



A Dangerous Woman: A Tribute to Nawal el Saadawi

By Rasna Warah



I was in my mid-20s when I read Nawal el Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*, a book that completely changed the way I viewed feminism. Until then, I thought I knew everything about the women's movement. After all, I had taken several courses in Women's Studies as an undergraduate at a very liberal university in Boston, USA, in the 1980s, so I thought I knew all there was to know about patriarchy and misogyny. But Saadawi's book led me to question all my assumptions.

The Hidden Face of Eve could be described as a Marxist analysis of the root causes of patriarchy. It lays out in clinical detail how advanced forms of agriculture, which produced surpluses that could be sold for profit, created societies where the subjugation and seclusion of women became the norm. Her thesis is simple but devastating in its conclusion: when societies transitioned from subsistence farming and started making a profit off their land, the value of their land increased. The more land you owned, the more power you wielded. So, issues surrounding inheritance - who would be the heirs to the land - became more important. To ensure that the person inheriting your land was your biological son, you made sure that your wife (or wives) had no opportunity to have sexual relations with other men. Because only a woman knows who the father of her child is, it became imperative to ensure that she did not "stray". Hence the veiling and seclusion of women.

When feudal agricultural societies transformed into urban capitalist ones, the impetus to control

women and their bodies did not diminish; it merely took other forms. In some societies, the veil became normalised; in others, women's "purity" was safeguarded through other means, such as female circumcision or arranged marriages. Women who dared to break these norms were dismissed as prostitutes, witches or mad.

Literary reviewers and feminists have described *The Hidden Face of Eve* as a book about women's oppression in the Arab world. The tendency is to see it as an indictment of Islam's attitude towards women. But it is far from this. On the contrary, Saadawi argued that it is not Islam that has kept women down, but a patriarchal class system that cuts across all religions. It is not men who are the problem, but a system that prevents both women and men from fulfilling their potential. Men too suffer from a patriarchal system that determines what they can and cannot do.

Saadawi emphasised that this system has its origins in the mythical "first woman", Eve, who dared to eat "the fruit of knowledge" that was forbidden to her. For this "sin", she was punished, labour pains during childbirth being one among many other penalties she had to endure. Since then, women have continued to be suppressed by men who prefer women to remain ignorant. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam - the major Abrahamic religions - all have an Eve story where a woman's intellectual awakening is considered threatening. Women who "know too much" are viewed as dangerous, potentially promiscuous, women who might become bad mothers or wives.

Men too suffer from a patriarchal system that determines what they can and cannot do.

What Saadawi taught me was that the oppression of women - whether in feudal societies or in capitalist ones - is not confined to any religion or region. That when critics of Islam, like the Somali-born Dutch American author Ayaan Hirsi, blame the religion for treating women badly, they must also accept that the "enlightened" Western/Christian world, which they believe has accorded women more rights, has developed other types of oppression against women that can be equally devastating. Rape and domestic violence are as prevalent in Western societies as in non-Western ones. Violence against women has become normalised because women are commodified in capitalist societies - they are valued purely on the basis of their capacity to please men. The beauty industry has capitalised on this and created a market for fashion and cosmetics. Hence the growing demand among Western women for silicone breast implants and Botox injections, and the acceptance of pornography as a legitimate form of entertainment.

This revelation - that there is no hierarchy in women's oppression and that patriarchy and the capitalist system upon which it is built is inherently oppressive - completely changed the way I viewed the family and community structures within which I operated. I realised that being born female had already relegated me, my sisters, my mother and my grandmother to an inferior status. That the women who participated in my oppression, including my mother (who was more eager that I get married than that I obtain a university education), were only doing so because patriarchal norms left them with no choice. That when Saadawi's mother happily watched her six-year-old daughter being circumcised, she did so because she knew that her daughter would only be accepted in her small Egyptian village if she underwent the procedure. "I did not know what they had cut off my body, and I did not try to find out," recalled Saadawi. "I just wept and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side."

Women are commodified in capitalist societies - they are valued purely on the basis of their capacity to please men.

The Egyptian feminist and author, who died in March at the age of 89, and who I had the pleasure of meeting briefly at a literary event in Nairobi a few years ago, was born in the village of Kafr Tahla outside Cairo, where it was normal for girls as young as 10 to be married off. She defied all societal expectations, did well in school, and went on to become a medical doctor, only to lose her job in the Ministry of Health when her book *Women and Sex* was published in 1969. Saadawi did eventually marry - three times - and had a son and a daughter.

In 1981, Saadawi was among hundreds of activists imprisoned by President Anwar Sadat, and was only released from jail three months later when Sadat was assassinated. Her imprisonment did not deter her writing or her activism; she remained a strong advocate for women's rights throughout her life. In 2011, she joined the protesters in Tahrir Square in Cairo who eventually brought to an end the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. But her staunch opposition to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which gained prominence after Mubarak's ouster, had many questioning her democratic ideals when she celebrated the removal of President Mohamed Morsi (who supported the Muslim Brotherhood), in a military coup. (Morsi's successor and the coup leader, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, is viewed by many as a dictator.)

Saadawi wrote more than 50 books during her lifetime. One of her more well-known novels is *Woman at Point Zero*, the story of Firdaus, a sex worker sentenced to death for murdering her pimp. In this book, Saadawi shows how patriarchy is relentless in its vilification of women - even those who have allowed their bodies to be used and abused for the pleasure or benefit of men. Women seeking justice for the crimes committed against them find that justice always favours men, including those who have committed the crimes. Women like Firdaus are described as "savage and dangerous".

Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian American journalist, sums up how important Saadawi's writings were to her and to other women around the world: "Patriarchy fucks us over and it has us thinking we are the insane ones, that we are the wrong ones, that we are the unworthy ones . . . And so to be told that you are not insane or unworthy . . . that is the gift of Nawal El Saadawi . . ."

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).