



*A Daughter of Isis*

THE EARLY LIFE OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI

**Nawal El Saadawi**

WITH A FOREWORD BY BETTINA APTHEKER

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## Praise for this Book

‘This brave book brings to life all too familiar news items from some traditional cultures where women are treated throughout their lives as misfortunes, compared to their brothers; are forcibly clitorctomised, married off at the age of ten. The author fought injustice all her life, succeeded in becoming a doctor... then a writer. In our culture women’s education was fought for by our grandmothers and great-grandmothers; reading this we are reminded not to take our good fortune for granted. This is a book we should all be reading.’

Doris Lessing

‘In this book we see how, from an early age, Saadawi combines her love of the Arabic language with her awareness of gender-based oppression to create texts which are as subversive as they are moving.’

*Modern African Studies*



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## About this Series

Nawal El Saadawi's writing has the power to shock, move, inform and inspire. Her powerful stories of the lives of ordinary women in the Middle East remain as relevant today as when they were first published a quarter of a century ago.

An uncomfortable examination of gendered power and violence, *The Circling Song* (1989) is a powerful novel about the complex relationship between Hamido and his twin sister Hamida. Hamida falls pregnant after being repeatedly sexually abused, whereupon her brother Hamido is charged by the family with the task of killing Hamida in order to defend the family's honour. In *Searching* (1991), Saadawi tells the tale of Fouada, whose search for a lost lover leads her into a labyrinth of existential torment and self-doubt. Overqualified for her mundane civil service job, Fouada views her personal predicament as being entwined with her professional ambitions - structurally held back by the prejudices of a patriarchal society, Fouada strives to achieve emotional fulfilment via professional recognition. Following on from the critical success of these novels, Saadawi wrote the first of two autobiographical works, *A Daughter of Isis* (1999), in which she describes the formative experiences of her early childhood, and her struggles as a political activist in Egypt. In *Walking through Fire* (2002), Saadawi relates her experiences as a young doctor, and considers wider questions of struggle and gender inequality through the prism of her personal relationships with three very different husbands.

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Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in a small village outside Cairo. In defiance of cultural precepts which tended to exclude women from education, she was sent to school and later trained as a doctor. Her writing was inspired by her experiences of treating women in her medical practice. A vociferous political activist, Saadawi has been imprisoned in and exiled from Egypt, and put herself forward as a candidate for presidential election there in 2004. Her work has been internationally acclaimed, and she has been awarded numerous honorary doctorates and prizes.

Saadawi's major works are classics of contemporary Middle Eastern literature. It is hoped that these beautifully designed reissues will engage a new generation of readers.

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# A Daughter of Isis

*The Early Life of Nawal El Saadawi*

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**NAWAL EL SAADAWI**

*Translated by Sherif Hetata*

*With a foreword by Bettina Aptheker*



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## Foreword

**D**r Nawal El Saadawi embodies the international struggle for women's liberation. Activist, memoirist, essayist, novelist and among the first women physicians in her country, Saadawi has been translated into twelve languages and her books are available all over the world. Born in Kafr Tahla in Egypt's lower delta in 1931, she entered medical school at the University of Cairo with a handful of other women, and received her degree in 1955. Her first medical practice was at the rural health centre in Tahla, where she witnessed the suffering of its impoverished families. Until the early 1970s, she was general director of public health education in the Egyptian Ministry of Health. Then her feminist declarations and writings ended in her dismissal, and later in her arrest and exile.

*A Daughter of Isis* was written in exile while Nawal El Saadawi was a visiting scholar at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, in the mid-1990s. She tells a riveting story, taking us through her childhood, early adulthood, medical school and her first years working as a doctor. She chronicles her anti-colonialist and feminist activism. Written with lyrical grace and the precision of a scientist this autobiography is a treasure

trove of the astute observations of a child, the proclamations of a young militant, and the compassionate wisdom of a women's human rights activist.

