

The Feminist and Religious Features in Some of Nawal El Saadawi Literary Works

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Abstract

Who is Nawal El Saadawi? What are the features that El Saadawi has used in some of her novels? What are the difficulties that Nawal El Saadawi faced when she decided to write to send a message for all over the world about her feminist thoughts? In the western culture, it may come as a surprise to many that there are a number of Arab women who campaign for rights, and better quality of life, facing imprisonment and exile in many cases. Nawal El Saadawi is an example but not the only one.

On the subject of women's rights however El Saadawi is vocal not just about her own gender, but about social equality as a whole. Nawal El Saadawi used most of her literary works to concentrate on the idea of women's rights and how women suffer in society.

Throughout reading El Saadawi's literary works and watching some interviews with her one must have decided to write about the feminist features that Nawal El Saadawi has throughout some of her literary works. Two novels have been chosen as a sample for this term paper research which are listed down:

1. Woman at Point Zero. (novel)
2. Memories of A Woman Doctor (novel)

The feminist and religious aspects will be discussed throughout the following chapters in this paper. The concentration is on the feminist and religious features and views and the techniques that El Saadawi has used to reveal her thoughts. All of the above works were translated into English.

Introduction

It is important to know that Nawal El Saadawi is one of the most influential literary figures not only in Egypt but also worldwide. She has opened the gates for other writers to talk about these issues which were once impossible to talk about in such patriarchal societies. The main critical point is that she goes over and talks about things that are not accepted here in the Middle East, as a result of this, she is now living in exile. She also has her own ideas about religion and religious matters, for example, she thinks that Muslims are still practicing some pagan features as they still practice kissing the black stone located in Mecca.

As a deduction for reading some of Nawal El Saadawi's literary works or novels, the reader should take into consideration the complexity of Egyptian society today – in particular, Islamic fundamentalism and women's status. The techniques that she uses are oral literary traditions, woman's narrative, and imagery as techniques throughout her novels and novellas. She also concentrates on certain topics like female circumcision, gender roles, prostitution, honor killing.

The emphasis throughout this research paper is on the Imagery and narrative as techniques. There will be a light spot on the female circumcision, gender roles and religious aspects.

Biography

Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Thala, a rural area outside Cairo. El Saadawi was raised in a large household with eight brothers and sisters. Her mother died when she was 25, and her father nearly at that age also, both unable to witness the incredible accomplishments their daughter went on to make. Nawal El Saadawi is a leading Egyptian feminist, sociologist, medical doctor and feminist writer on Arab women's problems. She is one of the most widely translated Egyptian writers, with her work available in twelve languages.

El Saadawi attended the University of Cairo and graduated in 1955 with a degree in psychiatry. After completing her education, El Saadawi practiced psychiatry and eventually rose to become Egypt's Director of Public Health. El Saadawi met her husband, Sherif Hetata, also a doctor, while working in the Ministry of Health, where the two shared an office together.

Nawal El Saadawi's books have concentrated on women, particularly Arab women, their sexuality and legal status. From the start, her writings were considered controversial and dangerous for the society, and were banned in Egypt. As a result, El Saadawi was forced to publish her works in Beirut, Lebanon.

Since she began to write, El Saadawi's books have concentrated on women particularly on Arab women their sexuality and their legal status. Although her works were denied by many people because of her insult to religion and politics or in other words she talks about what others don't talk about. She was imprisoned in 1980 but she continued to write in prison, using a pencil and a small roll of old toilet paper to write on it instead of paper. She was released in 1982, and in 1983 she published *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*.

El Saadawi's life was threatened by those who opposed her work, mainly Islamic fundamentalists, and armed guards were stationed outside her house in Giza for several years until she left the country to be a visiting professor at North American universities.

Saadawi began writing early in her career. In 1972, she published her first work of non-fiction, *Women and Sex*, which evoked the antagonism of highly placed political and theological authorities and led to a dismissal at the Ministry of Health.

Finally, El Saadawi is alive now and her literary works and books about women and humanity will stay alive forever. Her feminist work made a revolution against the government and the society especially the Egyptian rural society. The research is helped by El Saadawi's biography because most of her literary works were affected by her personal life.

Discussion

The novel *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, tells a story of a woman, Firdous, born in Egypt who suffers through many hardships in her life. She married a man could be as old as her grandfather. She ran away and became a prostitute. Firdous gave that up and tried to be a "respectful woman" by working at an office. After being played by men again, she returned back to her old occupation. In the end, nothing was ever right in her life and chose death in order to escape it. This novel is perfect example for a lot of previous written essay on women studies.

Women in the novel are treated similarly to de Beauvoir's description of the second sex (women). Most of the women in the novel are treated as servants or slaves by their husbands. In *Woman at Point Zero* novel we have two narrators. The novel is affected by the biography of the writer because El Saadawi was imprisoned by the government as mentioned in her biography above. She is the narrator of the story who met the main character (Firdous) in prison and Firdous also tell her stories to the main narrator in the novel.

