

Dissidence in Nawal El Saadawi's *Two Women in One*

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Abstract

Egyptian-born physician, psychiatrist, and writer Nawal El Saadawi identifies herself as a historical socialist feminist. In her life that spanned over eighty-nine years, she has fought aggressively for the emancipation of women and men from oppressive structures. El Saadawi's writings are a mirror that showcases her feelings on various issues plaguing the world. She is a dissident through and through and her novels have women who are equally dissident. As El Saadawi professes dissidence is a necessary tool to fight injustice.

Keywords: Dissidence, Oppression, Injustice, Feminism

Physician, psychiatrist, and radical feminist Nawal El Saadawi taught Creativity and Dissidence at several Universities while she was living abroad. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, dissidence means the act of openly disagreeing with a person, group, or government's policies. El Saadawi's dissident life began the moment she was born. In her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis*, she recalls how her birth was not a matter of celebration for either of the families. She was merely left to be taken care of by the *daya* Um Mahmoud who was “. . . trained over centuries of time to deal with such catastrophes (p. 23).”

The very first act of defiance came with the words “a boy is worth fifteen girls at least” (p. 56), a statement often repeated by her paternal grandmother whom she called Sittil Hajja. The preoccupation with wanting boys was something El Saadawi could never understand and she has strived to highlight the issue in most of her works. In her novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, she explains the struggle of the protagonist for whom femininity is a burden that stifles her identity. As a child of nine, she is taught that her brother is better and has more freedom than her and because she was a girl she had to be careful of every movement she made, could not eat with gusto as her brother did, and could not even enjoy the simple joys of childhood. The protagonist goes on to say. “. . . Everything in me was shameful I wept over my femininity even before I knew what it was (p.10).”

Imra'tani fi-Imra'a written in 1968 and translated into English as *Two Women in One* in 1985 by Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough, portrays a woman's struggle in Egyptian society. Bahiah Shaheen represents the women of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Her rebellion against her family is a testament to the age-old oppression that continues to harangue women all over the world.

Bahiah's family sees her as a hardworking, traditional girl. However, she sees herself as a modern independent woman who cannot seem to relate to her family and is unhappy with the choices they make for her. Her rebellion begins the day she is born when she feels the

“eternal separation” (El Saadawi, 2005, p.10). Bahiah is torn with wanting to be joined back to her mother but also striving to break free from her mother’s influence. The reason for the latter is because of the patriarchal views reinforced by the mother to her daughter. The rebellion causes Bahiah to spit out food when no one is watching whenever her mother stuffs her mouth with eatables. Bahiah is saddened by her mother’s apathy in not being able to understand her daughter’s feelings and desires especially when she was a part of her mother.

Sexuality in Egyptian culture has always been a massive issue. El Saadawi explains in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that the girl child in any Egyptian family receives an education on how to hide her sexuality. A child’s curiosity while exploring her body is considered evil and thus she is chastised and warned of hellfire if she does not correct her behavior (El Saadawi, 2015, p.28). Bahiah, in her innocence, revels in her discovery of being a girl and promptly undresses in front of her mother to show her findings. The repercussion she faced in the form of beatings and then warnings led her to believe that “. . . people suppress only real desires, because they are strong, while unreal desires are weak and need no laws to keep them in check (El Saadawi, 2005 p.12).

From that moment on Bahiah understands how deceptive people are and the fact that how they never reveal their true selves. Here Bahiah tries to understand the motives of various taboos that are prevalent in her society, especially the one to do with the dress code. Women are always subjected to propriety. They are expected to properly cover themselves and veiling is encouraged. In an interview with Sarah Raphael for *Refinery 29*, El Saadawi explains how women are seen as mere bodies, to use the veil to cover their faces and bodies so that their real self does not emerge. She further says, “. . . women are not really encouraged to be real, to be themselves, they are encouraged to hide, to be what society wants, what religion wants, what men want.” Bahiah’s classmates dress up in tight skirts which makes walking for them quite difficult as the skirt tapers to the knees and keeps them together as if there is something hidden

between the legs that can fall off any moment. Bahiah however, wears trousers, rebelling against the social standards. Her stride is confident and she uses her energy to stamp the ground firmly. The behavior of the female medicos amuses her as she cannot understand what is the difference between a man and a woman. When she asks her professor Dr. Alawi the same question he replies by showing her the physical attributes that differentiate a man from a woman.

. . . he dipped his metal forceps into the open stomach of the dead woman whose body lay before him and took out her womb: a small, pear-sized triangle of flesh soft on the surface and wrinkled within. . . . ‘As for a man, here he is.’ With the tip of his forceps, he held up the penis. She saw a wrinkled piece of black skin like old excrement. (El Saadawi, 2005, p.17)

From this Bahiah understands that save for the womb and the penis there is nothing special about men that make them special or worthy of differential treatment. Bahiah’s uneventful life changes when she experiences her first period during her childhood. The vivid picture of blood trickling down her legs and falling to the ground is traumatic for her. The situation might also allude to Bahiah’s sexual assault as a child. Arab society’s obsession with referring to women as sexual objects is distressing. Bahiah’s father keeps a watch on his daughter to make sure she does not sully the honor of his family. Bahiah is stunned by the hypocrisy of Egyptian society. On one hand, a young girl is expected to behave as if she lacks sexual organs while on the other after marriage she is expected to satisfy her husband, deck herself in racy lingerie, and put on makeup so that her husband’s needs can be met.