Everywhere in this autobiography is a theme of transcendence as women struggle for voice and human dignity, and to overcome the binds of patriarchy. It is found in the words of Nawal's grandmother, who 'had not read the book of God and had not been to school' when she confronted the village headman. 'We are not slaves and Allah is justice. People have come to know that through reason.' It is in the words of her mother when she rebukes Nawal's father for shouting at her, 'I'm ready to go from house to house washing clothes, rather than live with a man who allows himself to shout at me.'

Throughout her young life Nawal saw the suffering of women, and their struggles for survival. She saw how they could be crushed under patriarchal conventions: 'Beneath the smiles of the women I could detect the sadness, the tears that had dried over the years, the gloom which enveloped memories of their wedding night.' She saw the effects of poverty under British colonial rule: 'In [the villages] of Menouf and Kafr Tahla I often saw children who were blind, or with one eye open and the other closed, or with a white spot creeping over the black pupil, or with swollen eyelids exuding pus and with flies all over their faces.' And she experienced the struggle for women's education, attending the Saneya Secondary School for Girls from which the first Egyptian pioneers of female education had graduated. Heralding these women, and especially Nabaweya Moussa, who championed women's education and women's rights in the early twentieth century, Saadawi imagines their 'magical eyes that were open to other worlds, and magical voices that came from somewhere in the heavens'.

Bearing witness to these injustices, Nawal conveys the stories of Egyptian women who 'have an unwritten history told orally by one generation to the other'. She determines that she will transcribe this history, and it is one of the great motivating forces in

her life. She takes us on this journey in her quest for education and literary expression. 'I loved the Arabic language, its letters, its words, their rhythmic music in my ears.' For Saadawi, Arabic was the language of resistance against the British colonialists. This autobiography, for example, was written in Arabic and translated into English by her husband, Sherif Hetata. She tells us how she 'loved the touch of the pen in my hand much more than the ladle or the handle of a broom'. This desire to write was so strong that it propelled her with astonishing force. 'I could not imagine', she says, 'that I would live and die like everyone else, without anything happening during my life.'

Nawal's mother was of a rebellious nature herself and encouraged her daughter's spirit, while her father believed in the education of girls (with some added persuasion by the young Nawal and her mother). This is the story of Nawal's personal transcendence against all the odds of village life: 'circumcision' – a polite term for genital mutilation – when she was six years old, internalized shame of the female body, and an impetuous and rebellious nature that often resulted in perilous moments. Although fraught with danger, Nawal's resistance to an arranged marriage with a procession of suitors when she was a young teen provides some of the most hilarious episodes in her story.

There is an insistent internal voice that echoes in Nawal's mind, one that affirms her deepest core: 'I would not be like other girls ... or other women in my family. Nor did I want to be like my grandfather, or my father, or my uncles or the other men in the family.' She shows us the way in which one woman with a clear vision, inner determination and courage could challenge these powerfully inscribed gender roles, insisting on a radically different vision of womanhood.

Near the end of this autobiography Saadawi describes a tidal wave of protest against British rule in Egypt. It was 14 November 1951. Nawal was in medical school. Tens of thousands joined a silent protest, 'coming from everywhere forming a huge mass of people, one huge body advancing ... waves of people rising and

falling in an endless sea. Millions of breaths mingling to create the single breath of the crowd. An immense silence that echoed in the ears more powerful than the sounds of thunder.’ In this moment Nawal felt that she and everyone around her was ‘fused to become one body, or one spirit with no body’.

Although women were expressly forbidden from participating in social protests, Saadawi describes an earlier moment when she and the girls in her high school broke down the heavy metal door that had been chained shut to prevent them from leaving the school grounds to join a protest against the British occupation. In this transcendent moment, an anti-colonial consciousness merged with a nascent feminist one, and ‘the hundreds of [women’s] arms became a single powerful arm that twisted the metal, snapped it with the strength of anger building up since the day they were born, with the force of a dream suppressed in childhood, with the power of a great love imprisoned in the chest, with all the pent-up hatred against doors, and chains, and locks, with all the hope of a coming freedom.’

