

How Saadawi's  
"Memoirs of a Woman  
Doctor" works to show  
the oppression and  
femini...



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Nawal el Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist writer, has worked throughout her life to highlight the need for improvement in the lives of the modern Arab woman. Her book, "Memoirs of a Woman Doctor", written in 1958, takes her own experiences from living in Egypt and her professional life as a doctor, and uses these to create a personal reflection on her suppression and her feelings of gender dissatisfaction as a younger woman. She reflects on not only the way men have pushed her to despise her sexuality throughout adolescence and into her adult life, but also on the constraints older women put on the younger generation of girls that are developing. By looking at Saadawi's work and examining the current day life of Egyptian woman, we can see how literature helps to share the stories of women all over the world and spread the documentation of the oppression and fighting of women everywhere for their rights and freedoms. Saadawi's, "Memoirs of a Woman Doctor" is an insightful work that uses personal experience and perspective to expose the Egyptian women's plight.

"Memoirs of a Woman Doctor" begins with a young girl starting to question why the separation between sexes is so pronounced in Egypt. Because she has a younger brother, her restrictions as a girl are juxtaposed against his freedoms as a boy. While the main character made his bed every morning, she says her brother would, "play without asking my parents' permission and came back whenever he liked, while I could only go out if and when they let me" (9). During the first section that surrounds her childhood, she constantly emphasizes her hate for being female. As she is young and has less understanding of Egyptian society and culture, she hates the entire concept of being a woman and thinks it is just because she is born a woman

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that she must endure oppression and give up personal freedom. As she grows older and is taught how to be a woman by her mother, she places the blame on the patriarchal society and its history that indeterminately favors men. When her mother teaches her how to cook, she expresses her hate for it calling it, "the hateful, constricted world of women with its permanent reek of garlic and onions" (14). She realizes that women are only valued in her society as wives who serve their husbands. Cooking and cleaning are her main obligations and they are all in an attempt to satisfy a husband. She was not allowed to laugh too loud and she had to be conservative and restricted when she ate. The main character mentions on page 22 that she is not willing to throw her life away on cooking for a husband just as all the women in her life had done before her. Her anger turns into a force for desiring change. During this process of learning about her place in society, she enters a stage of rebellion. This first begins when she cuts off her hair on page 18 saying, "my challenge of authority had turned me into an immovable force... I looked in the mirror and smiled at my short hair." Her entering into an almost strictly male dominated career field, medicine, gave her the power to push against oppression and strive for greater freedom and meaning for the lives of women in Egypt. This is perhaps best exemplified when she says, "I'd prove to nature that I could overcome the disadvantages of the frail body she'd clothed me in...I wouldn't give it a single chance to drag me into the ranks of illiterate women" (23). In her shift from blaming herself and her gender from restricting her, she realizes that societies restrictions, although powerful, are able to be broken and are not determinant of her future. She asks herself why her mother, and everyone in her life had made the

differences between women and men seem so great when they were both really so similar. She questions herself on why she had spent so much of her childhood believing her femininity was a , “ weakness and disgrace” (25). Continuing to challenge Egyptian society, she becomes wrapped up in her medical studies and is confronted with the dead bodies, both males and females, and is hit with the realization that we are all mortal and therefore none of us have any real power or superiority over the other gender.

It takes Saadawi a while and some distance from the medical field to realize that her constant hate for not only her womanhood, but also the patriarchal society she lives in has done nothing except bringing her unhappiness. Page 39 includes her thoughts, “ I’d wasted my childhood and adolescence and the dawn of my young womanhood in a fire battle: against whom? Against myself, my humanity, and my natural impulses.” Her extreme hatred for men and pity for herself had lead her to lead an angry life. She went from hating not only the women who told her she was not as good as men, but also the men who were born with entitlement for no apparent reason. She suddenly has a kind of rebirth and even acknowledges she has a newfound faith in humanity. Although she still has resentment towards the place of females in society, she finds there is greater meanings in life, including love, and pursues this when she finds her first husband. She still is an extremely independent and hardworking woman, however she is able to change her hatred from men to a dislike of the system. We see a big change from the character that appeared on page 11 saying, “ I began to search constantly for weak spots in males to console me for the powerlessness imposed on me by the fact of being female.” She says that she feels the weariness she had

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for males evaporating and she becomes more of an advocate for bringing young girls up by helping them to develop with the realization that they have both a mind and a body. This comes partly as a result of her first romantic relations with a man. Her first husband appears to believe that women should have more freedom and rights and this makes her see that she cannot classify all men as oppressive and greedy. Soon her first marriage goes downhill with her husband stating, "I'm in charge...Of this house and all that's in it, including you" (62). She finds that being a strong and empowered woman in Egypt's current society is threatening to men who are used to having a woman always there for them attending to their needs at home. She threatens to disrupt the typical family order that husbands were used to and this caused him to try to force her back into an oppressed state. They end up divorcing, and although she finds another husband later, we see during her divorce she questions again the capacity for society to accept the desire for millennial women to live their own independent lives. She feels alone in society again and says, "woman faces the man alone, but the man stands barricaded by tradition, laws and creeds, backed up by generations and eons of history" (75). This is an extremely powerful statement and makes the reader reflect on the cultural situations she is put up against. To reverse tradition and custom is a challenge that would take a large social shift with the backing of many supporters.