El Saadawi uses the characters names and characters actions to reveal her feminist point of view. For example, masculine characters influenced the main character negatively. They turned her from a good woman who loves studying to a prostitute which is a rejected and insulted figure in society.

The names of the characters themselves are indicative. For example, the author used to use opposition to show the inequality which is a clear theme in the novel. Sharifa, is an Arabic name which means chaste or honest, is a prostitute in the story.

She replied that it was precisely men well versed in religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience. (El Saadawi: 1983).

The feminist view in the above quotation is very clear. The narrator used the pronoun "she" to refer the main oppressed female character throughout the interview that the narrator has made it with Firdous. Here, El Saadawi shows that religious men in particular beat their wives. Religious views are noticed through relating the word "religion" with the word "men". The writer- Nawal El Saadawi- used Firdous speeches to send her message to the readers. Her message to readers is that women are treated in a bad way in Egypt or in some Islamic societies.

El Saadawi wants to say that women suffer a lot in life and should get freedom. According to her speeches in other books, she refuses the idea of polygamy which is practiced in some Muslim countries Islam. Simply the following quotation is a mixture of religious and feminist features. I knew I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master. (Saadawi: 1983)

These two lines above show the feminist point of view of the author of this book. Women were treated as slaves in the patriarchal society. The theme of the importance of attaining respect is shown also in the following quotation.

All my life I have seen searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rules. (El Saadawi: 1983)

She is searching freedom and even if freedom is death. She has been treated badly by men who control her society. The word "something" stands for freedom and she seeks that something.

As a conclusion of commentary on El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero*, whenever you read between the lines you find more and more ideas. Themes, motives, characters and tone also gives the reader about the main idea in the novel.

Memoirs of A Woman Doctor is a novel by Nawal El Saadawi is an exciting novel. It talks about an Egyptian woman who wants to get her identity. The Narrator is the main character in this novel. She had to clean the house, wash the dishes, and make not only her bed but her brother's bed as well. Her brother had more freedom than her; He went out into the street to play without asking permission and he would come back as he pleases. She could only go out if her parents let her.. She was told that she had to cover up those "shameful" parts of her body. Her mother had persuaded her that men were like "gods" which would imply that they were superior and women were inferior. The narrator saw the life of her mother as a wife, who was always in the kitchen in order to fill up her husband's orders. Thus the narrator despised the word "marriage" and she hated being a female. When the narrator gets older she looked older than children of her age. One day, her mother along with her grandmother had asked the narrator to put on her cream dress and to go say hello to her father's guest.

Upon meeting the guest, she noticed that his eyes were roaming all over her body until it landed on her chest. At the age of ten, the narrator had cut her long hair as an act of resistance towards her mother. After the narrator had cut her long hair, she always wanted to say that is a success for her. She went on to study medicine to prove to her family that women just like men are capable of achieving anything they want to do. While studying medicine, the narrator was dissecting naked human corpses. This was the first time she saw men naked. Science had helped her realize that women were just like men. Later on, the narrator noticed the science cannot explain everything. She regained her faith in humanity while helping a sick old country man. She would go on and get married. But she would soon get a divorce. Her husband had asked her to stop practicing medicine.

After the divorce, the narrator kept practicing medicine. She was respected by society because of her occupation and she was independent. But she felt that something was missing in her life, something called love. Love would come to her in the end. This shows us (the readers) that some men are quite capable of loving and treating a woman as she ought to be treated. The narrator tells us that love does exist and she encourages us to search for it. Nevertheless, we should never accept our inferior positions in society; we should always fight for change.

According to the biography of the author, this novel is similar to El Saadawi's life. Gender roles is the main idea in this literary work, it is also about identity, the weakness of women in a patriarchal society and the importance of love. The inner life of a simple Egyptian woman who struggles against her society in which she has to prove herself as a woman who can work and do men's job.

She discusses her sexual thoughts throughout describing her sexual appearance of her body when she gets older. She hates herself of being a woman with in an unfair society.

This novel is written in the first person singular point of view; It is considered a revolutionary feminist novel. The novel has been reprinted several times in both Cairo and Beirut, but was never to be published in its entirety, because she had lost the original manuscript.

Is still consider 'Memoirs' like a first daughter, full of youthful fervor and expressing a reality which is still relevant today. It is a simple, spontaneous novel in which there is a lot of anger against the oppression of women in my country, but also a great deal of hope for change, for wider horizons and a better future. (Saadawi: 1984)

El Saadawi wanted to change the false concepts in the society and even wanted to change the oppression which affects women in general. She proved it to the society and wanted even to look as a man because she has cut her hair and she felt that she has got a success. But she criticizes the idea of marriage in her society. Sexual desires of men are the main aim of marriage as she expresses throughout the novel.

