



Nawal El Saadawi

DIARY OF A CHILD CALLED SOUAD

Translated by Omnia Amin

GIANTS OF CONTEMPORARY ARAB LITERATURE



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by Omnia Amin

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Introduction: Why is Nawal El Saadawi Banned?

THE MAKING OF A LEGEND

It was in 2002 when I first saw Dr. Nawal El Saadawi give a talk on comparative literature at a conference held at Cairo University. I was already familiar with El Saadawi's writing through a number of novels and works of nonfiction that I had read and studied. I had always wondered why she is feared so much in some quarters, to the extent that her writing and talks are banned. On this occasion she spoke about creativity and courage, and I will never forget the sparkle in her eyes that continued throughout the talk despite the sneering and hissing of a mostly hostile and disapproving audience. I saw a simply dressed woman with the famous black and white Palestinian shawl around her neck, which in itself indicated her sympathy for the Palestinian cause and made a political statement. The first

thing she said to her audience, which mainly comprised university professors and students, was: *What are you doing in here? Why aren't you outside demonstrating? When we were your age we were out there asking for our rights. We were very different from what you are today.* In fact, on our way into the hall, there was a long queue of students standing for hours on end in the scorching sun in front of a small, closed wooden window waiting for books to be dispensed to them. The scene was not lost on El Saadawi, who looked at the students in amazement and said: *Why are you accepting such humiliation? Why don't you protest and insist on your right to dignified treatment?* Perhaps her remarks fell on deaf ears, but the level of mixed passions she stirred in them made me realize that I was in front of a person worthy of the legend that surrounds her.

This talk was, in fact, the first talk she was ever allowed to give not only in her home country of Egypt but also in the whole of the Arab world. She later confessed to me that she has never been honored by a single university or institute in any Arab country, whereas the rest of the world vies to have her as an honorary professor or a visiting guest of honor.

In the aforementioned talk and in every talk I attended by El Saadawi after that, I realized that her technique is simple but powerful. First, she arouses the passion and emotions of her audience to shock them out of the mundane level of thinking and seeing things. Second, she stretches their imagination to allow them to remove the veil from

their eyes and accommodate new possibilities. To achieve this, she starts by using extremely provocative sentences. At this conference she spoke about the connection between creativity and courage, and the gist of her talk was that the act of writing is an act of supreme courage because, to reach the truth, one has to have the courage to go beyond and surpass the limitations and intimidations forced on one by the environment. El Saadawi, in this talk, stated that she was 71 years old; today, a decade after first meeting her, I can see this same fiery spirit and ability to provoke in the first piece of writing she attempted in her early teens. *Diary of a Child Called Souad* was written as a school assignment; it was deemed inappropriate by her teacher, she received a zero grade, and she was told off and asked to rewrite the whole exercise. In other words, Nawal El Saadawi's first piece of extended writing was banned. On reading the book, I soon discovered that the legend that was later to become Nawal El Saadawi is already there. The story of Souad is a courageous creative endeavor by the young El Saadawi to examine the double standards of her surroundings and critique not only her society but also herself. This young girl had the strength and vision to expose the hypocrisy of her own background and form the early budding of what she has become today. *Diary of a Child Called Souad* is, in fact, El Saadawi's first step on a long and arduous journey to show that the act of writing is an act of fighting oppression on personal, social, and political levels. The young Souad understood this, and the Nawal El Saadawi

of today is a testimonial to it. By looking at her life and works, especially this first piece of writing, I address in this introduction one question: Why is Nawal El Saadawi considered so dangerous that she has to be banned?

WRITING IS A HISTORY OF OPPRESSION

In her book *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, El Saadawi speaks for all of the women prisoners jailed with her, not for any crime, but for their thoughts and writing. She says in defiance of the prison authorities:

We will not die, and if we are to die we won't die silently, we won't go off in the night without a row, we must rage and rage, we must beat the ground and make it shudder. We won't die without a revolution! (1986: 36)

The banning of a book or a talk by Nawal El Saadawi becomes more understandable once viewed through the history of her writing, which is a history of oppression brought about by her outspokenness and her sharp confrontations with various authorities. One pauses to ask: What is so threatening in her writing to infuriate churches and mosques and to cause a government to ban a novel? What is so blasphemous in Nawal El Saadawi's writing or talks to cause religious orders and groups to call for her death, first in 1988 and then a second time in 1992? How could telling a story and unfolding a

plot create such upheaval against one individual? Could the power of the word be so mighty that presidential election commissions feel threatened and religious orders feel insecure?

Her book *The Novel* was banned all over the Arab world the same year it was released in Arabic in 2005. This was not the first time that El Saadawi's writings or declarations led to such violent actions being taken against her. In 2004, her book *The Fall of the Imam* was also banned; in 1980, following her activism toward bettering the lives of women and her efforts to empower women by bringing together their efforts in a woman's organization, she was thrown in prison at the end of the late President Sadat's regime. What is this one woman capable of that distinguishes her from other feminists and public speakers and writers? More than any other writer in the modern age, El Saadawi has had a profound impact on the lives of men and women by shaping and opening their field of vision. Her books cover a range of topics, from women's oppression in its various forms, to the mutilation of women's bodies through circumcision, to other forms of oppression found in the culture, to the interpretation of religion regarding women's duties, responsibilities, and rights. She is most famous for her critique of "veiling of the mind," which has become synonymous with her name and has inspired the efforts of the Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA) that she established and has headed since 1982. She also writes about cultural identity and the threats of a fast-moving globalization process that threatens

the mind and the spirit of the rising generations. Her books create an awareness of this imminent threat that deliberately misleads us in the name of freedom and democracy. In her attack El Saadawi spares no one, from the Presidents of superpowers to minor journalists with misdirected and defeatist attitudes. Her arguments respond to a history of suppression that targets not only women but also the whole of humanity to serve the interests of the elite. In her uncovering of the strategies aimed at indoctrinating the citizens of the world, El Saadawi traces historical roots and movements dating from the times of the Pharaohs and ancient civilizations and from the rise of religious institutions and epochal political movements to current events that are the end result of policies deeply set and established in the bone and marrow of our historical heritage. She ties all of this to the rise of women's organizations that resist inequality of every sort, poverty and fundamentalism, and seek to liberate the minds and spirits of both men and women. Calling for the consolidation of women's efforts under global organizations has been regarded as the most threatening of El Saadawi's endeavors, and she has had more than one organization repeatedly closed down.

