

9/11, From a Different Perspective:

Interview with Nawal El Saadawi and Sherif Hatata

By Nicola Joseph

Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian novelist, psychiatrist and writer. Her novels and her books on the women in Egyptian and Arab society have had a deep effect on successive generations of young women around the world. Throughout her life, Nawal has faced fierce resistance from the Egyptian authorities. The Arab Women's Solidarity Association, an organisation she founded, has been banned in Egypt, and she herself has been imprisoned. Nawal visited Australia recently, together with husband Sherif Hatata, also a doctor, writer and activist, for the Sydney Writers' Festival.

Nicola Joseph interviewed her at Radio Skid Row. Some excerpts:

Nicola: First of all, Nawal, I know that you came to know feminism as a young girl, as we all did in Arab families where brothers were given lots

of privileges while girls were expected to make their brothers' beds, but can you tell us a bit about this awakening because I think a lot of people will be surprised to know that there is this thing called "Arab feminism"?

Nawal: I think this point is very important because I think people believe that feminism is a western concept. Feminism, or the idea of the liberation of women, is embedded in the history of every country, in the east and west, in the north and south. So, to be a feminist—and to have these feelings of liberation of women—are universal. As you said, all female children feel oppressed when they are young. I have been teaching in the United States for the past ten years and all of my students and colleagues say they felt oppressed when they were children. The idea that feminism is

western is not true.

Also some people talk about Christian, Muslim or Jewish feminism, but I don't agree to that because I think women are oppressed within all religions, and you cannot really liberate yourself within any religion.

Nicola: How successful has the Arab Women's Solidarity been, given it has been shut down by the Egyptian government at different times?

Nawal: Since we started the association, we have had problems with the Egyptian government. First, it did not want to recognise us legally. It was only in 1985 that we were recognised legally. After we were registered, the harassment did not stop and we were eventually closed in 1991 because we stood against the Gulf War. You see,



from left to right: Nawal Sadawi, Sherif Hatata and Nicola Joseph

all photos courtesy of Anna Schinella

we did not make a separation between women and war, between women's problems and military, economic and colonial problems. So Arab Women's Solidarity [Association] (ASWA) was not just about domestic violence, or veiling or female genital mutilation. We connected female genital mutilation (FGM) to American foreign policy in our region. We connected veiling to religious fundamentalism, and neo-colonial powers and globalisation. This was the major problem because the Egyptian government wanted us to concentrate on what it called "women issues."

Nicola: How much membership has AWSA been able to build across the Arab world?

Nawal: Despite the fact that the organisation has been banned in Egypt, we have a membership of thousands all over the Arab world and internationally. We are a Pan Arab organisation affiliated with the Economic Social Council of the United Nations. We are growing and have branches inside and outside Arab countries. Today there are many young Arab women active within the organisation. Women like my daughter, who is a member, represent a new trend in society. [We have] women who are thinkers and writers, they are educated. Some of them are single because the marriage code in Egypt is very oppressive. They live alone and they are happy.

Nicola: Sherif, you talk in your writing about the experience of breaking the "English shell." You were brought up in with your English mother and

When you want to wage a war, when you want to militarise, you have to mobilise people against an enemy. The Soviet Union is no longer there, and so you have to find another enemy.

growing up in the English school system in Egypt. Do you think that this experience of breaking the identity shell through your activism in Egyptian left-wing politics also helped you break the "gender shell" of male oppression?

Sherif: I think when you get used to breaking shells, when you get used to changing, then every change is a little easier than the one before. Although I also think as far as men are concerned, to become gender conscious and really believe in equality is a difficult process because [patriarchy] is very much ingrained in their upbringing, in their emotional and psychological makeup. I think it is very much up to women to be firm with men about their rights.

Nicola: It does seem like it is a struggle that we are not winning, especially for women in the South—with the new forces that are happening globally?

Nawal: I would say losing and gaining—we cannot say that women are losing. Of course there is a backlash against women's rights in every country for many reasons, including

political and economic ones. But in many ways, women are gaining. If I compare the life of my grandmother with the life of my daughter, it is a world of difference.

Nicola: You were in New York on September 11. What was it like for you?

