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Nawal El Saadawi: The Legacy of Stories

by Stacy Nalley

(English 130)

The Assignment: Write a contextual research paper on an author whose work we read in class, so as to better understand the author, her socio-historical and cultural framework, and her overall body of work.

Stories from her grandmother, her mother, her father, her patients, fellow prisoners . . . stories which beg to be told. Providing a voice for these stories through her work as an author, physician, educator, and political activist is not a choice for El Saadawi. “Writing,” says El Saadawi “is like breathing in the air of life. I cannot stop” (Daughter 54).

The child who listened carefully to these stories has grown up to be regarded as the Arab world’s leading feminist. All of her work is geared toward battling the injustices and oppression faced by women in the Middle East. How did the stories El Saadawi grew up hearing shape the activist she has become? What role does storytelling play in her writing? And, finally, how has her work raised awareness of the treatment of women in the Middle East? Exploration of these questions provides insight into the importance of storytelling in the shaping of societal views.

The use of storytelling as a method of raising public awareness and thus shaping worldviews has long been acknowledged. Throughout history, horrific conditions have spawned incredible literary legacies. Many survivors of the Holocaust reported the need to bear witness to the atrocities they experienced. Examining some of the literature created after World War II by Holocaust survivors illuminates the reasons authors tell their stories.

Primo Levi, Holocaust survivor and author of Survival in Auschwitz, explains why he devoted much of his energy after World War II to writing: “The need to tell our story to ‘the rest’, to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs” (9). Levi states that he tells his story as a form of “interior liberation” (9).

In his essay “The Power of Stories”, Scott Russell Sanders offers reasons why he considers stories a source of self-illumination and hope. He begins his essay by telling a story about a situation in which he ignored a cry for help. As the years passed, the memory of this encounter became a story which he would recall from time to time. The story evoked “a burst of clarity, about who he was and who he wished to become” (84).

El Saadawi acknowledges the importance of storytelling: “Women have an unwritten history told orally by one generation to the other” (Daughter 75). She has made it her mission to record this history. Her direct style and addressing of the most sensitive topics sheds a harsh spotlight on the horrors suffered by the women of her region, drawing the reader into reluctant participation. Awareness creates a feeling of responsibility.

As a story is passed from person to person, a new layer is added as the words are filtered through the listener. As the stories around El Saadawi intersected with the world she witnessed, she began to formulate strong questions about the differences in the treatment of men and women.

She wrote to express these questions and to seek answers. Her first letter was written to God asking why it was His will that men should be treated differently than women. Through the words of her father, her mother, and her paternal Grandmother Sittil Hajja, El Saadawi began to understand that she “had been born female in a world that only wanted males” (Daughter 52).

In her autobiography A Daughter of Isis, El Saadawi tells the story of her own birth, as told to her by her Grandmother Sittil. When she was born, the midwife pushed apart her thighs to answer the all-important question: Was this baby a male or female? When the gender was determined, the midwife let out a “sound of deep regret before she let it [El Saadawi] drop to drown in the basin full of water” (20). The baby’s survival is said to be determined by the will of God. That El Saadawi survived seems to be proof of her mother’s words: “Throw Nawal in the fire and she will come out unhurt” (2). This message has infused El Saadawi with the courage to defy the odds throughout her life.

El Saadawi’s mother passed her dreams along to her daughter in whispers: “I wanted to be a musician, and play music, or to finish my education and find a place where I could experiment and invent something useful. I dreamt of galloping on a horse to the horizon, of riding in an aeroplane to see the world, but your grandfather Shoukry took me out of school and married me off to your father” (Daughter 6). El Saadawi writes of a mother who was proud of her daughter’s rebellious spirit, but sometimes too weak to stand up for her. (Daughter 2)

El Saadawi’s father also imparted his unrealized dreams upon his daughter. Spending his childhood dreaming of freeing his country from colonial rule, freeing “himself of the bondage of his government job to become a poet, or writer”, he died in exile without ever achieving his aspirations (Daughter 6). Growing up with her parents’ regrets following her like a shadow seem to have left El Saadawi determined to realize her own dreams.

Recalling that her grandmother, who had never been to school, provided her with her first lessons in philosophy, religion and politics, is an acknowledgement of the influence of the stories she heard while following Sittil through the fields. Sittil’s graphic description of the brutal way in which her clitoris was cut off with a razor by a midwife echoed in El Saadawi’s young ears: “I was screaming at the top of my voice, “Mother, where are you?” . . . but that unnamable woman . . . took hold of me, tied me up as though trussing a chicken, covered my head with a shawl and pulled my thighs wide apart so that she could tear off my surface below. . . her finger going through it like a nail cutting into my flesh with a burning pain” (Daughter 27).

