

**Nawal Al-Sadawi's 'My Writings... My Life'
A Biography of Refusal and Rebellion**

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Abstract

This paper reviews the autobiography of Nawal Al-Sadawi (1931-2017) who was a prominent Egyptian feminist writer. The study attempts to uncover the feminist tenets in this literary work from a *post-modernism* perspective. Specifically, it focuses on how men see themselves as the 'self' and see women as the 'other'. Al-Sadawi reflects such an extreme feminist approach that she was threatened to be killed because of these extreme ideas and thoughts. This led her to run away to the states. The paper argues that Al-Sadawi follows two paths to reflect her true existence and identity: freedom to objection and revolution and freedom of writing. It is through these paths she replicates the factors that affected her writings. First, the childhood experiences developed a Freudian complex due to having stereotypical image of women. Second, the patriarchal masculinist authoritative society, which differentiates between the male and the female, led her to a feeling of injustice. Finally, the religious malpractice drove Al-Sadawi to have an anti-religious stand.

Keywords: Nawal Al-Sadawi, post- modernism, feminism, autobiography, Freud.

1. Introduction

1.1 Who is Nawal Al-Sadawi?

The doctor and author Nawal Al-Sadawi was born in 1931, in a village of the Egyptian governorate, Daqhaliyya, to a *Sai'di*¹ father who worked as an education inspector. She was enrolled in the School of Medicine in 1949, and participated in some political activities opposing the Egyptian government there. She got married to Sharif Hatata, a doctor, novelist, and Marxist. She was arrested during the regime of President Abdel Nasser, as she practiced writing and literary activities which had clear and explicit critical political approach. Thus, she was imprisoned several times. She completed her higher education in the United States of America, then worked in the UN as a representative to development programs in some countries. Additionally, she worked as a professor in an American university, until her return to Egypt in the late 1990s. She passed away in 2017.

¹ *Sa'id* is a province in the south of Egypt.

Publishing her book *Woman and Sex* in 1968, Al-Sadawi emerged as a rebellious writer against societal customs and traditions. She became one of the most important Egyptian writers who stormed into the world of taboos through her articles, stories, novels, books, and autobiography. In her writings, she addresses sexual, religious, political, and social taboos. Thus, she was accused of atheism because of her courageous opinions and her writings which the public found interesting but questionable. Over a period of a half a century or more, Al-Sadawi published a number of works that appeared to be at the vanguard of 'feminist writers' in the Arab and Western cultures. Among her most prominent works: *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, *My Writings...My Life*, *Memoirs from a Female Prison*, *The Fall of the Imam*, *Egyptian Women's Political and Sexual Issues*, *A New Battle on Woman's Issues*, *The Death of the Only Man in the World*, *Studies on Men and Women*, *Breaking the Barriers*, *Al-Hakim bi'Amr Allah (play of two acts)*, *Two Women in One (a novel)*, *The Female is the Origin*, *The Man and Sex*, *The Woman and the Psychological Battle*, *Love in the Age of Oil (a novel)*, *God Presents his Resignation in His best* (banned from publishing in Egypt in 2006). Her works have been translated into several languages around the world.

1.2 My Writings... My Life... An Excellent Arabic Feminist Discourse

This study attempts to consider the features of feminist discourse and its manifestation in one of the contemporary literary works of a controversial author, Nawal Al-Sadawi, whose works exemplify writing which is at odds with the Arab culture generally. This literary work is her autobiography, *My Writings... My Life*, which comes in three parts, published by Dar al-Adab in Beirut in 2000 and 2001. In this autobiography, Al-Sadawi narrates both her and her mother's childhood, her education, studying medicine at the university, and working as a doctor at the Ministry of Health. Additionally, she discusses her political activities as well as her rejection of and rebellion against the stable social, religious, and sexual values. She also described in detail her experience with love and marriages, imprisonment, exile, her residency in America, until her return to her country in 1996. All of that is recounted from a feminist point of view which guarantees that this autobiographical work is located at the crux of the feminist writing and thinking that controlled Al-Sadawi. She accomplishes this through discussions of her life experiences, and through her academic excellence, shown through her MA studies in the west and her residency there as a professor at one of the American universities.

The paper proceeds as follows: section 2 addresses the feminist discourse. The study's proposal is presented in section 3. Section 4 presents the analysis which include four subsections: freedom to objection and revolution, freedom to writing, rebellion against the patriarchal system and religious malpractices, and unjust society and solidarity with women. Section 5 concludes.

2. A Feminist Discourse:

In the autobiography, Al-Sadawi represents her feminism through two trends. The first trend is the psychological strand of feminism (Freudian feminism), which relates to the manifests of childhood experiences. Thus, "Freud's studies, namely those relating to the subconscious mind had a role in transforming the field of women's studies, especially those related to our

understanding of sexuality, whether it occurs above or below the surface of the conscious mind. These studies helped us to re-examine the persecution of women and our understanding of it under the global patriarchal system” (Al-Sadawi 2000:12).

