

A Woman at Point Zero

by Nawal el Saadawi, Zed Books, 2007, 128 pp.

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Also under review: Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Zed Books, 2007, pp. 395; Nawal El Saadawi, *God Dies by the Nile*, Zed Books, 2007, pp. 215.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas writes, in her 1995 study *Men, Women, and Gods: Nawal el Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* that ‘[n]o Arab woman inspires as much emotion as Nawal el Saadawi. No woman in the Middle East has been the subject of more polemic. Certainly, no Arab woman’s pen has violated as many sacred enclosures.’ [1] The metaphor is apt, for enclosures of all kinds have been a dominant concern for El Saadawi throughout her written work: the enclosures of the house, of religion, of the family, and most powerfully that last enclosure of the female body, the hymen, symbolic of a woman’s honour or disgrace and too often the determiner of her fate. The image of violation – of pen wielded as weapon – also moves beyond cliché, for violence and its aftermath is El Saadawi’s great subject, both the symbolic violence of repression and the specific traumas which she herself has witnessed (and experienced). Violence, and in addition justice, are the poles of meaning in her work; and these two forces pull within her fiction, both providing its power and demonstrating its limitations.

Her two most important novels, *A Woman at Point Zero* (1973) and *God Dies By the Nile* (1976) have recently been reprinted in new editions by Zed in London, along with her influential study on Arab women, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, originally published in 1977. The English translation of *The Hidden Face of Eve* first appeared in 1980; it is undoubtedly the most recognised of her works, and one which has had the greatest impact on a Western readership. The chapters on female genital mutilation are unforgettable, and drew attention for obvious reasons; a 1982 New York Times review by Vivian Gornick was entitled ‘About The Mutilated Half’ and focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the book. [2] For me, as for many other young (white, North American) feminists in the early 1980s, the horror of genital mutilation, of which we had largely been ignorant, overwhelmed us, and – and I say this carefully – fixed to an unfortunate degree our opinions on women’s situation under Islam. The images of brutalised girls, damaged by fingernails and razors, are overwhelming, as are El Saadawi’s reports of the physical and psychological

trauma suffered in consequence. That genital mutilation is not a specifically Islamic tradition but an African one, with a history long predating the Islamic conversions of nations where it is still practiced, was elided in our understanding, and we became (and Aparajita Sagar writes of this tendency in her Western students) 'fixated on clitoridectomy and the veil.' [3] This response to *The Hidden Face of Eve* was an honest one, for if ever a book were writ with flame, this one was; but its outrage became our own and had its own momentum, eventually obscuring El Saadawi's other concerns so that we took from the book a one-dimensional afterimage of the Arab woman as wholly victimised and held under the thumb of a rigid, ahistoric theocracy.

The danger here is not only that our reading of the conditions of women's life under Islam became caricatured, but that El Saadawi was seen as anomalous and isolated, granted the position of singular representative for Arabic women, when she is part of a long and complex history of Egyptian feminism which was largely contemporaneous with the movement for women's rights in the West. In 1892, Hind Nawfal, a Syrian, started her first journal *al-Fatat* ('Young Girl') in Alexandria and subsequently, as Bouthaina Shaaban notes, 'there were more than 25 Arab feminist journals owned, edited, and published by women – all before the First World War.' Huda Sha'rawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union and two important women's periodicals, *l'Egyptienne* and *al-Misriyya* before her death in 1947, and more recently memoirs and works of fiction by Fay Afaf Kanafani, Hanan al-Shaykh, Fatima Mernissi, Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Sebbar all add to the range of women's voices writing in Arabic. [4]

And there is more to *The Hidden Face of Eve* than examples of cruelty and physical suffering; chapters on the heroine in Arabic literature, and historical material on the situation of women in the time of the Pharaohs (better, in many respects, she says, than in Egypt at the time of her writing) and socialism (though, notoriously, in the English version an entire chapter on women and socialism was redacted) give some sense of the scope of this work.