Sometimes in the intensity of such social upheavals one may experience, however fleetingly, the transcendent capability of human beings to dissolve the differences and separations that divide us from each other because of class and racial differences, sexism or religious doctrines, and to break the bonds that shackle us to systems of domination. Many of us who are activists for peace and social justice all over the world have, at times, felt something very similar. Reading Saadawi’s accounts of these protests, I was heartened by a sense of the vast strength in the human potential for community.

As I finished reading Nawal El Saadawi’s autobiography I felt a sudden sense of loss. I didn’t want to leave her. I went back and read the last sections again, and then again, until I remembered how many other books she has written. Then I felt delight that I will be able to return to her words and to her stories, and that so many others will share in them.

*Bettina Aptheker*

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## PREFACE

### The Gift

#### My First Words

**I**t was my mother who taught me how to read and write. The first word I wrote was my name, Nawal. I loved the way it looked. It meant a 'gift'.

My name became a part of me. Then I learnt my mother's name, Zaynab. I wrote it down next to mine. Her name and mine became inseparable. I loved the way they looked, side by side, and what they meant. Every day she taught me to write new words.

I loved my mother more than my father. But he removed my mother's name from next to mine, and wrote down his instead. I kept asking myself why he had done that. When I asked him, he said, 'It is God's will.' That was the first time I heard the word God. I learnt he lived in the heavens. I could not love anyone who removed my mother's name from next to mine, who abolished her as though she did not exist.

In my mind God had become responsible for that and I felt it was unjust. But father said to me that God was just. I did not understand what that could mean so I wrote a letter to God asking him. It was the first letter I had written in my life and

it began as follows: ‘O God, if you are just, why do you treat my mother and my father differently?’ I thought God had written the Qur’an since my father said it was God’s book. But mother said to me that God did not read or write. After my mother told me that, I did not write to him again. Instead I wrote letters to my father for I now realized that between him and God there must be some relationship. However, each time I wrote a letter to him I burned it, and so none of my letters ever reached him.

In my memory, the distant childhood years, the 1940s, seem closer than the 1980s. Memory, like wine, grows mellow with time. The impurities settle into deep forgetfulness. Body becomes mind transparent, and I can see things to which I was blind.

As I write, moments of the past emerge into the light. Body memory becomes one with my spirit, with my blood. I discover the past, rediscover it again and again, try to catch hold of the moments, but they escape me like fish in a mercurial sea, enveloped in the darkness of night.

I cannot live the same moment twice, cannot transform past into present, let alone express reality in words written on a piece of paper. Truth changes, is never the same, like the sea, like the movement of water, of air, and soil. We do not swim in the same sea more than once, so how can I cast it in a mould of three letters on to a sheet of paper? This is the difficulty whether in autobiography or in fiction, for it lies not only in the limitations of language. Imagination, dreams, reality, memory are all imprisoned, surrounded by walls, slower than the changing truth.

The moments of my early childhood are alive, are always being renewed, are inseparable from my adult life. Past and present fuse. The smell of the air here and now is the smell of the air in my village nestling quietly into the embrace of the River Nile.

My relationship with my mother decided the course of my life. I used to think that my father’s influence on it was greater than

hers. I discovered while I was writing that this was not true. The spinal column that has held me up was built on what my mother said when I was young: 'Throw Nawal in the fire and she will come out unhurt.' After hearing that, I could walk into danger with a brave heart. Maybe that is why I was able to escape death more than once.

At the age of ten I could have been trapped in a marriage were it not for her. Sometimes she used to weaken under pressure, and then in addition to struggling against my father, my grandmother and all my aunts and uncles I had to struggle against her. There was hatred in their eyes when I stood up to them. All except mother. Her eyes would shine with pride and happiness as she watched me fight my battles against them. Now and then she would give me a quick sidelong glance to back me up, or whisper a word of encouragement in my ear.