In this autobiography, we have recurrent scenes of the anger among families when they learn of the birth of a female, not a male, which allows the society to express their hostility towards women through the practice of female circumcision, a social practice which concerns Al-Sadawi in many of her opinions. She focuses on the psychological and sexual harm that it causes to girls, and how it affects them throughout their entire lives. From the first moment of birth, “my mother closed her eyes, and was curled up like a fetus closing her fat white thighs. She did not even extend her arms to bring me to her chest, leaving me trembling next to her in an old room. She wrapped around my chest and stomach, to the point of suffocation” (ibid).

When Al-Sadawi was six years old, she had to be circumcised. Here, in an entire chapter, Al-Sadawi tells her unique story of this incident. She tells how the family practices this procedure, this heinous crime, upon all of the girls born in the country. The midwife is the woman who carries out the birth process of the women in the village, which Al-Sadawi watched with her own eyes, with an overwhelming sense of enmity. With such narrative skills, Al-Sadawi depicts the extent of the torment inherent in the practice of circumcision: “At age six, I could not save myself. Four women the size of the midwife Umm Muhammad gathered around me, my arms and legs tied up, pricking my hands and feet with needles like Jesus on the cross. ... I was lying down, below me a pool of blood, bleeding for days. Later, the midwife looked at me through my thighs and said: ‘thank God, the wound is dry now.’ But the pain remained like a deep scar in my flesh” (p. 19).

Among the features of Freudian feminism, that persecution in society is seen as being done by women against women, as well as by the patriarchal society against women; something inherited through the genes of the society itself. Al-Sadawi describes the injustice that happened to her mother saying, “At the age of fifteen, her father took her from school by force. Her new husband was sixteen years older than her; a tall and broad man, she never saw his face before. She would be between his arms on bed with her eyes closed. She conceived her first child without removing her clothes. And so in the darkness of the night she got pregnant ten times. She had nine children, aborted the tenth, all before she reached the age of thirty, without ever knowing that special thing that we call sexual pleasure. She died in the peak of her youth” (p. 62).

The second feminist trend in Al-Sadawi’s autobiography, *My Writings, My Life*, is what we call post-modern feminism. It stems from her confrontation with the concepts of the *Self* and the *Other*, and from her confusion in dealing with it, living under the subtle tensions and interventions that arise with women’s practice in a patriarchal society in which men are used to oppressing women. It is derived from her search to discover her identity, and her encounter with all forms of power, which comes from her propensity toward the refusal and rebellion against the inherited traditions and values, whatever their source or root was. So, post-modern feminism is

founded upon a culture of critique toward everything including certain ideas of unjust cultural practices, as well as the gendered *social construct* that women find themselves in, the language they use, and the system through which they build trust. Indeed, this feminist movement is one that rejects the fundamentals of the society and *idealism*.

This aforementioned critical theory is manifested in all of Al-Sadawi's scattered texts in the three parts of her autobiography. Her critiques of certain ideas and unjust cultural practices was apparent in her stand against *hegemonic* masculinity that rejoices for the birth of boys and decries the birth of girls. This view was strongly rejected and condemned in the Qur'an, as it says: "if he preaches to women, his face will be black and swollen with anger." (Surat al-NaHL, Aya 58). In addition, she is disgusted with the patriarchal, absolutist power of a husband upon his wife and upon the whole family, among other practices. As for her critique of the social construct that women inhabit, Al-Sadawi greatly suffered and faced a confrontational environment that employs a complex mix of oppression, domination, and repudiation of women that sees her as the *Other* rather than the *Self*. She is not seen as *essence* of society, despite the fact that she is the one who gives birth and raises children, and practices an essential role of continuing and reproducing the human race.

With regard to the critique of language, post-modern feminism is the most sensitive trend towards the world of language in which one lives. In this world, a woman's identity and existence are shaped. It is an inequitable world in the eyes of feminist studies which requires the reproduction and re-configuration of social identities. For example, Al-Sadawi shows her frustrations, and her refusal of discrimination in the treatment of children based on sex. She describes a scene that happened on the beach: "My brother exposes his chest to the wind and the sun, and I have to hide my chest. The nakedness of my chest must be hidden... .. The word 'nakedness' stabs my ear like a nail. It's an offensive word: my chest, without breasts, is as smooth and flat as my brother's. I was then just a little girl, younger than my brother" (p. 142).

Al-Sadawi also protested against people using the word "impurity" to describe menstrual blood. "How can blood from my body be impure? I heard the word 'impurity' for the first time in my life. According to the Holy Quran, menstruation is nothing more than some a kind of harm. For me, *harm* is a very normal word, just like any other word" (p. 144). Furthermore, she objected to calling peasant farmers as 'laborers', "Other people do not own anything at all; yet, these people (the peasants) work on others' lands and are called 'laborers'". They were considered as the '*others*' by those who consider themselves the '*self*'. One can find more examples about this kind of perception in the rest of her autobiography.

On the other hand, Al-Sadawi criticizes the system that she lived in, including the political, social and the private family systems. She condemns the patterns of thinking and attitudes of her family. She changed them or called for the change. For example, she did not let her daughter go through circumcision. In another occasion, Al-Sadawi decided to ride a bicycle in front of the boys in her town (the self, the superiors). As a result, she confronted their severe criticism. One of her colleagues reminded her of that during a conferences saying: "Do you remember (the

place of) Manuuf?! You were riding a bicycle in Al-Teraa Street and there were boys following you screaming “Look! A girl is riding a bike!” Youngsters in Manuuf gathered at a bridge to check the female bike-rider. Citations of this critical opinion are many in her autobiography “*My Writings... My Life*” in which Al-Sadawi made her point of ‘*the other, the inferior*’ more salient as the case in the post-modern feminism literature.

