



## Nawal As-Sa`dawi Figure of Islamic Women's Emancipation Fighter in Egypt

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

#### Article history

Received 2021/5/17

Revised 2021/6/06

Accepted 2021/6/10

#### Keywords

Nawal Sa`dawi

Fighter

Women Emancipation

The purpose of this research is to reveal the background and forms of Nawal Sa`dawi's struggle in voicing women's emancipation in Egypt. In this study, the author uses a qualitative descriptive method with a character study approach, and data analysis uses a literature study. The results of this study are 1) Nawal As-Sa`dawi's background in fighting for women's independence because of his personal experience of having been circumcised (cut the clitoris) at the age of 6 years. His experience caring for a woman in his medical practice in Tahla, and the last reason because her father was rude to her mother. 2) Nawal As-Sa`dawi's form of struggle for the emancipation of women in Egypt, namely In 1979-1980, Nawal served as a UN advisor for the Women in Africa (ECA) and Middle East (ECWA) Program. In 1981 Nawal formed AWSA (Arab Women's Solidarity Association). In 1985 the AWSA organization received official recognition from the United Nations Economic and Social Council as an Arab non-governmental organization (NGO). 3) Nawal As-Sa`dawi's propaganda to Egyptian women through book publishing, education through ECA and ECWA, and speakers at various universities. 4) Nawal As-Sa`dawi's influence in the Egyptian revolution is that Nawal came to Tahrir Square almost every day during the 2011 Egyptian revolution by raising awareness about people's rights antitotalitarianism revolution democracy.

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### Introduction

Egypt ranks low on gender equality compared to other countries around the world. The 2015 Global Gender Gap Index -which measures the gap between men and women in different countries- places Egypt at 136th out of 145 countries worldwide. Women have significantly lower participation in the workforce than men (26% vs 79%) and lower literacy (65% literacy for women vs 82% for men). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Social Institutions and Gender Index 2014, which measures laws, practices, and attitudes that limit women's rights and opportunities, classifies Egypt as one of the 'very high' countries in gender discrimination along with others. In Africa and America (Mesok, 2022). Baymī al-Sabkiy considers women's problems as one of the problems facing the modern Arab world. Arab women find it difficult to claim their rights

to have limited access to public spaces (al-Subki, 1986, pp. 4–5). Amid this patriarchal socio-cultural grip, they call for their social status and demand the elimination of discrimination against them. The demand for women's equal rights before men, whether in the economic, political, social, or cultural fields, has become a crucial cultural issue in the Arab region (al-Subki, 1986). Nawāl As-Sa`dāwiy is an Egyptian woman who fights for and voices the rights and injustices of Arab women. Nawal fought for women's freedom from the cultural confines of Arab society at that time.

## **Method**

In this study, the authors used a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research can be interpreted as a procedure that produces descriptive data in written words (Poerwandari, 1998). The approach in this research is a character study. According to Abdul Mustaqim, the selection of figures to be studied was based on several considerations, including; (1) Having popularity so that the study is exciting and significant. Popularity is caused by his unique work or having a media that popularizes it; (2) It influences society, seen from how many people are inspired by their thoughts; (3) Controversial aspects to clarifying his opinions and ideas, his arguments when he expresses his thoughts, and any politicization of certain parties about it; (4) It Has a uniqueness that distinguishes it from other characters; (5) Has intensity in his field, the dynamics, and development of his thoughts can be traced from time to time. The relevance and contribution of the character's thoughts to the current context (Mustaqim, 2016).

According to Arief Furchan and Agus Maimun, in the aspect of socio-religious research, character studies have the following uses: (1) life history data of a character is essential to obtain an insider's view of socio-religious phenomena in society through the views of the citizens as participants of the society concerned; (2) data on the life history of a character is essential to achieve an understanding of individual citizens who behave differently (deviating from the habits of other citizens) as a driving force for the emergence of new ideas and changes in society and culture; (3) data on the life history of a character is essential to obtain an in-depth understanding of psychological problems that are not observed from the outside, or obtained by interview methods based on direct questions. This usually involves the influence of the cultural environment on the character's psyche, and such data, practically, are essential in religious psychology research; (4) life history data of a character is necessary to get a more in-depth picture of the details of things that people did not tell through the interview method based on direct questions (Furchan & Maimun, 2005). Data analysis in this study used a literature study. That is by researching, understanding books, documents, and analyzes of writing theses, journals, and articles related to Nawal As-Sa`dāwiy that have been studied previously. Literature studies make library data a theory to examine and examine in obtaining hypotheses to obtain objective results.