But it is difficult not to read some conscious manoeuvring, awareness of audience, into other changes made between the Arabic original and the English text (documented exhaustively by Amal Amireh) which include the foregrounding of the issue of genital mutilation at the expense of political material; the harrowing opening of the book, describing El Saadawi's own experience of circumcision, was situated differently in the original, and less sensationally. The history of its framing

through its introductions is also complex; the preface to the first British edition, written by El Saadawi, praised the Iranian revolution as an anti-colonialist action, and characterised Western feminism as a 'fanatical movement prejudiced in favour of the female sex and rising to its defense at any cost,' adding that '[w]e know that progress for women, and an improvement of their status, can never be attained unless the whole of society moves forward.' This preface was omitted from the American edition of 1982 – whether in reaction to negative criticism or out of political delicacy is an open question – but is included here, and strikes an odd note. It is very much an artefact of its time, and phrases like 'The Iranian Revolution has lifted the banners of Islam overhead, as banners of freedom from imperialist oppression' complicate, to say the least, the authority of the subsequent text. Of the four pages of the forward to this edition by Rosnak Hosni, two are dedicated to reiterating the harms of circumcision; a more contextual piece, or, better still, a new preface by El Saadawi would have been much appreciated. To situate *The Hidden Face of Eve* within contemporary discussion of Arab feminism would have been valuable indeed. It's an important work, and deserves an update.

A Woman at Point Zero was first published in Beirut in 1973; political conditions – El Saadawi had recently been fired from her Directorship at the Egyptian Ministry of Health, and the magazine which she had founded three years previously was shut down – did not allow it to be published in her own country. It tells the story of Firdaus, a prostitute jailed for killing a man; her life is relayed in a night's telling to El Saadawi's stand-in, a doctor visiting the prison. It stands as a small wonder of a book, its 114 pages unrolling in an intense and seamless narrative, spare, graceful, and elegant. I sped through it in one breathless hour and a half, and my experience isn't unusual; *Woman at Point Zero* is the novel of El Saadawi's which is most often found on university curricula, and this quick and potent experience of reading is likely the reason why. It is not a book which bows to, or needs, nuance: Firdaus is uncomplicatedly heroic, and the force of the book relies on three major motifs: the blows of fate to which Firdaus is subject, the social surveillance which entraps her, and the appetites of men, which devour her. Within this strict logic, it seems inevitable that Firdaus' greatest act of will is not just that she stabs her pimp, but that she refuses to accept the offer of a death sentence commuted to life imprisonment. She kills one of the men who has used her, but after this single shining moment of self-assertion (and it is unequivocally portrayed as such) she walks to the gallows in a gesture of self-destruction.

The reader is served well by the translation by El Saadawi's husband, Sherif Hatat, which reflects the simplicity of the original language but still manages to convey a deftness in description. Firdaus' husband, to whom she is married off by her brother, is an old man with a persistent infection on his chin, who insists on kissing her: 'the swelling on my face and lips [was] like a small purse, or a water skin, full of a stagnant greasy fluid'; a client's angry words gain visible shape as they are spoken: 'I could almost see them as they traversed the space separating his lips from my ears, like tangible things with a well defined surface, exactly like blobs of spit'; and, strikingly, the images of eyes, symbolic of social hostility and control, become malevolent, to enfold and enchain her at a school assembly: 'I saw all heads turn towards me, and all eyes staring in my direction, countless eyes transformed under my gaze into innumerable rings of white surrounding innumerable circles of black, which turned in a concerted circular movement to fix their look steadily in my eyes.' Scherezade is a difficult figure to invoke in the context of this novel, with her dignity compromised as it has been by Orientalism, but the potency of her image as a storyteller labouring under a sentence of death holds some resonance here. The traces of the oral tradition, in particular descriptive repetition, still linger, and give the novel the sense of being broadcast from a world both modern and ancient. Firdaus is in fact at the point of zero: she moves towards her erasure from the world, and her refusal to live in the end leaves her as a literal zero: non-existent. She is a bit too saintly, in the end, for comfort.

This narrative arc is repeated in *God Dies By The Nile*, also published in Beirut a few years after *Woman At Point Zero*. But where the earlier novel relies on the singular voice to tell its story, this novel has many voices and as a consequence is more sophisticated; El Saadawi creates a temporally complex narration, with viewpoints from multiple characters living in a kind of Egyptian Everyvillage.