3. The Study’s Proposal

Those who read Al-Sadawi’s find her to be a writer who resists all the values and customs of family, society, politics and religion. She also strongly rejects the concepts that these systems established including her opinions about various topics and problems that seemed bold especially when it comes to sex and relationship between men and women. She does not hesitate to describe sexual issues in a direct way, unlike other male and female writers of her time. It seems all her resistance and objection originates from childhood experiences, authority of the patriarchal society and mistaken authority of religious practices. These factors eventually led to her mutiny and revolution. Al-Sadawi, thus, took two paths throughout her autobiography “*My Writings... My Life*” to reflect her true existence and identity: freedom to objection and revolution and freedom of writing. It is through these paths she replicates these three factors.

4. Analysis

4.1 Freedom to Objection and Revolution

The first path is freedom to objection and revolution. Some features of this path were mentioned by other female writers who lived before or after Al-Sadawi. However, none of them were as audacious as Al-Sadawi. The second part of “*My Writings... My Life*” is full of radical thoughts and opinions about marriage, expenditure, polygamy, honor, and female roles in the society and even in religion.

4.1.1 Protest because of Childhood Experiences

Throughout the three parts of her autobiography, readers witness a number of anecdotes of abusive childhood experiences. The narration craves for feminist protests against a patriarchal society. In that society, the image of women was complicated and confined by many social, human and even existential confusion.

Therefore, in the first part, the writer depicts her tragic existence through revelation and challenge, especially through sexual issues. That was one of women’s rejection manifestations against the social norms of the patriarchal society. From the beginning, Al-Sadawi was keen to describe this confrontation. In this way, she invites the reader to the opinionated nature of this biography. In the scene of Zainab’s giving birth. The essence of the autobiography stems from her wrath, protesting with determination to choose sex in all manifestations. On the wedding night, “taking heavy steps while swaying and tripping, strong pain and bleeding returned. The drums were beating in her head like hammers as she was trembling. Her thighs were holding very tight around her hairless vagina. She was 15 years old and her father dropped her from the school by force” (p. 224).

This tragic version of the world and individuals serves as a mental reference for upcoming projections that will trigger the biographical events of “*My Writings... My life*”. Al-Sadawi uses heroic manifestations with the common understanding of the literary heroic archetype and with narrative guidelines to attract the reader to stations of discontentment, rejection, and non-belonging. “My full name on records was Nawal al-Sayyid Habash Al-Sadawi. The name Habash dropped from my birth certificate but still appeared in the prison records and in the Ministry of Interior Affairs. I did not know that until 1981, when, at the age of 50, I became prisoner no. 1536 in the women’s prison in Qanatir” (p. 280).

In the overall framework of this story, Al-Sadawi searches for other triggers to strengthen this disenchanted trend stressing the negative consequences of silence. She expressed her opinions sexually, politically and even religiously. After circumcision, she describes her experience “I was lying down, below me was a pool of blood, the bleeding stopped after some days. The midwife looked between my thighs saying, “the wound has stopped bleeding’, Thank God.... The pain has lingered like a scar on the body and I can’t see it myself to know where the pain is coming from, and I can’t see my naked body or this forbidden place surrounded by sin and shame” (p. 243-244).

There are numerous scenes that Al-Sadawi establishes as central for a world of personal and social conventions that created her rebellious and outgoing personality. One of these scenes was the menstruation scene: “At the age of nine, I saw a red bleeding that is known in formal Arabic as (menstruation)... mentioned in the Quran... I become overwhelmed with a mental illness, a form of obsession, all day, I wouldn’t stop washing my hands with soap, a sickness that afflicts girls and women, Muslims, Copts or Jew. There was a fellow Jewish classmate called Sarah that, like me, did not stop washing her hands....” (p. 253).

The first part of (*My Writings... My life*) covered everything that would lead to Freudian representations and details and experiences of childhood mixed with social practices of a private, conservative nature. As a matter of fact, the political situation and its national antithesis and the arrests had affected the formation of the author’s awareness until she had her (first Love) and the relationship (with Fathi). Thus, she entered the labyrinth of transitions and she added some romantic description in her biography. The author began with a literary experience based on broadcasting her fictional literary work. Then, she underwent a change to emphasize her humanity to show her human disposition which is called love “a sound leaks from under the covers, my heart quickly flutters in the air, his songs can be heard from the balcony...his strumming on the Oud sneaks under the covers, softly gliding in the darkness to touch my soft body. He has a grassy scent from underneath the covers, and I touch him with my hand, with my naked forearm under the moonlight while enveloped by the cover” (p. 278).