If it were not for her I would never have continued my education and become a medical student. Father believed in the importance of education for girls as well as boys but sometimes under financial stress his resolve would weaken. He had to pay school or college expenses for six girls and three boys.

One day he said to my mother: 'Zaynab, the work you are doing at home has become too much for you. Why not take Nawal out of school so that she can give you a helping hand?' The answer came right back without a moment's hesitation: 'My daughter will never be made to stay at home. I don't need help', pronounced in a ringing voice which still echoes in my ears.

My mother spent her whole life caring for nine children and their father. Not one of her six daughters was deprived of an education, which went up to university level. She died a young woman at the age of forty-five, and spent two whole years in bed suffering terrible pain. But since the father alone gives his name to the children, bestows legitimacy and honour on them, her name was buried with her, is lost for ever. For in this class patriarchal world of ours a mother's name is of no consequence, a woman is without worth, on earth or in the heavens. In paradise





My mother in Giza, in the spring of 1956.  
She died in 1958.

a man is promised seventy-two virgins for his sexual pleasure, but a woman is promised no-one except her husband, that is if he has the time for her, and is not too busy with the virgins who surround him.

My mother made my childhood very happy. I used to bury my face in her breast, smell the odour of her milk, of the hot soup she prepared on winter nights, of corn cake rising in the oven. Her voice in the stillness of the night was like the voice of God, and her laugh in the morning a ray of sunlight. It made me run towards her, lift my arms up in the air so that she would take me to her breast, and we could play or sing together: 'The sun has risen, a light more beautiful than any light. The shining sun.'

The smell of my mother's body is a part of me, of my body, of its spirit, of the hidden strength I carry within me. She is the voice that speaks to me if something's wrong, rescues me just in time, encourages me in moments of despair.



My father in Giza, January 1959, less than a month before his sudden death.

But my childhood was not always happy. There were things that made me suffer, caused me pain. At such moments I was filled with hatred against my mother, wished that she would die, against my father, and my grandfather and everyone else in the family. Then something would come along and wipe it all away, delete it from my memory, banish it from history. My mother would be at her best, once more a shining star, the real mother that I knew, her head held high, a woman full of pride, a goddess like Isis, a halo of light around her head, like a full moon, a silvery crown that the ancient Egyptian goddess wore above her brow. When I watched her move it taught me to be proud, to dream of better things, of a place for myself in this vast world.

I did not know from where arose her strength, her pride. Did it come from an unknown woman I had never seen, a grandmother, or a female antecedent of hers born many years ago, a descendant of Isis or her mother Noot, goddess of the heavens

five thousand years ago? For was it not Noot who, speaking to her daughter, had said before she died 'I say to you, my daughter who will inherit the throne after I am no longer here, be a merciful and just ruler of your people rather than a goddess who depends for her authority on sacred power.'

My father was a just and kindly man, who never raised his voice to her. He worked all day, and when he came home gave her a helping hand, laid the table, made the salad, and washed the pots and pans. He sat up at night sometimes to darn his socks, told us that the prophet, peace be with him, repaired the leather sandals that he wore, and sewed his own clothes. He followed what the Prophet did if he believed he should, but the Prophet was not a model for him in everything. The Prophet had several wives, but my mother was my father's only wife and he would never have behaved towards her like Abraham, who gave away his wife as an offering to the pharaoh to escape his tyranny.

My father opposed the king and the coterie of men through whom he ruled. He stood up against the British occupation of Egypt and colonial rule. He was loyal to his country, faithful to the woman who shared his bed, and believed that a man could not betray his wife and at the same time remain loyal in his dealings with the outside world.

Four months after my mother died, his coffin travelled to the village and we watched it as it was lowered into the ground. Before he died I used to see him sitting silently on the verandah, a fleeting look of sadness in his eyes, before he smiled quickly at me. He loved my mother dearly, never raised his voice when speaking to her, except that day when I woke up to hear him shouting in angry tones at her. She was dressed as though ready to go out and I heard her say in a voice that shook with anger: 'I'm ready to go from house to house washing clothes, rather than live with a man who allows himself to shout at me.'