This duplicity confuses Bahiah. She wants to rebel but she cannot find the courage to do so. Hence, she tries to hide in the crowd and become one of the women so that she can ensure her survival. This goes on till she meets Saleem. El Saadawi has been a feminist all her life and has opposed the patriarchal two-facedness. Yet, in some of her novels, it is men who

create an option for change. In Bahiah's case, her meeting with Saleem moves the cause of rebellion that lay dormant in her being.

Saleem offers Bahiah a choice something that her parents had not done before. For she says: "None of her life was of her doing or her choice" (El Saadawi, 2005, p.72). Bahiah's life was decided the moment she was born. She was supposed to be a dutiful obedient daughter, and her father ensures that she receives proper education and becomes a doctor while Bahiah wants to paint and dance. She has no choice in even choosing the specialization as her aunt who suffered from lung disease chose it for her. She is expected to graduate from medical school, marry her cousin, a business graduate and make lots of money and babies while satisfying her husband as long as she lives. This is still the absolute truth of the Arab society that reinforces deceptive values in women forcing them to be obedient to Allah and the husband and threatened with dire consequences if she disobeys.

Bahiah chooses for herself and goes to Saleem's flat not minding what would happen to her. He provides her with the same sense of satisfaction as her art does. Painting and drawing bring forth Bahiah's true self and she feels the same when she is with Saleem. Their union marks the beginning of Bahiah's rebellion. The breaking of the thin membrane – the hymen which was considered the membrane of honor connects her to reality. She is no longer her father's property nor the property of any male member of her family.

The transformation in Bahiah is evident when she joins the students' protest and shouts slogans against the government. Here she feels the same excitement that she felt when she was with Saleem or in her mother's arms. Breaking all bonds and all chains that were holding her captive she rejoices her freedom and promises herself that she would not go back to being the old Bahiah. "She was determined that there would be no going back; no authority on earth could stand between her and her freedom" (El Saadawi, 2005, p.83).

When Bahiah is caught by the police and jailed, she does not regret her actions. The rebellion that had sprouted grows swiftly like a strong tree planted whose roots went deep into her psyche. Hence, she refuses to acknowledge her name when the policeman calls out as the old Bahiah had died. Diana Royer in *A Critical Study* explains, “Her connection to the natural senses has brought her to an honest relationship with her physical self, which in turn fuels her individuality and resilience (p.65).

Such strength of character does not please Bahiah’s family, mostly her father who is aghast at his daughter’s sudden change. The family gets together to decide her fate once again. The various male members reprimand her father for allowing her to go to medical school as they believed that education spoils the minds of young women and makes them dissident. To curb her newfound freedom they get her married to her cousin. Once again society tries to chain Bahiah through the means of marriage. El Saadawi describes the wedding processing and fanfare as equivalent to a funeral.

The bridal stage, surrounded by roses, looked like the grave of the unknown soldier. The drums’ slow, heavy beat sounded like funereal strains. Her small cold hands lay in the bridegroom’s large palms. His fingers were strange. They coiled around hers like fingers of fate. Under the fold of the coffin her legs moved slowly as if she was heading for unknown disaster. (El Saadawi, 2005, p.100)

Alone with her husband in his bedroom, Bahiah outrightly rejects him, no longer ready to conform herself to the patriarchy. She kicks her husband in the stomach and laughs at him when he tries to consummate their marriage. Bahiah’s actions brandish her as being “not normal” as women cannot exude so much strength, nor can they say no to any man especially when it is her husband. Bahiah does not stay long enough for her family to free her but she herself walks out on them. She no longer wants any protection because in the name of protecting the girls what the family does is suppress their desires.

She wanted to be cast out, to have no mother or father, and no family to protect her. For protection itself was the real danger: it was an assault on her reality, the usurpation of her will and of her very existence. (El Saadawi, 2005, p.103)

Bahiah searches for Saleem as he was the one who had realized her true self. On the streets, she is an easy target for men like Dr. Alawi who try to take advantage of her. Once again using her strong feet she kicks Alwai who falls to the ground and says that she is not normal. El Saadawi through Bahiah exposes the truth of how men think women are made only for sexual pleasure. If a woman goes against the system be it religious, political, or social, she is immediately said to be not normal. Bahiah asks herself what entails a normal woman.

One with beaten eyes who walks with closely-bound legs, obedient and submissive, with amputated sexual organs? One who drips with perfumed powders and paints, saturated day and night with sad songs and sex films? One who knows romantic stories by heart and can't experience anything? The virtuous and pure virgin preoccupied with removing body hair and enticing men? (El Saadawi, 2005, p.112)

Bahiah lives her life of freedom while searching for Saleem. She sells her paintings by morning and at night distributes pamphlets of revolution against the government. Even in pallid conditions, Bahiah is content and happy. She does not regret her decision and continues to live the way she wants without bothering about the hypocritical eyes of men and women that follow her wherever she goes. Bahiah gets arrested once again for working against the government. She is taken to prison but the bars do not frighten her. In fact, she looks forward to prison life as she can finally meet Saleem, the only genuine person in the sea of artificiality. Nevertheless, Bahiah cannot embrace Saleem as she is physically chained, her handcuffs restricting her movement.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Two Women in One* deserves all praise. This novel has captured the plight of women in an oppressive society. It is a reminder that women are never free though

they are promised freedom. There is a price to be paid for being a dissident like El Saadawi paid or countless other writers have paid even with their lives. Bahiah is an inspiration for all women irrespective of race or ethnicity. A call to be true to oneself as Nawal El Saadawi once said: “To be aggressive, to be dissident is good. Don’t be afraid (*Channel 4*)

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