However, at this moment, this dream collides with the bitter rock of the society, and the unfortunate reality that surrounds her in every corner: “I saw myself in a dream like Zaynab, my cousin, a peasant with cracked feet and hands, who cannot read or write. Zaynab forgot the letters of her name, lying with her swollen legs on top of the stove in wintertime, coughing like her mother, and calling to her granddaughter with a rough shaking voice: ‘you little girl, you

Sudfa, wake up and milk the buffalos, and sweep under the cow!’... Her granddaughter is 10 years old; she was forced to drop from school to work at the house and the field, preparing her for marriage to her cousin, treating her daughters and granddaughters how her father treated her. I reminded Zainab of her old dreams. She laughed saying: - “this was a long time ago, Dr. Nawal, it’s very hard to live today, and the schools are expensive. Those who have a university degree, what did you do? There they are, working in the farm; there are no work or job opportunities like before” (p. 302-303). This is a bitter picture of social criticism that Al-Sadawi presented through the dark scenes during her cousin Zaynab’s life (after the 1991 Gulf War).

The narrative period of Al-Sadawi covers a series of disconnected times that jumps from the past to present, and from the present to the past in pursuit to feel the livelihood of the moment and the shifts from real periods to imaginary ones; the future that is supposed to be the creation of man, and man only.

“In the summer of 1942, I received the elementary certificate with excellence, but no one in my father or mother’s family rejoiced it. Sorrow over the failure of my brother overshadowed the happiness of my success. My grandmother gazed at my chest and whispered in my mother’s ears “the girl has grown up, Ms. Zaynab, and I’m afraid she will never get married” ... I no longer play with the kids.... I keep cleaning the tiles until they shine. They are happier for the cleaning of the tiles than their happiness of my success in school. Once they slept at noon-time, I entered my father’s library. On the shelves, I found a book titled (Days) by Taha Hussein (p. 329).

"I awoke up in the middle of the night, the whole house was asleep, and sat in the room alone. The moonlight reflected on the canal between the fields, a long white ribbon of silver. The full moon was a perfect disk, white-skinned with black eyes gazing at me. A voice whispered like the murmur of the wind, "Fathi is coming tomorrow" (p. 327-328). Thus, Nawal had to accept whatever groom proposed to her because this groom was not the dream, the future was the dream.

In Cairo was the most prominent and famous transformation in Al-Sadawi's life. The beginning was her stay in the house of Tant Hanim, her mother's sister... there, the characteristics of civilization and the difference in all ways of life even in the way of bathing. The Sunni school in the secondary stage was replete with the events of the youth. Not to mention the shocking event: the presence of an infant foundling in the restrooms of the school. "The matron did not discover the sinful girl. Every student became suspect of adulterous pregnancy. The word adultery resounded in my ears like "the shedder of blood".² The Sunni school came to have a bad reputation" (part2, p.2).

Then, I learnt about the misfortune of the maid Shalabiyya, who got pregnant without anyone admitting to be the father. "I cried alone at night, I remembered Shalabiyya, a girl like

² The Arabic word meaning 'incest' or fornication, *al-sifaaH* closely resembles the word meaning 'shedder of blood' or 'butcher'; *al-saffaH'*, with the difference being that the latter has a stressed "f" and an /a/ sound after /s/.

me aged fourteen. She was victimized, an innocent sheep brought to slaughter instead of the lord. The guilty adulteress was killed with the baby without investigation". (part2, p.19).

All this awakened in Nawal her literary feeling and expressive tendency, to fill the vaults of memory with thousands of attitudes that she formed from nightmares about the *self* and the *other* (the female/ and the male).

"There were special compartments for women in the trams and trains, that I prefer to sit in than to sit with the men. Their eyes looked at my chest with gazes sharp as arrows. One of their hands spread over the seat to pinch my thigh in the crowd where I stood among them. His finger pierced my spine or that other thing that stiffened between his thighs poked into my side. On other occasions, one would pinch me in the butt while I was standing affixed between bodies... I would turn around sometimes and slap one of them across the face. I did not know where I got the courage from?!" (part2, p. 20).

The other, more important, courage was represented in her strong refusal of the nomination she got from the institute of female teachers because of its conditions that represented a restriction on human freedom; the freedom that Al-Sadawi looked for in every detail of her life. This freedom probably began ideologically and institutionally (in the Newspapers of the Republic and the Socialist Party Newspaper) (part2, p. 21). It was represented in devouring any novel that came into her hands, or in the choosing of a boyfriend the news of whom she circulated among her female friends when they swore on all the saints that none of them would tell this to any of the girls of the Halwan school. Likewise, the freedom was reflected in the art that she wrote as in the play 'A scream at night', the content of which the censoring matron rejected. It was also manifested in 'the nationalist protest' she led".

In school, I alone became accused of stirring up trouble. The word *trouble* in the language of the matron means the nationalist protest" (part2, p. 22). All of this did not inhibit Nawal from acknowledging her parents' positive view of her. Her mother loved her daughter's writing, and her father supported her nationalism. Additionally, the English literature teacher, Miss Saniyya, had a positive view of her. In her writings, she expressed rebellion and indifference as she was seeking immortality. She deeply touches upon the hidden particles of life; pleasure... submission... and hope. "I open my eyes in the middle of the night feeling sinful. I rise to the bathroom and perform wudu [ablution], then I return to the dormitory on tiptoe. I lay out some of my clothes on the tile as if they were a prayer mat. I kneel to God two or three times and I recite some verses from the Quran in an inaudible voice. They were verses with a musical sound, like a poem with a rhyming meter... "when the sun is wrapped up (in darkness), and when the stars fall, dispersing, and then the mountains are removed, and when full-term she-camels are neglected, and when the wild beasts are gathered, and when the seas are filled with flame, and when the souls are paired, and when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed."³ I was reciting joyfully at this last verse like if it were an anthem, "and when the girl who was buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed." My eyes were full of tears as

³ Quranic translation by Sahih International. Accessed 1.02.2020 <https://quran.com/81>

I pronounce the words "buried alive" as if I had been the one buried alive since birth" (part2, p. 23).