## Discussion

### Biography of Nawal As-Sa`dawi

Nawal As-Sa`dawi's was born on October 27, 1931, in Kafr Tahla, a small village on the banks of the Nile in North Cairo, Egypt Sa'dawi grew up in a large family with eight brothers and sisters. His family was relatively traditional religious and thrived in conditions under colonial pressure. When he was six years old, he was "circumcised", but he was progressive and refused. His father was a college graduate, educated, and highly valued education. Hence, it is not surprising that Nawal's father insisted on educating all his children even though Nawal often argued why his brother should have a higher education than him. In 1937 his father served as general superintendent of instruction for the province of Minufia in the Delta region, an area located north of Cairo City. His father taught his mother at a French school, the General Director of Army Restructuring (El Saadawi, 2011). He described his mother as a potential revolution in the history of his life. Her father and Nawal's mother are also educated. Her mother died when she was 25 years old, and shortly after her father followed her mother, both of whom were unable to witness their daughter's remarkable achievements as Arab heroines. Nawal As-Sa`dawi completed his education at elementary, middle, and high schools in his native Egypt as a child. Nawal studied at Cairo University and graduated in 1955 with a doctorate in psychiatry. He became the best graduate of 50 women among hundreds of male students in his graduation year. After completing his education, Nawal opened a psychiatry practice serving the state and in 1963-1972, finally rose to become Director of Public Health in Egypt. Nawal met her husband, Sheriff Hetata, a doctor while working at the Department of Health, where the two work together in the same office. They married in 1964 and have a son and a daughter. Hetata and Nawal were jailed for 13 years to participate in a left-wing opposition party. In 1966, Nawal Sa'dawi received a Master's degree in Public Health from studying at Columbia University in New York (El Saadawi, 2010).

During his education in New York, he practiced autopsying the corpse of a man; at that time, he thought that in such circumstances, men lost their power and greatness, which had been glorified by the patrilineal culture of the Arab World. As an intellectual and a fighter for women's rights, Nawal has held several scientific activities, including; research and social observations about women, especially the issue of gender bias or gender inequality. In 1969 he made observations and a scientific trip to Sudan. This trip to Sudan takes a closer look at the practices of female circumcision, which are traditionally carried out, painful, and very dangerous for the safety of women themselves. From 1973 to 1976, Nawal As-Sa`dawi continued her education and became a female researcher on neurosis at Ain Shams University of Medicine. His research results were published on Women and Neurosis in Egypt in 1976 and Nawal included 20 researchers who studied case studies of women in prisons and hospitals. This research also inspires the novel *Wanita*

di Titik Zero, based on a death row woman convicted of murdering her husband. Nawal As-Sa`dawi has more than ten honorary doctorates. He has received many awards including the Great Minds of the Twentieth Century Prize awarded by the American Biographical Institute in 2003, the North-South Prize from the Council of Europe, and the International Catalunya Premium in 2004. In 2007 Nawal As-Sa`dawi received the Fonlon-Nichols award. The African Literary Association is awarded annually to African writers who have achieved excellence in creative writing and contributions to the struggle for human rights and freedom of expression (El Saadawi, 2010). An Egyptian human rights defender, especially woman, doctor, psychiatrist, and writer, Nawal As-Sa`dawi, reportedly died at 89 years. He died in Cairo Hospital due to a long illness. This news was conveyed in the Al-Arabnews newspaper (arabnews, 2021).