The characters range from some grotesques that could have sprung from the darker corners of Fellini to recognisably noble, but ignorant peasants. And their ignorance is profound: they are easily tricked and manipulated to give up their lives or bodies in the name of Allah, and act without understanding or even without much awareness of what is happening to them. In one sequence, two women approach a mosque in the nearby city – they have never been outside their village before – and join in the crowd in a kind of animal consciousness, losing all sense of self. Another character is initially described as sharing the features of the family buffalo, a patient and symbolic presence as pure a symbol as Animal Farm's Boxer (and as misused). The book seems to take place in an unlocatable time that could be anywhere in

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the last thousand years; it opens with a woman walking from her village to the fields at dawn and her buffalo harnessed to a turning waterwheel which irrigates the riverside crops. It's an image as old as human agriculture, and it's a scene which could have taken place under the Pharaohs as easily as under Nasser or Sadat.

The only glimmer of hope offered is the possibility of class consciousness and violent uprising: the bad guys are thoroughly bad, the good are brave and self-sacrificing; this either-or vision of the novel gives it, again, a narrative momentum that leads only to one end. El Saadawi's voice is powerful and there are passages of great lyrical beauty, but she brooks no argument – good and evil choose their sides. It is a book wholly about power and its abuse, and reaches a harrowing climax when the village attempts to purge its anxieties through the ancient act of scapegoating and murderous punishment. The sequence is difficult to read, particularly as we must believe El Saadawi drew it from life; there is a documentary impulse in Saadawi's writing which grants it the authority of lived experience but which also dismays and disheartens. The only language available for redress is the one which the characters have been forced to speak, which is that of violence. Justice, of a sort, ends up arriving at the point of a knife or the end of a hoe, but at that point the action stops, and the story is over.

While didacticism is traditionally considered the enemy of art, and though both novels are written with the urgency of their message undisguised by symbol or allegory, they do manage to escape being compromised by their political intentions, and this is a testament to literary skill. Malti-Douglas writes that El Saadawi's fiction 'has been castigated as mere propaganda, as tireless repetition of her radical message,' [5] but the books are most certainly better than that; they are meditations on the fate of individual women under religious and political oppression, not propaganda. (One minor complaint: the covers of all three books in these new editions, though handsomely designed, still reference old tropes of veiling and screening, with women's faces half-hidden in shadow, eyes visible but averted from the viewer. There has been too much made of the supposed eroticism of the veil and the confinement of the harem for such images to be used without in turn raising associations which are surely not intended.)

The New York Times article quoted at the beginning of this review concludes that it is 'appallingly true that no culture as religion-dominated as Arabic culture can ever accomplish social or political equality for women,' [6] but modern feminists in the Arab world might well beg to differ. The importance of El Saadawi's novels,

as well as the controversy around her reception in the West, is summed up by Amal Amireh, who writes of her experience of reading El Saadawi as a teenager living in the West Bank, where ‘the influence these books had on me, and on the friends with whom I shared them, was profound. They literally gave us a voice,’ though in reading her work again as a graduate student in the United States she finds that ‘in both the popular and academic whirlwind of discourses about El Saadawi and Arab women, I hardly recognized the author that I knew. I hardly recognized myself.’ She writes elsewhere, in *Al-Jadid*, that ‘I agree that el-Saadawi is popular in the West partly because her works have played into Western prejudices. But I don’t think this fact should be merely used to dismiss her achievement.’ [7] And her achievement is an extraordinary one, which deserves to be regarded as such. The last word, then, to El Saadawi herself, from an interview conducted this year with Adele S. Newson-Horst: ‘I do not write for the West. I write for people everywhere who believe in justice, freedom, love, equality, peace, and creativity. But I do write in Arabic; therefore I write mainly for people in our countries.’ [8] We are grateful for the opportunity to listen, and learn, from this conversation.

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Notes

- [1] Malti-Douglas 1995.
- [2] Gornick 1982.
- [3] Sagar, quoted in Amireh 2000.
- [4] Bouthaina 1993.
- [5] Malti-Douglas 1995.
- [6] Gornick 1982.
- [7] Amireh 1996.
- [8] Newson-Horst 2008.