With this change in her personality, reading between the lines becomes of great importance to the reader. The importance of searching for overlaps between the black and the white, the light and the shadow, the devils and the angels... for every evil or rebellious human, is not entirely bad, and no human exists that is completely good, compliant and disciplined.

4.1.2 The Expansion of Awareness

After the resoundingly successful diploma from a public secondary school, Al-Sadawi appeared to be very inclined to enter the School of Literature, but her mother and father expressed clear opposition to that. So, she entered the School of Medicine in 1948 as her mother wanted. "That was the day when my dad gave me an envelope, as he was paying the first installments of the college tuition when I noticed a tremor in his hand, with his fingerprints on the bank notes. I could smell his sweat. My heart ached. I carried the envelope walking in the street as if I were carrying my father's large body in my purse, or as if I were carrying the earth's globe on my head ... Maybe it was a kind of reprimand of the conscience or a feeling of guilt. Will my younger siblings starve, and suffer from anemia so that I can become a doctor!" (part 2, p. 24). Thus, began the transformations, the mixing with men, the politics, the demonstrations against the English, and against the king. Her awareness began to grow; the general feeling began to be based on a different perspective– the perspective of human awareness.

It is this artistic intensification that the novel's spirit exerts control. The horizon of expectation closes at the crossroads of desire in pursuit of what comes about as a result of the writer's abundant human sensitivity. Indeed, Al-Sadawi narrates how she worked hard to obtain a scholarship for academic excellence as a reaction to the guilt she felt at depriving her brothers of their livelihood (part2, p.25).

In 1951, she meets Yusuf Idris at the university and is introduced to the communist party and the party journals. Here arise the feelings of love toward her colleague Ahmed al-Munisi who later became her husband and a father to her daughter. However, she got divorced in 1957. After a short while, she moves to the State of California in America, where she experiences genuine exile. It is like a fortress of memories of Cairo, university, love and medicine, all of which pour forth like rain.

Al-Sadawi does not cease protesting and rebelling against anything that contradicts her liberal inclinations, even religion: "In the primary school in Manuf, I read a verse in the Bible, which my father said was a book of God just like the Torah. God sent these books as a gift and a source of light for people who believed in them just as Muslims believe in the Quran. My childish mind was unable to hold this faith, with that verse bunching up in my throat like a lump ('give birth in sorrow and pain and let your longing be for your husband, who rules over you'). I did not know what God meant by the expression ('your longing shall be for your husband, who rules over you'). I imagined that if the woman longed for her husband, she would be under his

mastery. I swore to myself that I would not marry ever, though if I did marry I would not long for my husband; and, if I did, he would not control me” (part2, p.26).

Al-Sadawi’s political rebellion was no less severe. The narrative of the autobiography makes this clear by recounting her membership in the communist party and her participation in the student protests, as well as the public position she took toward the rulers of the country: “within the solid gold frame are pictures of one ruler after another, the pictures rising above the heads of the viewer. One man after another turns toward a certain picture saluting it like idol worshippers and speaking in a hushed voice for fear the ruler will hear him. They look at it from the corner of their eyes as if it sees them, imitating its owner in all manner of things. If he says, ‘by God,’ they repeat ‘by God,’ according to the instructions of the president” (part 2, p.27).

Al-Sadawi refuses the blind loyalty to the ruler (Mr. President) and sees the complete obedience of people as a kind of worship of an idol. Here she had a distinctive experience in breaking religious, social, and political taboos, which led her be thrown in prison -- just as what happened to Latifah El Zayyat for *The Search: Personal Papers* and Fadwa Tuqan for *A Mountainous Journey, a Difficult Journey*. Leila Al-Othman almost suffered the same fate in *The Trial*, as did other women who crossed the red lines of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and politics. It is with this thought about writing, and her inclination to reject the values and traditions, that Al-Sadawi concludes the second part of her autobiography.

