

# THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEWS

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## “MY PRINCIPLE IS TO UNVEIL THE MIND”

*By Asmaa Abdallah and Nadeen Shaker*

Physician by profession and radical feminist by vocation, **Nawal El Saadawi**, 86, has been dubbed the “Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab World.” El Saadawi is most known for her fierce advocacy against the issues of female genital mutilation, Islam, and the veil. Her controversial views have led to her imprisonment, the issuing of death threats against her, and ultimately, her having to flee Egypt with her family. El Saadawi returned to her homeland and took part in the 2011 uprising, championing women’s rights through calls for constitutional amendments and for the establishment of a union for Egyptian women. El Saadawi’s most recent public efforts include her plans to launch an institute that promotes thought and creativity. The *Cairo Review* conducted this interview with El Saadawi on April 8, 2018.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What got you into writing literature? How did working in the medical profession influence that, if at all?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** I started writing when I was a child in primary school. I kept a memoir—a diary—in which I wrote letters to God, to my parents, to my teachers, and to King Farouk, but all these letters were kept secret or burned.

And I never wanted to be a medical doctor but I became a doctor just to please my parents. However, studying medical sciences and examining sick men and women gave me a lot of material for my fiction and nonfiction.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why was female genital mutilation the most recurring and sensational topic in your early writing?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** Female genital mutilation and male genital mutilation are very serious problems. To cut healthy children is a grave crime, but medical doctors, nurses, and midwives were ignorant, locally and globally, and religious men and women of all religions supported these crimes.



△ Nawal El Saadawi, West London, April 15, 2010. Felix Clay/Eyevine/Redux

The global commercial media made it sensational but I challenged all that by writing scientifically and truthfully in my fiction. However, female genital mutilation is only one of the topics I write about, and I wrote about many more, which were ignored by literary critics and the global media.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Do you still feel it is an important issue today?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** In Egypt today, 90 percent of females and 100 percent of males are cut. The law forbids female genital mutilation but not male genital mutilation. Even the United Nations did not prevent male genital mutilation. All these operations have serious complications, physically and socially, and are crimes against children who cannot fight back.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is your opinion about the state of feminism in Egypt today?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** We have fragmented women's organizations called NGOs; they are semi-governmental organizations. They receive a lot of money globally, but

their effect is very little. The governmental women's organizations are obedient to the government and cannot struggle against class, and patriarchal and religious powers.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Immediately following the 2011 uprising, there was the idea of establishing an Egyptian union for women. Do you still think this is necessary?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** The Egyptian Women Union was aborted (like the January 2011 revolution) by the Muslim Brotherhood and the government at that time. Women in Egypt need a women's political party not only an organization, to be liberated from the political, religious, colonial, and capitalist powers.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Many of your novels such as Memoirs from the Women's Prison, Woman at Point Zero, and Love in the Kingdom of Oil deal with imprisonment, literal or figurative. What does it take for your heroines to escape their imprisonment?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** All creative works help to open the minds and illuminate oppressed women and men, as well as, assist in raising their consciousness, and therefore they organize and struggle together to liberate themselves from all types of prisons. Most of my heroines are fighters in different ways.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How can Memoirs from the Women's Prison be relevant today, especially with so many political prisoners languishing in jails?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** I think prisons are a global-local (glocal) problem, not only in our country. Democracy is false in the classist, patriarchal, and racist system that it exists in. Anybody can go to prison if he or she challenges the status quo in any country, and so I cannot compare between prisons today because they are all forms of postmodern slavery.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *There is emerging literature mapping a new geography of sexual politics in the Middle East. Does resistance have to be transgressive as your novels show?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** Resistance can take different forms in different situations, but women cannot be liberated by covering or uncovering their bodies. Veiling and nakedness are two faces of the same coin, encouraged by capitalist imperialism and religious patriarchal fanaticism. My principle is to unveil the mind.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *To what extent are your works autobiographical?*

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** Yes, the writer is inside his or her novel. I do not separate the self from the other. In all my novels, there are parts autobiographical, parts fiction, and parts reality. There is no separation between fact and fiction.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** Your last play God Resigns in the Summit Meeting, which explores religious paradoxes and the final resignation of God from his role, led to a publisher recall and accusations of heresy and insulting Islam. Why did you feel the need to write this work? Do you accept criticism of the play?

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** I accept any criticism of my work, if it is objective and based on critical thought, but I refuse threats or insults of fanatic religious political people.

I wrote this play because the characters and ideas in it have haunted me all my life, since childhood, since I wrote my first letter to God in primary school. The urge to write a novel or a play is not voluntary, and has many reasons and no reason at all.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** Can you share your experience of exile both in Egypt and in the United States?

**NAWAL EL SAADAWI:** Exile can be very useful if we continue to work and produce creatively. Exile in Egypt or outside Egypt was very useful to me, but exile in the United States or Europe or other places was more productive and inspiring to me than in Egypt. The threats against my life were greater at home than far away. In fact, I learned a lot from living in different places with different people and different cultures.