### **Background of Nawal As-Sa'dawi's Thoughts About Women's Emancipation**

Nawal As-Sa`dawi writings have the power to inform, move, and inspire. Her powerful account of the lives of ordinary women in the Middle East remains as relevant today as it was a quarter of a century ago when it was first published. Her writing was inspired by her experience caring for a woman in her medical practice. His first medical practice was located at the rural Health Center in Tahla, where he witnessed the suffering of low-income families (El Saadawi, 2010) as experienced by Nawal when he was a child, namely circumcision. When he was six years old, Nawal was treated like he was not a human. The same thing happened to his sister. At that time, Nawal was forced and taken to the bathroom to be circumcised. The practice of female circumcision was common at that time, and not a single girl escaped cutting her clitoris, regardless of whether her family lived in the village or the city (El Saadawi, 2010). Because of this incident, even when Nawal grew up and graduated as a doctor in 1955, he could not forget the sad event (El Saadawi, 2010). The tears that dried up Nawal felt when she was a child had undergone a cruel system, just like other Arab women. A system that applies in the village or the city makes women unable to move freely like men.

This kept on his mind, and Nawal wanted to change the people's views who did this with medical science evidence. If it continues, the girls can lose their lives due to primitive and inhumane methods and can result in acute or chronic infections so that they will be tormented for the rest of their lives (El Saadawi, 2010). In addition to female circumcision, sexual violence also occurs in girls. A system in place in almost all Arab countries, society forbids teenagers and young people to have sex in any form other than attachment to a legal marriage contract, and masturbation is banned because it is dangerous, as dangerous as having sex with prostitutes (El Saadawi, 2010). Because of this, it makes teenagers and young people prefer to have sex with their sisters to fulfill their sexual needs because the men feel that they are not economically capable of collecting the costs of their wedding. The occurrence of sexual harassment against women may not be done by force or coercion because when the woman is an adult, they can understand, but it also cannot be

guaranteed. It could be that men commit sexual harassment by coercion or violence. The fate of Arab women who are not considered to exist by society, even oppression and harassment that starts from those closest to them, still dare to survive in such a situation. However, Saadawi did not want Arab women, especially Egyptians, to experience that. Justice and equality of rights between men and women must be upheld. Women must obtain human rights and the freedom to act whatever they want as long as they are within the corridor of Islam. One testimony of violence and exclusion against women made Nawal determined to demand justice and equality for women, both within the family and society. Through his writings, Saadawi was finally able to open the world's eyes that women are still under the pressure of a man all this time.

An uncomfortable examination of the power and violence of gender, *The Circling Song* (1989) is a powerful novel about the complex relationship between Hamido and his twin sister Hamida. Hamida became pregnant after repeated sexual abuse, with her brother Hamido being charged to kill Hamida in defense of the family's honor. In *Searching* (1991), Nawal tells the story of Fouad, whose search for a lost lover leads her into a maze of torment and self-doubt. Qualified for his maiden ministry, Fouada views his circumstances as intertwined with his professional ambitions that are structurally held up by the prejudices of patriarchal society; Fouada seeks to achieve emotional fulfilment through professional recognition. Following the critical success of these novels, Nawal wrote two autobiographies. The first is *A Daughter of Isis* (1999), in which she describes her formative childhood experiences and her struggles as a political activist in Egypt. Later in *Walking through Fire* (2002), Nawal recounts his experiences as a young doctor and considers questions around gender struggle and inequality through the prism of his relationships with three very different husbands (El Saadawi, 2010).

In her mother's words, there was also when she reprimanded Nawal's father for shouting at him, "I am ready to go from house to house washing clothes, instead of living with a man who allows him to shout at me" (El Saadawi, 2010). Seeing this incident, which his father carried out by being rude to his mother, made Nawal even more determined to fight for women's rights. However, it was also because his mother was brave enough to fight his father when he was violent against his mother. The author assumes that Nawal was good in the interests of women, showing the courage of his mother against his father in work. Because human rights to get protection, especially for women, must be applied and earned. Throughout his young life, Nawal saw the suffering of women and their courage to survive. He sees how they can crumble under patriarchal conventions: "Under the women's smiles, I can detect the sadness, the tears that have dried up over the years, the darkness that shrouds the memories of their wedding night". Witnessing this injustice, Nawal tells stories of Egyptian women who have an unwritten history passed on orally from one generation to another. He determined that he would write this history, which was one of the tremendous