4.2 Freedom of Writing

This path lies in adopting and writing about any emancipation movement we find in feminist autobiographies both before and after Al-Sadawi. For example, Leila Al-Othman insists on writing despite the fact that it brings her in a lawsuit, produces horrifying nightmares, and almost drags her into prison. Yet, she possessed something sacred: “writing is a prayer...”. This is how Al-Sadawi describes writing to her children. She would say to them, ‘Do you want me to enter while you are praying and interrupt you?’ Then do not disrupt my prayer. If the idea (in writing) is penetrated, it is burnt” (part 2, p. 28). She continues: “I decided to write... writing alone is my escape from the intellectual intolerance, and my only salvation from all grinding pressures that affect my nerves... what is the mission of the writer, then, if not to employ their painful experiences for the purpose of literary creativity?” (part 2, p. 29). “Writing does not stop at the point of catharsis, as Aristotle believed, but is rather a shelter and a sanctuary and a search for a horizon which can liberate the Arab women from the restrictions of their culture and masculinist, authoritarian society. Ishraqa Mustafa Hamid, the Sudanese academic and translator, admits in her autobiography ‘*The female of the rivers: An Autobiography of Wound, Salt, and Resolution*’ that: ‘writing connected me with love... it was and remains my sanctuary, all of my positive and negative emotions come out in writing. It is my spirit and myself’ (part 2, p. 30). In the second part of her autobiography, entitled *The Danube Knows Me: The Other face of the Autobiography of Rivers*), Hamid describes, “I seek freedom to write without a censor standing between me and myself. I am completely aware that my engagement with the taboos would bring me more discomfort, and that I have no weapon than the knowledge I have acquired. Thus, the horizon I seek is not for me alone, but rather for future women who find in writing an outlet and a life project” (part 2, p. 31).

Writing is thus a life-long project, not just for those who write, but for the coming generations. The woman writes for her freedom and the freedom of her fellow women. Writing changes people and provokes new intellectual creativity and creates a different culture. This is the only power that women possess in confronting the counter-authority of the man and all its forms.

4.2.1 Prison... and the Spilled Blood

Through her writing, Al-Sawadi's attempts to influence the thinking of 'The Other / the Religious and Patriarchal Authority'. "When my name appeared on the hit list in 1988, Latifa Al-Zayat whispered in my ear, "they're saying, Nawal, that your novel, *The Fall of the Imam*, reflects a projection.

- A projection?
- Yes, Nawal.
- A projection of whom?! The one who died seven years ago, Latifa?
- They say he's still alive.

That made her erupt in a long laughter with disrupted breath.

"In 1992, my name appeared on a hit list another time. The government stationed armed guards in front of my house in Giza. A body guard accompanied me day and night. My husband, Sharif, said, "Your life is in danger, Nawal. We need to go somewhere far away". "We didn't know from where the bullet would be shot, from the Islamic groups or from the guards?" (part 2, p. 32). "I don't even know from when the bullet will be shot. During sleep, I see my blood spilled on the asphalt...and a voice screaming: kill her, the infidel, enemy of God and Islam" (part 2, p. 33).

Nawal Al-Saadawi's life fluctuated due to the fluctuation of power between the left and the right before finally settling in the middle: "I wrote an article for an opposition party newspaper. It was an article titled "Who founds the parties in Egypt, the people or the ruler?". In 1981, policemen stormed into my house, broke down the door, and took me to the women's prison in Al-Qanatir where I found myself charged with conspiracy to overthrow the Egyptian regime on behalf of a foreign country called Bulgaria. Why Bulgaria in particular?! I don't know!" (part 2, p. 34).

4.2.2 Exile... Writing... Self-production and Identity

Al-Saadawi starts the second part of her biography '*My Writings...My Life*' with her new life abroad, specifically at a university in North Carolina, a place which represented a shelter and refuge from her homeland. In her country, her life was threatened, her name was put on a hit list, armed guards surrounded her house day and night, a body guard accompanied her wherever she went. Traveling was the only way to save her life. She looked around in amazement. The house is beautiful. The yard is lovely. The sun is shining. She had a 'Professor' title but the exile remains exile (part 2. p. 35).

It is the exile that pushed her to write her autobiography. It is where she developed her feelings about the significance of her life; this life that others had threatened with assassination and kidnapping. But Nawal insisted on protecting her life: physically, by going into exile, and spiritually, by writing that made her stronger in protecting herself and defeating death. To Nawal, writing is “a true extension of life. Nothing overwhelms death like writing. If not for the Torah, the Prophet Moses and Judaism would not have lived. If not for the Bible, the Messiah and Christianity would not have lived. If not for the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad and Islam would not have lived” (part 2, p. 36).

Thus, Nawal ends the prohibition of writing for women and slaves, a practice that had existed in a number of prior nations. In this section specifically, she crisscrosses places and times in a narrative way as in the back-and-forth scenes and events between Cairo and America... the picture of her daughter, the theater, Isis, Osiris, male friends, female friends, her husband Sharif, the prison, the winds of the Atlantic Ocean, the conquered city of Cairo, religion, marriage, rejection, and resistance.

In this section, it becomes obvious how Nawal lived for a time under protection from a government that imprisoned and defeated her:

- Is Doctor Nawal Al-Saadawi here?
- Yes, she’s sleeping.
- We have an order to put her under protection.

“I began living under armed protection, and my life was not my own” (part 2, p. 37).

Therefore, Nawal decides to leave, to exercise her freedom in writing, the same writing which had alienated her from the countrymen who had accused her of infidelity and shed her blood in vain. This writing balanced her life as is clear from the title that she chose for her three-part autobiography, ‘*My Writings...My Life*’.

