

# The Reading Room: A review of 'Memoirs of a woman doctor'

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El-Saadawi, N. (2000). *Memoirs of a woman doctor*. London: Saqi Books.

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Nawal El-Saadawi, the famous Egyptian feminist activist, trained and practised as a medical doctor, a psychiatrist and a surgeon. She is also a prolific writer and has written more than 50 books, several of which have been translated into English. Her writings – essays and fiction – address issues of gender and class in Egypt and the Arab world. She is a vocal campaigner against male and female genital circumcision (from 1979 to 1980 she was the United Nations Advisor for the Women's Programme in Africa and the Middle East), against religious patriarchy and against political Islam. She has also campaigned for education, women's rights and freedom of expression and was jailed under Sadat. Her life was threatened by the Islamists and she had to flee Egypt. She has been back in Egypt since 1996. Since the Arab Spring she has been campaigning against political Islam and against the counter-revolution.

El-Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla, a small village in Egypt, the second of nine children. She won a scholarship to study medicine, graduated from the University of Cairo in 1955, and specialised in psychiatry.

*Memoirs of a woman doctor* (2000) was first published in its translated version in English in 1988. The Arabic original version first appeared in a serialised form in the Egyptian magazine *Ruz al-Yusuf* in 1957. The book was El-Saadawi's first novel. In a preface to the English edition, she mentions that the book was censored both in the serialised and in the full book versions, but as she 'was young and inexperienced and eager to see the book in print' she 'allowed it to be published with deletions'.

The text is a first person narrative that reads like an autobiography. The author states that 'although many of the heroine's characteristics fit those of an Egyptian woman such as myself, active in the medical field in those years, the work is still fiction'.

The narrative is very informative of the medical practices of the time in Egypt and could read like an anthropological text with surprising details (for example there were no regulations for access to the blood bank). In the passage below, the 'companion' is a musician with whom the narrator falls in love after a bitter divorce. The divorce was the narrator's decision after her husband asked her to choose between him and her practice; this 'companion' character reconciles her with her femininity and her desire for a male companion that would support her:

'A thin young man lay on a dirty mattress on the floor. Beside him was a little pool of blood. I sounded his chest, realizing he was desperately ill with pulmonary tuberculosis and that life depended on a blood transfusion. I looked round and found my companion standing beside me. He said instantly, 'Do you need anything?' 'A bottle of blood straightaway from the emergency services.' (p.97)

The narrative is chronological and describes the narrator's awareness of the lower and unfair status ascribed to girls and women. The first period is described alongside associated feelings of shame and self-hatred:

'I hated being female. I felt as if I was in chains – chains forged from my own blood tying me to the bed so that I couldn't run and jump, chains of shame and humiliation' (p.12)

The narrator's family wants to get her married but she is determined that she will study and become a doctor:

'Put on your cream dress and go and say hello to your father's guest in the sitting room.

I caught a whiff of conspiracy in the air.' (p.15)

'I hated my femininity, resented my nature and knew nothing about my body. (...) I was going to show my mother that I was more intelligent than my brother, than the man she wanted me to wear the cream dress for, than any man (...)' (p.22).

'Medicine was a terrifying thing. It inspired respect, even veneration, in my mother and brother and father. I would become a doctor then, study medicine, wear shiny steel-rimmed spectacles, make my eyes move at an amazing speed behind them, and make my fingers strong and pointed to hold the dreadful long sharp needle. I'd make my mother tremble with fright and look at me reverently; I'd make my brother terrified and my father beg me for help' (p.23).

The narrative moves on to the years of studying medicine when the young student is the only woman in the dissection room and she has to hide her fears and to proceed 'steadily and unflinchingly' (p.25). The passages dealing with the dissection allow the narrator to explore the vanity of the male body, the absurdity of the alleged superiority of men in Egyptian society, the equality and frailty of men and women before death and a celebration of life:

'I was delighted by this new world which placed men, women and the animals side by side, and by science which seemed a mighty, just and omniscient god; so I placed my trust in it and embraced its teachings.' (p. 32). 'Ah, how simple life is when one takes it as it comes!' (p.28)

The narrator also explores the ethics of practising medicine and she describes her transformation from a rich, successful but hard doctor into one who is caring and dedicated. This epiphany comes when she acknowledges the 'emptiness' of her life to be followed with her encounter with the character of the musician, who – in connecting the practice of medicine with art – answers her quest for meaning in her life and supportive, loving companionship:

'My surgery filled up with men, women and children and my coffers with money and gold. (...) I felt a chilling cold as though I was sitting on a snowy mountain top.' (p.82)

'Why had I bounded up the ladder of my profession instead of drinking from the cup of life sip by sip (...)?' (p.83).

'Being a doctor meant giving health to all who needed it, without restrictions or conditions, and success was to give what I had to others' (p. 100).

'For the first time in my life I felt that I needed someone else, something I hadn't felt even about my mother. I buried my head in his chest and wept tears of quiet relief.' (p.100-101)

Reading Nawal El-Saadawi's first novel today, almost 60 years after its publication, gives us an insight into her extraordinary journey and her loyalty to herself. Although simple in its semi-autobiographical structure, the rhythm is powerful and the issues of class and gender are – alas – still relevant in a world where patriarchy, poverty and lack of education are widespread. The issue of

FGM, which made El-Saadawi famous in the West through her subsequent essays and her action as a doctor and a feminist, is not mentioned in the book and might have been part of the material destroyed by the Egyptian censor and thus lost. Paradoxically, this adds to the power of the short text as the whole context in which the practice takes place gets more attention and allows the reader an insight into gender discrimination and social inequalities, which are prevalent not only in Egypt.