concentrating forces of his life. The desire to write was so strong that it gave him astonishing power. According to Nawal, fact, and fiction cannot be separated, just like body and mind. He writes fiction, to tell the truth. He wrote to emerge from darkness to the light of knowledge, from the chaos of an unjust world to a new world of justice, freedom, and love. He wrote to challenge the superpowers on earth and in heaven. Both live in war, exploitation, and deception. Both distinguish between people according to race, gender, class, religion, and other traits. He writes to change himself and change the world for the better (El Saadawi, 2010).

### **The form of Nawāl As-Sa`dāwīy's struggle for the emancipation of women in Egypt**

In 1979-1980 Nawal served as UN advisor for the Women in Africa (ECA) and Middle East (ECWA) Program. Then in 1980, as the culmination of a long war, she fought for the independence of Egyptian women in all aspects, especially in social and intellectual aspects. All activities or expressions of women have been closed; women have no rights and roles in building the country because their only place is at home to be housewives; women are imprisoned under Sadat's regime, on charges of "crimes against the state. Nawal stated, "I was arrested because I believe, Sadat He said there is democracy and we have a multi-party system and you can criticize. So I started criticizing her policies and I landed in jail." Despite being in prison, Nawal continued to fight the oppression. In 1981 Nawal formed AWSA (Solidarity of Arab Women Association) (Toubia & Gamal, 1988). The AWSA (Arabic Women's Solidarity Association) is Egypt's first legal, independent feminist organization. The organization has 500 members locally and more than 3,000 internationally (Stephan, 2021). The association organizes international conferences and seminars, publishes magazines, and has started income-generating projects for women in rural areas. The AWSA was banned in 1991 after criticizing US involvement in the Gulf War. Nawal felt that the Arabs should resolve the conflict between Iraq and Lebanon (the gulf war). The purpose of establishing this organization is to seek political power that fights for the interests and appreciation of women.

In 1985 the AWSA organization received official recognition from the United Nations Economic and Social Council as an Arab non-governmental organization (NGO). Although he denied pen and paper, Nawal continued to write in prison, using a "short black eyebrow pencil" and "a small roll of old and tattered toilet paper." She was released freely in 1982, and in 1983 she published *Memoirs from Women's Prison*, in which she continued her critique of the repressive Egyptian government. In the concluding remarks of his memoirs, he noted much of the corrupt nature of his country's government, the dangers of publishing under such authoritarian conditions, and his determination to keep writing the truth. Even after being released from prison, Nawal's life was threatened by those who opposed his work, especially Islamic fundamentalists. Armed guards were stationed outside his home in Giza for several years until he left the country to become a visiting scholar professor at the University of North America. Nawal is a writer who lived in the Asia and Africa

Department of Languages at Duke University from 1993-1996. He is also a lecturer at Washington State University in Seattle.

Nawal then seeks justice by prosecuting the Egyptian government, but his efforts are in vain and fail miserably. On June 15, 1991, the government issued a decree closing the AWSA Arab Women's Solidarity Association in her name as its leader. Six months before this decree, the government closed and banned its magazine *Zuhur*, namely *Nun* magazine, the voice shaft for AWSA activists, published by the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. He is the editor-in-chief of the magazine. At the organization's end, Nawal wrote his work in a book entitled *ma'rakah Jadidah fi qadhiyatil mar'ah* (a new field for women's problems). In this work, he wants to show the public, especially the Egyptian government, that the world community widely supports his organization. During the summer of 2001, three of his books were banned at the Cairo International Book Fair. She was accused of apostasy in 2002 by a fundamentalist lawyer who brought a court case against her forcibly divorced from her husband, Dr. Sheriff Hetata. She won the case because she was supported by Egyptian Arab women's associations and international solidarity. According to Nawal: "Both are not religious issues as fundamentalists always say, but the problem is closely related to the country's economic and political problems." As a figure who is tireless in fighting for women's rights and an activist for the women's liberation movement, Nawal works hand in hand to advocate for women in the world that the liberation of women from the patriarchal culture of society and the shackles of the existing social system, can only be done by women. Women must be strong starting from each individual. According to him, women should be liberated and dare to face the veil of their minds, namely false awareness, minor impressions, and weak attitudes have been attached to women, so a new understanding will emerge in them that there is no significant difference between women and men.