It was also through Sittil’s lens that El Saadawi learned about the customs of arranged marriage. She recalls the vivid words of her grandmother who, at age ten, was led from her father’s house to her husband’s house on the back of a mule with the blood of her virginity “flowing down her over the saddle” (Daughter 31). Upon arriving at the bridegroom’s house, her grandmother cowered on the floor in fear. After hesitating when ordered to prepare supper, she was beaten with a cane. El Saadawi was told that this custom of beating the bride on her wedding night was performed to demonstrate the husband’s authority. The ten-year old Sittil was then raped by her new husband, whom she had only just met. Her cries were stifled so as not to bring shame to her family. It is no wonder these stories ignited in El Saadawi a passion to retell them through her books.

Reviewing her body of work, fiction and non-fiction, the impact of these stories on El Saadawi is irrefutable. El Saadawi explores these topics in order to promote awareness of their horrors. She layers her own perception of the stories she heard with those of patients and prisoners she encounters.

In her book The Hidden Face of Eve, she devotes a chapter to demystifying the brutal act

of clitoris removal, commonly referred to as female circumcision, and explaining its harmful effects. She opens the book with the story of her own experience at the age of six. She provides a poignant illustration of the emotional scars left by this experience: “The memory of the circumcision continued to track me down like a nightmare. I had a feeling of insecurity, of the unknown waiting for me at every step I took into the future” (8).

In this non-fiction account, she creates a dialogue that encompasses the stories she has been told by patients having suffered complications due to this procedure. Most of the patients, seeking treatment for physical complications, are unaware of the profound effect this procedure has had on them psychologically. It is through El Saadawi’s gentle probing and the sharing of her own experience that the women are able to unburden their stories and shed the shame of the act by acknowledging its ramifications. (33-42) Storytelling serves a dual purpose in this instance by providing catharsis for the patient and increasing the reader’s empathy and understanding of the horror of the act.

Scott Sanders acknowledges the importance of empathy when he quotes Thoreau’s question: “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant”(91)? Sanders maintains this miracle occurs most often as a result of storytelling (91).

El Saadawi explores female circumcision and its implications in her novel, A Woman at Point Zero. She describes Firdaus’, the novel’s heroine, confusion at one day having this part of her body violently removed and no longer being able to experience sexual pleasure. “It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it [sensation of pleasure] used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return” (15).

El Saadawi uses storytelling as a vehicle with which to tell her heroine’s story in A Woman at Point Zero. Firdaus is a prisoner awaiting execution for killing her pimp. Her story is told to a psychiatrist collecting research on the emotional problems of female prisoners. While written in a novel form, the book is based on an actual encounter between El Saadawi and Firdaus. In this novel in which Firdaus relates the events of her life leading up to the prison sentence, the topics of child molestation, arranged marriage, and prostitution are explored (1-103).

The idea that child molestation is considered a taboo topic in Egyptian culture does not deter El Saadawi from addressing it. On the contrary, it makes her more determined. In her book The Hidden Face of Eve, El Saadawi discusses her dedication “to the task of unmasking the double face of the society in which we live”(16). She recounts the story of a young woman who, from the age of five, had been improperly touched by her grandfather. This experience left the young woman filled with shame and self-doubt. It was through sharing the story with El Saadawi that she was able to lighten her burden and gain confidence in her inner voice (18).

Storytelling and writing as a means of self-discovery was a connection El Saadawi made at an early age. As a child, she would coax stories from her sisters “despite all the people around us who were forcing silence on their voices” (Daughter 53). She then put their stories to paper in order to learn more about her sisters, herself, and the world in which she lived (Daughter 53).

In her review of El Saadawi’s autobiography Walking Through Fire, Journalist Ilona Lo Iacona notes the use of storytelling as an effective communicator of El Saadawi’s message of resistance. The “use of snippets of conversations between herself and her femes throughout the book. . .with each of the women speaking in a distinctive voice” provides a stark contrast between their statements and El Saadawi’s feelings (55). The dialogue between her female friends makes clear the distinction between their more traditional views of men, marriage, and romance and El Saadawi’s very progressive thoughts on these issues (55).

The importance of a woman's virginity is another social issue El Saadawi explores at great length. In the book Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East, El Saadawi contributes an excerpt which describes the common practice of shunning a woman whose purity is questioned. El Saadawi tells the story of a young patient who was brought in for examination by her husband. The girl did not leave the required blood on her bed sheets on their wedding night. Despite El Saadawi's confirmation that the girl was indeed a virgin, she was divorced by her husband. When the young girl returned to El Saadawi's office, she wore "the face of an old woman, aged before her time. Sorrow had sketched lines of pain on her face which made her resemble the faces of the dead – of whom I had seen too many in the shadow of the medical profession" (82).