Her life has set an example of the spirit of continuation. Despite attempts to thwart her efforts by discontinuing her services and closing down her organizations, as well as banning her books, her writing, and even her public speeches and declarations, this woman keeps rising like a phoenix from the flames. She calls for a revolution of the mind, a

revolution in rereading and reinterpreting religious dogma and political and social laws and regulations that enslave the individual in the name of the sacred and in the name of democracy.

The simplicity of her background is what makes her a role model for every individual, whether rich or poor, male or female. This is what makes her so threatening. Authorities fear the stubbornness of her spirit, her faith in her own efforts, and the success of her achievements. Her character moves every individual in word and flesh in a world that lacks a proper political figure or leader who commands a mass following. When she started out as a young female doctor in Egypt in the 1950s, she went against all that was considered taboo or sacred. Even her family life is testimony that she becomes what she advocates. Dr. Sherif Hetata, her ex-husband and companion for the majority of her life, a writer, and an ardent supporter of her efforts, has shown his belief in what El Saadawi is achieving. Also, her children serve as examples of spirits that have grown to be free thinkers. Her daughter, Dr. Mona Helmy, who is also a writer and a poet and has a weekly column in *Tahrir Daily*, created outrage with her declaration that she wants to change her name to include her mother's name in addition to her father's. As a result, they were both summoned to court and accused of apostasy, but they were later cleared. Mona's efforts won for every Egyptian child born outside marriage the right to carry the mother's name. Her son, Atef Hetata, is a renowned film director, which shows that the whole family displays a spirit nurtured to

create and invent. They have endorsed as a family the belief in equality and the freedom to act and speak what they believe to be true and intrinsic to the rise of human values and the liberation of the human spirit.

Her danger lies in her own self, because she embodies the revolution she calls for. *Diary of a Child Called Souad*, written by El Saadawi when she was a child, is a testimonial to this fact. As a child, she instinctively exposed the hypocritical socio-religious and educational construct around her. She uncovers women's silence and lack of representation as she looks at and describes her grandmother who lives in the shadow of her grandfather:

As for her grandmother, she is silent all the time. She sits with her full, pale body wrapped in a black silk dress. Her thick, pale legs are covered by transparent black stockings. She has a round, pale face and her complexion is sagging but she has no wrinkles. Her eyes are unlike other people's eyes. She does not have any black or white in them but all one color: grey. They look as if they have never seen the light or the sun, or as if their black has melted into their white from lots of crying or lots of sleep. Her plump, pale hands rest in her lap. They are small but sagging from waiting for a time longer than time itself.

A similar description is used years later in El Saadawi's autobiography, *My Papers...My Life*, when she again describes her grandmother. She exposes the oppressed life she led and narrates how when her grandmother is finally released by the

death of her husband, she does not get to enjoy her freedom because she develops cancer and dies.

In El Saadawi's later novels, the characters described by the young Souad are developed into more complex figures, like Miriam the poet in *The Novel*, another surrogate of El Saadawi, who declares in her poetry:

*Freedom is knowledge,
It is the motive power behind everything,
Even behind poetry and novels!
Why else
is the gun in prison more innocent
than pen and paper? (2009: 190)*

The influence of El Saadawi's pen and paper has reached beyond the range of any weapon as she penetrates the minds of her readers. The history of her writing proves that to write the truth and to live with courage is to confront a history of oppression. Her ability to withstand all the attacks from religious and governmental institutions is what makes her the most threatening woman of our time.

THE MOST WANTED WOMAN

El Saadawi poses a threat on different levels. The first is on the level of writer of fiction and nonfiction alike. Being a physician by profession, she has spoken freely about women's bodies and problems with a voice of informed authority and not as just another woman who feels injustice and wants to

release her anger against society and her female condition. The second level is that of a public speaker and lecturer who speaks directly to her audience in a provocative way. Her manner arouses indignation, and people are quick to take offense as she tries to tear the veil from their eyes. She refuses to allow her audience to hold onto their comfort zones, because she believes that change can only take place if there is courage to question what we think is of unshakable value. It manifests in her exposure of limiting ideas and the corruption of the system of political economics that wants to make humans slaves of production and mere consumers of the things they produce while posing as a global movement of globalization, economic freedom, and democracy. The third level is that of her activities as head of women's organizations to consolidate women's efforts on a huge scale to fight tyranny of all sorts combined with her efforts to stand for the presidency of Egypt to defy an ongoing political farce in that one president was nominated for life. The fourth level is her private life and personality, much of which is revealed in her autobiographies and in this *Diary of a Child Called Souad*, because Souad is none other than her own voice as a young girl in school. All these factors make El Saadawi a living icon that kindles the spirits of generations. The evolution of her life, from a simple background to becoming the star of the modern intellectual world's fight for human rights and justice, speaks for itself. On all these levels, El Saadawi has one demand. It is the demand of freedom, for which the young Souad's