

SILENCED VOICES: NAWAL EL SAADAWI

by Sara Whyatt

Early this year, Nawal El Saadawi, the renowned Egyptian feminist writer, left her home in Cairo for Belgium, leaving behind her the threat of a court case on charges of disrespect to religion and apostasy for her most recent work, a play entitled *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*. Her website carried a call to academics, writers, and institutions worldwide to send protests and petitions to the Egyptian government against the campaign by religious authorities to ban her works. It carried a particularly alarming message that “To bring a writer to trial before a court relying on dangerous accusations of this kind is a license for her assassination and can encourage any mad man who might cross her path to kill her.” (www.nawalsaadawi.net/news/07/petition07.htm) Speaking to the press from Brussels, she said that she plans to stay away from Egypt for six months to a year, for her “peace of mind,” and to take up teaching positions and offers to attend conferences. Yet she is adamant that she will return to Egypt to confront her detractors.



Nawal El Saadawi

Photo credit: Therese Bjorneboe

Nawal el Saadawi, age seventy-five, is no stranger to book bannings and censorship, having been a controversial figure throughout her long career. This latest attack on Dr. El Saadawi came in January 2007 when she and her daughter, the author Mona Helmi, were called for questioning to the prosecutor general's office. It was her publisher, Mahmoud Madbouli, who, shortly afterwards, decided to withdraw the book from the Cairo Book Fair, held in early February, telling the press that he had done so of his own volition and not under orders from the authorities. He is quoted as saying, "We do not normally read all the books we publish. But on learning that Saadawi's book...offended readers' religious sensitivities, we decided to withdraw it." This extraordinary move is particularly surprising in light of the fact that Madbouli had already published over a dozen of Saadawi's works.

In March, the Islamic Research Council at Al Azhar University, one of the world's leading Muslim research centers, announced that it had filed a suit against the play on charges of "insult to Islam." Dr. El Saadawi retorted, "Since when do men of religion pass judgment on plays? That is something for theater critics to do, not them. It is a piece of fiction, and fiction has no limits." She describes her book as being a comment on the current socio-economic and religious issues in Egypt. On the withdrawal of her play from the book fair, she said, "I feel worried about the future of Egypt, whose young people are denied a real chance to be educated and exercise their minds. Confiscation provides a breeding ground for extremism."

Dr. El Saadawi is one of Egypt's best-known writers, who has become renowned at home and abroad for challenging taboos around, among others, women's sexuality, female circumcision, and the wearing of the veil. She is a prolific writer, having written over forty books, and has had her works translated into thirty languages. She graduated in medicine in the mid 1950s and worked as a psychiatrist, later becoming the Director of Public Health before being dismissed from her post because of her political activities. She spent a brief spell in prison in 1981, when she was among a large number of people arrested for their opposition to President Anwar el Sadat, and who were released after his assassination. She herself stood for president in 2005, pulling

out of the race citing harassment from the security forces. In the 1990s she was among a number of writers and intellectuals who appeared on terrorist groups' death lists. Among them was the Nobel laureate Nagib Mahfouz, who was subsequently stabbed in a Cairo street. She left Egypt in the mid 1990s to take up writing residencies in the U.S. In 2001, not long after her return, there was an unsuccessful attempt to force her to divorce her husband, Sherif Youssef Hetata, also a doctor and writer, on the grounds that as an "apostate" she could not be married to a Muslim.

This is just another instance of what has been a series of attempts—some successful, others not so—by Egypt's religious leaders to ban books. An attempt to ban Iqbal Baraka's *The Veil: A Modern View*, published in 2002, has so far been thwarted. The book criticized the growing tendency of young Muslim women to take up the veil, and asserts that the hijab is not prescribed by the Koran. The editor of a leading women's magazine, *Hawaa*, and president of the Egyptian Center of the writers organization, International PEN, Baraka is, like Dr. El Saadawi, a prolific writer and a feminist, not afraid to speak out. In 2000, the publication of Syrian author Heidar Heidar's novel, *Banquet for Seaweed*, led to riots in Cairo and a call for it to be banned. What had caused apparent offense was a phrase that described God as a failed artist. That one of its characters lays blame on the religious authorities for the existence of despots leading a number of Arab states may well have added to the ire of institutes such as Al Azhar.

Nawal El Saadawi is a controversial figure, who has been a consistent and powerful proponent of women's rights. Frequently fiery in her rhetoric, in her writings, at the podium, and in interviews, she attracts criticism from academics and the media in Egypt who accuse her of being egocentric and attention seeking. Some dismiss her recent flight to Brussels as simply a media stunt. Yet others have stood up in her support. One writer recently quoted in the independent *al-Masri al-Youm* says, "I never thought that one day I would find myself defending Nawal El Saadawi, but the first blow against her would mean an Islamic state has become reality."

Dr. El Saadawi is unlikely to be imprisoned, yet to be singled out as

an “apostate” is, as the appeal on her website points out, to become a target for extremists. It is the individual—sometimes acting entirely alone, other times in concert with small groups of other fanatics—who can wreak the greatest havoc. Assassinations of writers worldwide are, thankfully, extremely rare, yet the impact of those few deaths, coupled with almost constant threats and the triumphant posturing of extremists, is certain to make others think twice before writing on controversial issues. Who knows the extent of self-censorship, what goes unwritten and unsaid? Saadawi says of herself, “I’ve always been threatened, I live in fear—it has become a part of me.” She is a strong woman. Others may not feel so able to live under such circumstances, and so keep silent. It is therefore imperative that writers such as Nawal El Sadaawi, who continue to challenge and put themselves almost literally in the firing line, need all the support that the international community of writers can give.

For more details and an update of the case against Nawal El Saadawi, visit her website at www.nawalsaadawi.net.

Appeals protesting the continuing threats against Nawal El Saadawi and judicial actions taken against her works and that of others in Egypt should be sent to:

His Excellency Mohammad Hosni Mubarak
President of the Republic of Egypt
Heliopolis
Egypt
Fax: 011 202 390 1998

Or use this [sample letter](#) to fax or email the Egyptian Ambassador here in the U.S.

Sara Whyatt is Program Director of the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN, the writers’ association, in London.