El Saadawi concentrates on the idea of childhood at the beginning of her novel to recall the memories of the narrator. Childhood symbolizes innocence, which means that her society even insults innocent things, and oppression is being applied even on children. *Memories of a Woman Doctor* is a feminist work and El Saadawi used a heroic female character to narrate the novel.

The young first-person narrator of *Memoirs of Woman Doctor* expands the word 'awra', that which is shameful and must be covered, i.e. her entire body. In comparison with *Women at point zero*, Firdaws carries the 'awra' further, this time into the economic domain. In *Memoirs of a Woman doctor*, for example, this bodily function serves as a gender and social divider, separating the female narrator from her brother. Only when she is finally an adult in the countryside she performs this function audibly. For Firdous in *Woman at Point Zero*, eating is the bodily function that defines her heterosexual relationship with her miserly husband. Only when she finally gains financial independence from selling her body can she perform this bodily function freely.

Her refusal is far more effective than the protestations of the unnamed hero in the novel, whose childhood was imbued with ideas about woman's role in food preparation and for whom man and eating become virtually fused. Questions of femininity, masculinity, and the precise boundary of the body become part of the literary fabric of innocence as well. El Saadawi turns the tables on the brother-sister relationship and she shows how oppression is happening on females even they are kids.

As a conclusion or a commentary on El Saadawi's novel *Memories of a Woman Doctor*, El Saadawi has done a great feminist work which stands as a revolution in writing because it discusses many sensitive issues: Gender roles. Patriarchal society, oppression, the narrator society and religious effect on human being.

In general, El Saadawi has her own concepts and thoughts about religion and she sued to discuss her ideas within her literary works, books and interviews. She is very much against the idea of a 'fixed text'. She sees Holy books as political books. The Old Testament, the New Testament or the Qu'ran, are, for her, political books. They speak about war, invasion of other people's countries, of inheritance, of money, this, as a focus, for El Saadawi, has little to do justice, morality, or spirituality.

She wants ideas like justice, freedom and love but religion according to her thought is being deformed by some religious men. She believes that we worship the text, whether divine or human. But this enslaves us when we seek to 'do' the words – in effect we are just following instructions, as in a rite.

Islam is not fixed; it is changing all the time. When political and social systems change, religion also changes. The interpretation of religion also changes. All holy books need new interpretations. Some people interpret religion in a progressive way and some interpret it in a reactionary way. (from an interview with El Saadawi)

It is clear to notice that her thoughts towards religion are different and she was rejected because of her thought by Islamic and Christian men. She thinks that the holy books are political and sometimes they should be explained because as she thinks "they are ambiguous".

"Religion is politics" it is her most popular statement about religion. On the other hand, religious men refuse her thoughts and works and they even tried to kill her because according to them she is apostate 'mortada'. As shown in the quotation below from the same interview she keeps emphasizing her ideas fearlessly.

The following quotation was chosen as a conclusion for the discussion of this study because of the importance of religion in life.

"Islamic fundamentalists are political groups and are more oppressive to women because they tend to interpret Islam in the most reactionary way. The Koran is the book that most Muslims say is our book, it is God's book and it is our inspiration. Some people are inspired by the essence of Koran, for example my father. He graduated from al-Azhar. He was religious and he understood the Koran as Justice, freedom and love, which is the message of all prophets." (from an interview with El Saadawi).

Conclusion

Although El Saadawi generally enjoys favorable critical attention from the west, a handful of Middle Eastern and Islamic commentators contend that instead of simply exposing injustices, her negative depiction of religious laws. Middle Eastern culture and Islamic men actually reinforces Western stereotypes. Some critics maintain that because El Saadawi consciously writes for Western audiences, her works accomplish little more than raising indignation and a political backlash that further represses the marginalized women whose condition she wishes to expose. Both Western and Eastern commentators applaud El Saadawi for attempting to expose the

mistreatment of Middle Eastern women, but they differ in their assessment of the effectiveness of El Saadawi's writings and politically-charged activism in bringing about change.

Throughout reading Nawal El Saadawi's books and watching her recorded interviews on TV. It has been noted that El Saadawi is free pen writer who doesn't care about society, government and religious critics. El Saadawi shows her personal experiences between the lines and she used to use the word women in the titles of her books and fiction Nawal El Saadawi's themes of writing were refused because it is difference according to Arab feminist writers. She always mentions secular desires and she criticizes society and religion.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the spread of translating El Saadawi's books which means that she is a successful writher. According to critics she is not a specialist writer but she is a gifted writer; One is interested in feminism should read Nawal El Saadawi books because it enriches the literature and the feminist revolution.

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