Perhaps we should stop here to review the value and importance of writing of numerous women’s biographies. More importantly, we need to reconsider the danger these biographies pose to drive the *other* to confiscate women’s right to write. This also occurs with the autobiography of Nawal Al-Sadawi in which women’s opinions and their thoughts formed the real motive for the *other* to kill her and rob her life. In Leila Al-Othman’s biography ‘*The Court*’ we see how writing motivated the *other* to file a complaint against her, so she lived in the nightmare of the court. On the other hand, we see how women's existence and being are depicted in the writing, as is seen in most women’s autobiographies, where writing seemed to be a haven, refuge, existence, and identity. Writing for a woman is the action that the *other* (men, society) will not be allowed to expropriate; after this *other* confiscated many rights and freedoms... exactly as politicians expropriated the truth and entered into history as if they were the heroes that expelled the English and rose up in the revolution, while we, who carried the weapons and waged war, had become pursued like criminals” (part 2, p. 38). Thus, women refuse to give up on writing as an expression of their being and their core. *Writing* has given them “wider prospects for freedom where women check in the missing equilibrium between their inner selves

and their social selves... between what they wish to announce and what they are silent about” (part 2, p. 39).

4.3 Rebellion against the Patriarchal System and Religious Malpractices

In this part of her autobiography, Al-Sadawi provides many details regarding the topic of politics, society, and sex. She demonstrates a new awareness for women on the personal and societal levels. She also addresses new practices for women’s freedom by commenting on issues and providing criticism on political, religious, sexual, and social topics: “After marriage and sharing a bed there was no physical thrill like that which came from shaking hands. I didn’t know why. Is it love’s wild imagination that magnifies feelings, or is it that sex is disappointing like the deeds of guerilla fighters?” (part 2, p. 40).

Having spoken in the first section on circumcision in defiant language, Al-Sadawi demonstrates courage in her narrative language. She boldly expresses her thoughts in this part, “and the students surge (in the school of medicine) anew towards the sick child jostling with their shoulders, arms, and chests. They look at the boy’s uncovered chest. Their stethoscope erects like a hard penis. Its metallic surface shines like the head of a cobra.” (part 2, p. 41).

Her boldness had already transcended from language to thinking, as she began her bitter criticism of many societal and religious practices, habits, and traditions. She sees that the society treats women like servants and she doubts the existence of God and condemns the societal view of divorced women. Whoever marries a divorced woman is like someone who drinks from someone else’s glass. Al-Sadawi regards marriage as contaminating love and marital submission as a curse word. She, further, criticizes men’s overview that females as being a different category that lies outside the circle of humanity. The word “spending⁴” rings in her ears as a curse since it reminds her of the relationship between males and females in brothels where men pay money and women follow their orders.

Al-Sadawi rose up against customs and traditions and disobeyed many rules imposed by religion and society: “the word ‘obedience’ rings in my ears like a curse word, like a form of abuse or one of the traits for slaves. People around me say obedience is a virtue, but I see it as a sin. Obedience means the erasure of my brain and my desires and becoming a vessel for the desires of the *other*. Obedience means losing my ‘*self*’, my humanity and turning into another category- one called ‘females’, or ‘obedient wives’ or semi-domesticated house animals. Not one of them can raise her eyes to those of her husband- the duty of the husband is to provide, and the duty of the wife is to obey...” (part 2, p. 42).

We are here reconsidering Al-Sadawi’s religious and social discourse; a different personal reinterpretation, a reproduction of a culture according to defiance, an interest in rattling the status quo including religion. Here we know why Al-Sadawi left Cairo, and why she tore

⁴ Perhaps the translation is not very precise since ‘spending’ here is a religious term that refers to men being financially responsible for providing their wives and children with all their needs.

herself away from this society that she rejected, and was rejected by. There is no doubt that this rebellion and revolution are a reflection of psychological projections and Freudian representations, that dictate her thought. Her conscience began with her hatred of the image of the father, the master, the dominant. Despite his substantial presence in the life of Nawal, it was “the image of distasteful masculinity that she fought against as an author in her theoretical and creative writing. Despite his positive aspects and legendary image, he used to be a tyrant in some sense. Her father had numerous conflicts with the owner of a building, the headmaster of the school, with the English, with the King, with the Germans... She used to believe everything he said. She admired him with pride, for she was the daughter of the strong man that won all of his fights. However, the *largeness* of the father indicated otherwise the negativity of our female writer and her inability to fulfil her ‘*self*’ as she saw the world through the window of the man, reducing her entirety of existence. Moreover, the positive qualities of the father hid a repressing character. Women’s education at that time was built upon the complex of guilt and on the suffocation of freedom. The mixed feelings reached a climax with Nawal exploding when her father died, for the father was the one who killed his sons and daughters. Reciprocally, his children killed him with a cold response for there was no grieving upon his death. On the contrary, they might have rejoiced. Here we see Nawal on the second day, before the burial procedure, awakening her little sisters, smiling in their faces, and taking them to a zoo” (part 2, p. 43).

These childhood experiences and psychological issues drove Al-Sadawi to be what she is. She has a tendency for assault, transcendence, and extremism in her thinking- as the others regard her- against society, males, conservative religious, and political and educational ideologies.