Nawal's concept of emancipation can be seen from her goal of establishing a women's organization which she founded AWSA (Arabic Women's Solidarity Association). According to his assumption, emancipation is the removal of the veil that surrounds women's minds. Nawal, in expressing his thoughts, often has to reject established norms. He even dared to go against the Egyptian government and make it his opposition to all government policies traditions of society that are contrary to reason and belief and are not profitable for women's struggle. Of course, all had to be paid a high price, and there were sacrifices, he was often in and out of prison, there were many terrors and death threats against him, Nawal spent the rest of his life in Europe and America and occasionally visited his homeland in Egypt. Nawal has a psychological burden of over-assuming gender domination and authority issues. Although radical, he wants to rebel from an established patriarchal system and emphasize the role and political-economic factors. What is fascinating and perhaps disturbing is the existence of multiple personalities in looking at ambivalent men. On the

one hand, men are seen and portrayed as rulers and the cause of sexual discrimination; here, women's rebellion is seen as a rebellion against male power. On the other hand, men also seen as victims of "social imagination" in this case, becomes a woman's partner; the existence of class exploitation, in the discourse of Arab feminism, is like religious authority, on the one hand as a justification for resistance to a system, and on the other as a barrier to women's freedom.

### **Nawal El Saadawi's Propaganda To Egyptian Women**

Nawal As-Sa`dawi has propagated his thoughts on women, especially in the Arab world. Almost all of Nawal's books are written in Arabic, and many have been translated into English, French, German, Spanish, Turkish, Swedish, Indonesian, and 38 other languages. In 1969, he published his first non-fiction book entitled *Al-mar'a was al-jins* (women and sex), which discussed gender, religion, and the trauma of female clitoridectomy, which he considered taboo in his country. In 1977, he published his most famous work, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which covered some topics relative to Arab women such as aggression on Nawal's children and female genital mutilation, prostitution, sexual relations, marriage, divorce, and Islamic fundamentalism. While Nawal was imprisoned, despite using only limited tools, Nawal continued to research the conditions of female prisoners and wrote about them in prison using "a short black eyebrow pencil" and "a small roll of old and shabby toilet paper". She was released in 1982, and in 1983 she published a memoir from a women's prison, in which she continued her bold assault on the repressive Egyptian government. In addition, there is a very controversial book that caused Nawal to be included in the list of people who must be killed, the book is "*The Fall of The Imam (the fall of a leader)*". This book tells the story of Bint Allah, an illegitimate girl whose father is a religious ruler-priest in Islamic society believed to be Allah's representative (Kulsum, 2017). This Nobel has the poetic power of raising awareness among Egyptian women. There are many more books published by Nawal, with similar books on controversial issues such as the authorities' oppression of women, prostitution, domestic violence, and religious fundamentalism. Nawal has published nearly 50 novels, plays, and short stories, and become an advisor to the United Nations Program on Women in Africa (ECA) and the Arab World (ECWA). When Nawal was an advisor to the United Nations, he found many oppressions occurring in various parts, especially the African region and the Arab world. From 1979 to 1980, Nawal Saadawi was the UN adviser to the Women in Africa (ECA) and Arab World (ECWA) Programs. With this strategic position, he provides education to women and invites them not to submit to the oppression of patriarchal culture (Pranowo, 2013). Establish an Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA). Nawal As-Sa`dawi after being released from prison is still consistent with his thoughts. In 1982, she founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) to promote the active participation of Arab women in socio-economic, cultural, and political life. AWSA is Egypt's first legal, independent feminist organization. This organization that fights for the human rights of



