Hence, she is an embodiment of what a woman should be. Although Nawal El-Saadawi has travelled to the heavenly abode, she will keep on living in the hearts of her readers.

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