Nawal: Well, I spent the whole year in fact between New York and New Jersey, and I witnessed the whole event. And I am going to write a novel about it. I have spent almost ten years living between Egypt and the U.S., and I have studied American society and how the U.S. government brainwashes the American people through the media. How George Bush the son, the father, and the holy ghost (laughs) really worked in a hidden way to oppress the American people through so-called security laws after September 11. The U.S. government has used the event to create a war for more economic benefits. The war has been an economic stimulus for [it].

Nicola: How did you feel being [when you were out in the streets] where anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment was strong?

Nawal: They threw thousands of young men into jail without trial and they are still there. So the whole so-called American democracy and civilisation was exposed and everyone knew it was a big lie. Also, the way they inspect people in the airport when the traveller's name is Mohammed or s/he carries an Egyptian passport is unbelievable. However, I don't want to generalise here. At the same time, on many university campuses

around the country, the anti-war movement and the wider anti-globalisation movement were active, organising demonstrations against the war in Afghanistan, against the massacres in Palestine, and against globalisation. So, what is really positive about the developments since September 11 is that groups like youth, feminists, students, peasants, trade unions and so on are all coming together against the U.S. government. This is the new resistance. These different groups are coming together, transcending their class, religion, nationality, ethnicity and colour, against the U.S. government.

Nicola: Sherif, do you agree that anti-globalisation movement is addressing all these issues?

Sherif: I think it is a growing movement. One reason for the war against terrorism that the U.S. is waging is economic—the production of arms and so on. But [it's] also because when you have war, it is difficult for social movements to find their way. People are influenced by the xenophobic, racist atmosphere. So, in order for the U.S. to [contain] against the growth of the anti-globalisation movement, which it feels is growing everywhere, the “September 11” kind of psychology needs to continue.

Nicola: It is interesting to look at the way Christian fundamentalism has played a role in this so-called war against terrorism. The term fundamentalism has always been used in reference to Islam, and yet to many of us, it is clear that Christian fundamentalism is alive and strong in

America. Jewish fundamentalism is also alive and well in Israel, if we are listening to Sharon. Why is it that there is tendency to just attach fundamentalism to Islam?

Sherif: Because the United States needs an enemy. When you want to wage a war, when you want to militarise, you have to mobilise people against an enemy. The Soviet Union is no longer there, and so you have to find another enemy. You have to prepare people for war, so you show them there is a dangerous terrorist—the Arabs, the Muslims, etc. That, I think, explains why there is this tendency to concentrate on Islamic fundamentalism. But when you say that there is also fundamentalism in Israel and the United States, where is the enemy you are fighting? The enemy is then at home.

Nicola: Nawal, Christian fundamentalism is strong in America today, isn't it?

Nawal: Very strong. In fact, since George Bush the son came to power, he has increased the budget of the military and the Christian fundamentalist groups. You see the link between the two groups. In fact, the policy of George Bush's administration is to increase also the dose of religion around the world, including Islam. You know that the American government increased the dose of the Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan. It created Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, which it began fighting when it was finished with the Soviet Union. When you listen to the language of George Bush, it is very, very religious, very Christian. Usually, we say Osama bin Laden and George

Bush are two faces of the same coin.

Question from audience: What about Palestine, are you hopeful that we will see a just and proper [Palestinian] state?

Nawal: Yes, I am very hopeful. I think both Israel and U.S. policy lost a lot politically after the massacre in Palestine. What is happening in Palestine is not a war between two armies, it is a massacre because the Palestinian people have no army. They are fighting with their bodies. They are exploding their bodies, and they are called terrorists. They are calling the victims terrorists, and that's exactly the class-patriarchal system based on punishing the victim. But the Palestinian people, and especially those young men and women who are ready to kill themselves, I think they are freedom fighters, they are not terrorists. I think they have obliged the whole world to speak about the Palestinian problem. The consciousness of people all over the world is growing in relation to Palestine, and I think they will have their rights.

I would like to say that the people killed in Palestine were not only Muslims but also Christians. So the blood that was sacrificed in Palestine did not know religion. The resistance against oppression should not differentiate along religious lines. ♡

Nicola Joseph is an Arab Australian broadcaster and trainer who is based at community radio station Radio Skid Row in Sydney. She has interviewed Nawal several times during her time as the producer and presenter of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's women's programme. Last year she won the Australian Arab Women's Media Award.