Arab women in all fields is active in recording any violations, such as husbands pouring vinegar on their wives to murder and advocating for Arab women's rights (Nassef, 2004). In 1985, AWSA had 500 members in Egypt and more than 3000 international members, AWSA was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations as an Arab non-governmental organization (UN ECOSOC). AWSA has developed income projects for economically poor women, publishes literary magazines and books, and produces films about the lives of Arab women. From 1982 to 1991, AWSA held 4 international conferences. The 5th conference was in Cairo, Egypt. In 1991 the AWSAs were banned from the region after criticizing US involvement in the Gulf war, which Nawal said should have been resolved by the Arabs. Because it was banned in Egypt, AWSA headquarters moved to Algeria until 1996 and shifted Back to Cairo in 1996 (Toubia & Gamal, 1988).

Nawal As a professor (professor), it is clear that he has the task of teaching the community. However, Nawal Saadawi teaches at Universities outside Egypt, including: The University of Duke, 1993-1996, the University of Washington, Seattle, 1995, the University of Illinois di Chicago, 1998, Florida Atlantic University, 1999, the University Montclair, 2001-2002, the University of Southern Maine, 2003, the University of Autonomia, Barcelona, Winter 2004, Smiths College, Massachusetts, Autumn 2004, Claremont California University, 2005, Spelman College (Chief Cosby) Atlanta United States of America 2007-2009. As the times progressed, many works in the form of writings and video interviews were quickly published via the internet so that the Egyptian people could easily access their thoughts. In addition to technology, he uses AWSA to propagate his thoughts by publishing articles and the like, which are developed and taught to students at universities outside Egypt (El Saadawi, 2006).

Almost every day, Nawal came to Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, he mingled with the Egyptian people and raised awareness about people's rights, antitotalitarianism, revolution, and democracy. Nawal believes, "at least in my novel, I have freedom and power". It means real conditions that stifle people's rights, silence, and discrimination against women, and countered totalitarianism with fiction. Women in literary works express themselves that reflect their reality. Women find the freedom to act and advocate change in politics, feminism, economics, education (Saadawi, 2016). In his old age, his popularity as a dissident of the government and a critic of patriarchy made Nawal loudly call the government of Hosni Mubarak a clone of the Pharaoh. The world hears this statement. It is a statement that demonstrates political beliefs and their essential role in interpreting the revolution. Women in the revolution arena are part of the silent mass and the figure that determines change's spirit. Nawal's voice in a broad sense is a reflection of the people's will which has been silenced for decades (El-Saadawi, 2000). Nawal realized his bad dream in the revolution. He managed to take advantage of the momentum of the process carried

out by the majority of the Egyptian people, both male, and female. The criticisms launched by Nawal from the Anwar Sadat regime to the Hosni Mubarak regime produced results, especially for women, namely providing a new perspective for women to participate in the revolution actively. Nawal's presence in the 2011 Egyptian revolution significantly impacted women's participation. Hundreds and even thousands of women actively participated in taking to the streets, even taking part in clashes against the authorities. In earlier protests in Egypt, women accounted for only about 10 percent of all demonstrations. Still, in Merdeka Square, they accounted for about 40 to 50 percent in the days leading up to Mubarak's fall (Frederiksen, 2011).

## Conclusion

Nawal As-Sa`dawi is a woman who always fights for rights and gender equality for women. But the struggle is not aimed at men but against patriarchy. Nawal expresses his thoughts and opinions by writing a book. More than 50 books that he wrote, attract attention and even inspires many people to be translated into several languages. He became a person who dared to express his opinion, move, and bear all the consequences. There are several criticisms of Nawal El Saawadi of the existing laws in Egypt. The law was criticized for Egyptian families showing discriminatory treatment of women, and the Egyptian family law is a legacy of patriarchal culture in the past. Nawal also provided a solution for the renewal of religious thought among scholars, namely Arab women must be economically secure, educated, and revise Egyptian family law. The proposed solution ensures that women get justice and gender equality with men.

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