During her time as a practicing physician, many women with similar stories passed through El Saadawi's office. The punishments inflicted on these women ranged from divorce, beatings, public shame and rejection by family. Because a woman's purity is a direct reflection on her family and its reputation, women could even find themselves the targets of death or plunged into such despair as to attempt suicide (Bowen 83). Witnessing these stories compelled El Saadawi to use her pen to educate the world by giving voice to the stories through her writing.

Writing is her way of combating what she calls the "most lethal and dangerous weapon of all": the anaesthetizing of the mind ("War" 7). In her paper "War Against Women and Women Against War," which she presented at the World Social Forum in 2004, El Saadawi discusses the brainwashing which occurs when dissident voices are banned in a society. The goal of this type of thought control is "to make women obedient instruments of their own oppression and transmitters of this false consciousness to future generations of children, of girls and boys", thus robbing women of their most intrinsic power.

This power is exemplified by noting the effect of strong female voices in El Saadawi's childhood. Ever cognizant of this power, El Saadawi has refused to be silenced. Describing herself as the "voice of the silent majority", she has fearlessly fought to empower women to organize and liberate themselves (McMillan 5). She recognizes the tremendous political impact of writers in countries, such as Egypt, where the government is weak, noting that "a piece of poetry can make a revolution" (McMillan 1).

In 1981, El Saadawi's passion to educate the world landed her in prison along with fifteen hundred other Egyptian intellectuals who expressed political differences of opinion with President Anwar Sadat. Incarceration did not silence the storytelling. Instead, within forty-eight hours, El Saadawi and her fellow inmates were exchanging accounts of what had happened to each of them (Memoirs 35).

Her three-month incarceration in the women's prison, Al Kanatu, was spent carefully listening and secretly recording on toilet paper her own experiences layered with those of fellow inmates. El Saadawi's imprisonment provided powerful artistic inspiration as she turned her recordings and memories into novels, plays, and a book of memoirs (Malti-Douglas 160).

In her book Memoirs From The Women's Prison, El Saadawi explores the role of storytelling in creating community. As these women of diverse beliefs and social backgrounds were thrown together in cramped, filthy conditions, their sharing of stories united them. Through their cooperation, the women were able to accomplish improvements in their surroundings by unifying their voices (Memoirs 40).

Unifying the voice of women is at the heart of El Saadawi's work. She writes in order "to connect the village, the grassroots with the international" (McMillan 4). She expresses her belief in change coming from the "collective power of the people" and she feels her role is to

reach her countrywomen and men first (McMillan 7). For this reason, she writes in Arabic.

Through the gentle passing of stories written to the Arab world, El Saadawi envisions the lighting of minds (McMillan 8). Understanding that changing patriarchal views that have been in place for generations is a gradual process, El Saadawi uses her words “to make connections” and fill in the gaps of fragmented knowledge offered by the media, the government, and the religious systems (McMillan 3). Scott Sanders and El Saadawi find common ground in the belief that all humans are born with creativity and knowledge that is waiting to be released (Sanders 92, McMillan 2). Stories, in their finest form, can be the catalyst which releases these qualities and counteracts the negative influences of those with selfish agendas (Sanders 92). As enlightenment occurs, so too will revolution (McMillan 8).

Combining the ideas of revolution, unity, and political power with her voice as a writer, El Saadawi took a formal step into the political arena with the founding of the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA). The AWSA is an “international organization dedicated to lifting the veil from the mind of the Arab woman” (Malti-Douglas 11)

This organization gives El Saadawi a platform from which to spread her message to an international audience. The AWSA began with one hundred twenty members devoted to the idea that the liberation of the Arab people could not be separated from the liberation of the Arab woman. “By 1985, AWSA International had over three thousand members and was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations as an Arab non-governmental organization (NGO)” (El Saadawi Home).

Between 1982 and 1991, under El Saadawi’s leadership, the AWSA worked worldwide to raise awareness about Arab women’s lives through conferences, the publication of magazines and books, and the production of films. In 1991, the AWSA took a public stand against the Gulf War and was closed down by the Egyptian government. The organization moved to Algeria until it could reopen in Cairo in 1996. Two North American branches exist, in San Francisco and Seattle. This NGO continues to gain status in the world and work tirelessly to spread its message. Through the AWSA, El Saadawi has given thousands of women a unified political voice (El Saadawi Home).

While El Saadawi has many venues from which to fight the system, the written word remains her most effective weapon. For El Saadawi, there is no distinction between writing and fighting. At age seventy-five, she is relentless in her pursuit of truth. This is her message: “Words should not seek to please, should not hide the wounds in our bodies, the shameful moments in our lives. Sometimes words shock us, give us pain, but they can provoke us to face ourselves, to question what we have accepted for thousands of years. There still remains a lot to say. . .” (Daughter 292). It suggests that the ghosts in El Saadawi’s head are still rattling their chains.

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