My mother was not a doctor, or a writer. She had no job, no income of her own, no place in which she could live apart from

her husband's home, but she preferred to leave him rather than sacrifice her self-respect and pride.

Mother had a happy life in many ways. But she was not like the other women in her family. She regretted being just a housewife. Ever since her early school-days she had dreamed of other things. Sometimes when we sat together and no-one else was around she used to whisper: 'I wanted to be a musician, and play music, or to finish my education and find a place where I could experiment and invent something useful. I dreamt of galloping on a horse to the horizon, of riding in an aeroplane to see the world, but your grandfather Shoukry took me out of school and married me off to your father.'

My father's dreams were different. He wanted to liberate his country from colonial rule, free himself from the bondage of his government job, become a poet, or a writer. He died without achieving any of these, without writing anything, lived a life of semi-exile in faraway corners of the country with nothing to keep him going except his love for his family and an inner pride, the feeling that he had never given up, had always struggled for what he believed was right.

Did I inherit the dreams I heard them talk about, sometimes with enthusiasm to others in a tone of wistful sadness? I was proud of them despite the dreariness and pain that marked much of their life. I was proud of my country despite the almost constant alienation I felt towards the society in which I lived. I dreamt of another world on earth and in the heavens. It was as though I had come into the world from an unknown planet, could not believe that the earth and the heavens were two separate things, would not believe in a country which robbed me of my pride and freedom, in a husband who did not treat me as an equal, in a God who made me only half a human being.

I was proud of my dark skin. It was a beautiful brown, the colour of silt brought down to my land by the waters of the Nile. I never hid it under make-up or powder, or pastes of any kind, did

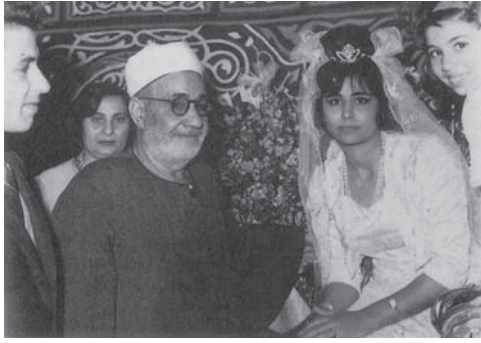
not believe in a femininity born with slave society and handed down to us with class and patriarchy.

My mother rebelled against many things but still she held on to certain traits of femininity which I did not share with her. Moments before she died, she stretched out her hand to a little flask of *kohl*, pulled out the rod and drew a line of black around her eyes, painted her lips with a baton of rouge, sprayed perfume around her neck and behind her ears, and combed her hair. She wanted to meet God fully made up, completely feminine, as though she was going to meet the only man she would ever meet again, like a nun who has been locked up in a monastery for years and dreams of meeting Jesus Christ, for she had been brought up in a school supervised by nuns and had mixed with them for years.

When she died, I saw her eyes open wide full of a sudden childish surprise, as though she were discovering the truth for the first time, realizing for the first time all that had happened to her in her life just a moment before she closed her eyes, never to open them again and look out at me with that shine. Her lips parted for a moment perhaps to express what she had now found out, but death was quicker, snatched her away before she could say anything.

In our life there is always a missing link, something which can be completed only by death. Perhaps not even death can do anything about it, and the circle of our life is never completed, remains open, continues as two parallel lines which never meet even at the horizon. This world of infinity, this infinite world, does it have an end and, if so, when and how?

I learnt my first lessons in philosophy, my first lessons in religion and politics, from my grandmother. She had not read the book of God, had not been to school, but I heard her say to the village headman as she waved her big rough hand in front of his face: 'We are not slaves and Allah is justice. People have come to know that through reason.' My father used to repeat what my grandmother said, but he used different words. 'Allah



My uncle Sheikh Muhammad, my father's half-brother, attending the wedding of my sister Hayam in 1963. My daughter Mona, then seven years old, is to the right.

is our conscience which tells us we have done something wrong when we do not stand up for justice. God's voice comes to us from our depths and not from the pulpit of the mosque.'