Thus, if the image of the father that pushed her towards reacting against ‘Power’ in all its forms, the image of the marginal submissive mother contributed in some way to Nawal’s refusal of this feminine stereotypical image within the controlling patriarchal society. In this way, the development of this reaction stayed hidden, unconscious since the childhood time and throughout her earliest experiences until the young woman’s conscious opened up to herself and to the relationship of this *self* to the *other*... These societal acts drove this young woman (the well-educated sensitive physician and university professor) to refuse to be a standard repetition of her mother despite her love for her.

Since childhood, Al-Sadawi knew that “to rebel against the Sacred Trinity (Family, Religion, and Political Injustice) returns to life its original taste: Love and Justice. Thus, she had the courage to take on activities that were considered to be masculine like running quickly and riding a bicycle. In a way, she did not want people to see her as the ‘*other*’. She wanted to be part of the ‘*self*’. On the other hand, she hated to play with dolls like little girls. If we know that the family in its entirety prefers the boy to the girl, we realize the extent of the need for liberation and preservation of the *self* to get over the inferiority complex. She, thus, would scream saying: “I will not be like all other girls. I will not be like my mother nor my grandmother nor my aunts

or anyone else. I aspire for an alternative world. I yearn for a born-again identity, even through inspiration. Because of this I reject the earth and the sky.” (part 2, p. 44).

Thus, Al-Sadawi’s autobiography represents one of the boldest and transgressive feminist autobiographies in the Arab culture. It is an excellent feminist literary work especially when we agree that feminist literature at its core is one that adopts women’s issues and defends them by all means.

My Writings...My Life approached the true art of biography, which at its core is not described as a literary document; rather it is described as an artistic work that leads the reader to bewilderment and amusement through a narrative technique of descriptive scenes, stream-lined language, aesthetic imagination, and employment of myths. Additionally, the work is one of the scarce feminist literary autobiographies that are characterized to a high degree by disclosure and courage in discussing religion, politics, sex and society. These all in and of themselves are the reasons that distinguish her.

4.4 Unjust Society and Solidarity with Women

This is one of the pillars of suffering and political domination that Al-Sadawi faced as she recounts in her autobiography, alongside her suffering in other cultural and social respects. However, she sees the transformation and social change as an inevitable phenomenon.

Thus, the mother who would stand in solidarity with the father and with society against the girl has changed. Here, Nawal recounts the story of a mother who stood in solidarity with her daughter who had endured a rape and became pregnant. So, the mother would go with her to get an abortion, and would threaten to call the police if any family member tried to harm her daughter: “they tried to rip the girl from her mother’s arm to kill her, but the mother hung on tight in a desperate effort to protect her daughter, presenting herself for sacrifice in place of her daughter, beseeching their sympathy for her. However, the stabbing of knives fell upon the mother’s body as four men struck her until she became a shredded corpse, then two shredded corpses, which were found in the irrigation canal.” (part 2, p. 124).

This accident increased Al-Sadawi’s belief in the women’s cause and women’s solidarity. In her clinic, she expressed her solidarity with a woman whose husband beat her nightly. However, the police took the woman by force and returned her to her husband. Then, there started accusations against Nawal that she was the enemy of God, “Does solidarity among women mean enmity with God?” (part 2, p. 126).

These events and others sparked in Nawal and her colleagues a deep consciousness of the importance of solidarity. Thus, they thought of establishing “The Women’s Solidarity Association”, which was opposed by the ‘social norms’ division who saw such an association as a reprehensible crime. Even the government investigations combatted the association despite the fact that the government accepted and blessed having dancers on Haram Street.

Again, we pinpoint that all these clashes increased her persistence to communicate through writing. Writing, “brought happiness to me. My life was a series of painful experiences: many kinds of agony and suffering, both public and private, imprisonment, being fired from work, exile, and denouncement. However, writing brought me pleasure; the pleasure of creativity. “I remember when I was in prison that the one thing that pushed me to overcome those walls and iron bars was writing. The pleasure of creativity outweighed all pain. It created an immunity within me, granting me spiritual health and a very strange physical power which I live with up to today” (Bakri, Nov 11, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This study showed that Al-Sadawi's thought in her autobiography lies at the heart of the feminist theory that explains the conditions of women in Arab culture. Al-Sadawi resists the stereotypical view of women as the ‘*other*’, as the premises of the theory attempt to detail the sufferings of Arab women from injustice and prejudices, and the harsh conditions they encountered through their long history under a patriarchal male society.

Al-Sadawi's adopted a rebellious, rejectionist feminism thought and thus refused to submit to any authority imposed by the culture of the society. Therefore, she wrote ‘*My Writings ... My Life*’ to express her discontent towards the male's view of the female, as well as the female's view of the female. She showed how women subjugated to men who declared a state of sadness and anger when a woman gives birth to a female child. Al-Sadawi also adopted controversial ideas about the institution of marriage, the practice of female circumcision, as well as raising many questions about God and religion and highly sensitive political, social and cultural issues. This thought led to her imprisonment several times. It, further, pushed the society to ask for her execution, which made her leave her homeland fleeing to a place where she can freely express her opinions. Finally, as the title of her autobiography suggests, Al-Sadawi uses writing as a means to express women's terrible childhood experiences and to utter her mutiny against the patriarchal domination, society's injustice and religious malpractices.

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