Were it not for my grandmother, my father could have become like his half-brother. He had the same father but a different mother, and taught religious jurisprudence in Al-Azhar.\* I called him Ammi Al-Sheikh Muhammad (my uncle Al-Sheikh Muhammad). He always addressed me using the slang word *bit* (short for *bint*). It means 'You, girl', and expresses contempt. He did not believe in girls going to the university, in their mixing with boys and men. He grew a long thick beard around his face which made me wonder what relation there could be between the strength of men's faith in God and the thickness of the beard on their faces. He used to slip the prayer beads through his fingers with a slow movement as he muttered the ninety-nine names of Allah. He believed that God permitted men to punish their wives by staying away from the marital bed, or scolding and beating them at will. He had a wife in the

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\* Based in Cairo, this is the most important religious university in the Muslim world.

village who baked buttered pastry loaves for him, and a wife in the city who cooked him meals made of lambs' feet or stuffed tripe. He did not darn his socks like the prophet did, but he followed the prophet's ways in other things, like marrying several wives and punishing them if they did not please him. He did not care whether his country was free, or under foreign rule, never opposed the government or the king, gave a sermon every Friday morning in the mosque, at the end of which he prayed that Allah protect King Farouk, whom he described as the pride of all our countrymen.

### The Forgotten Things in Life

Memory is never complete. There are always parts of it that time has amputated. Writing is a way of retrieving them, of bringing the missing parts back to it, of making it more holistic.

My memory started to awaken, after the deaths of my mother and my father. I was twenty-eight when one day I suddenly remembered the earlier years of childhood. Now they no longer seemed so distant. I could not describe what I felt in simple language so I wrote a poem in which reality was a dream, disappeared when it emerged under the light, was like an elusive flash, here one moment gone the next. Reality is something which changes all the time, something I cannot pin down or express in words on paper. When I try to draw it, it takes on the form of a collection of dots which become more dense at the centre. I say to myself maybe this is the truth, and maybe it is not, so I try to draw it, as I would like it to be, not how it really is.

What makes writing a source of wonder and beauty is its complexity which is simplicity itself, is the frenzied movement of the earth yet which remains so still that we do not feel it moving under us.

In my secret diary I noted down a poem which I wrote in my early youth:

My memory has remained a blank page  
Since childhood  
A mountain hidden under water  
With a single eye which stares at me  
The eye of God or Satan  
For they are one  
And I fear both of them.

The most difficult thing to write about is what people call sex. It is hidden behind a cloud of smoke, behind an inability to break the code hidden in the subconscious depths, in that obscure grey matter we call the brain. When I deal with sex I lose my mastery over language. This is the case especially with Arabic. Arabic is the language of the holy Qur'an and cannot be used easily to talk about what is considered sacrilegious. In English I can write down the word penis as simple as that, but in Arabic it is called the masculine rod, which sounds obscene. It is even worse when I write about the female sexual organs, especially in the colloquial slang used by the street urchins.

In my early youth writing, rather than reveal the things that people do not speak about, concealed them, served as an additional mask with which to hide the private shameful parts. Everything in a woman's life was seen as shameful, even her face. She often hid it behind a piece of material, or the edge of her shawl, or behind the shutters of her window. Literary criticism in our country is under the control of a small group of men and a few women who think and write like them, who say there is no such thing as an issue related to women's rights. For them the only important issues are related to the nation or to people in general, irrespective of sex. They call this humanizing the issues. They conceal the gender oppression of women behind brave words about human rights or the human being, distinguish between the liberation of our country and the liberation of women who are half of society, apply the norms and values created by the class patriarchal system and their signifiers in both spoken and written language.



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