In this book, Saadawi expresses how alone she feels in her push for women's rights. This is best summed up from her reflections as one of the only female doctors, and an unmarried woman, "how cold solitude was, how hard the silence" (83). Although the feminist movement in Egypt has grown and <https://assignbuster.com/how-saadawis-memoirs-of-a-woman-doctor-works-to-show-the-oppression-and-feminist-sentiments-of-women-in-modern-day-egypt/>

changed a lot throughout the years, the founding women of these feminist movements felt rejected from society and undervalued. This can be seen in the writing of many other Egyptian authors. Many critics have both praised and criticized Saadawi's work entitled, "Memoirs of a Woman Doctor." Hafez argues that Saadawi has failed to make a real impact in the Middle Eastern world but rather caters her work towards the Western world. He questions why other more skilled Arab women writers have not had the same success as her in the West. Perhaps their books have not been translated as often as Saadawi's or their novels don't appeal to a wider more universal audience. Regardless, "there is a wide gap between Saadawi's standing in the West and her own Arab culture" (189). He harshly says that she has failed to make "socio-political change." Although Hafez greatly criticized her appeal in the West and failure for change in the Arab world, it is very important that some of these Egyptian works are able to reach a wider audience and are able to communicate to groups of people who have little background on the Arab world. He also argues that the ending where she finds happiness with a man ruins the point of the book. He makes a valid point saying, "Does the solution of an individual's problem eradicate the social ones?" (190). On the contrary, I thought her portrayal of the man at the end was refreshing and helped to give a fairer view of Egyptian men, as well as help to adequately end the tale of the main character's self-discovery. The reader still understands that the main character resents the current political climate, however this story is more about her growing up and learning to live in this society that oppresses women while being an independent rather than a huge political work. It helps to educate the reader on how Arab women feel

and it shows how hard it is to make change in a society which forces women to take up roles that are inferior to the men. She does go against the traditional career path for women and the traditional familial role, but the main character does realize that not everything is bad and that she shouldn't torture herself by holding so much hate in her heart. This story is very real and not just the idealized version of feminism. It resembles a real woman's life rather than being focused on a political agenda. Saadawi includes elements of feminism but does not denounce the whole of Egyptian culture. We watch the main character grow and struggle to both fit in as well as reject parts of society. If this is read not as a story and as a piece of political material, one fails to see the complexity of all of the lessons and insights Saadawi provides the reader with. It might be pertinent to mention that in very traditional Arab societies, women who speak out against discrimination are violating the cultural restraints placed on women. Women speaking up and going against the man is seen in a negative light, and so through this book, Saadawi not only breaks barriers with her characters, but also in her own real life and publication of this book.

In the 20th century, common themes found between Egyptian writers were feminism and the role of women in the Middle East. Another well-known Egyptian writer, Mahfouz, has a lot of feminist themes in his works. "The Cairo Trilogy" is one of the best examples of this, with the stereotypical representation of an Egyptian wife through the character Amina. Amina is not allowed to leave her house and schedules everything, including her sleep around her husband's life. He is working and going out all day, while she waits at home for him. All of her actions and chores serve the purpose of

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aiding her husband. She finally works up the courage to leave the house one day, and as a result, is thrown out of the house and told not to come back. In "Midaq Alley," the male character that jokes about relationships with women, forces his sister to commit suicide because she is found with a man. Women are portrayed as these beings that are not allowed to do anything and only exist as servants to men. Men have the freedom to go around doing whatever they like, as seen in the childhood reflections of Saadawi's main character, but if the woman steps out of place, it is seen as ruining the reputation of the family. Purity and pride are tied up in the lives of women and their slightest actions can affect the entire family. Although Mahfouz doesn't give us the first person insight of the life of an Egyptian woman that Saadawi does, he provides us with examples of the typical restraints that are put on women, and the ways in which they are forced to live that Saadawi's narrative lacks. Now that we have explored Egyptian women's rights as portrayed by two writers from the end of the 20th century to the very beginning of the twenty first, with a focus on Saadawi, we can see how the political and cultural climate affected these writings and explore the current day situation, as well as the political climate while Saadawi was writing this work. During Saadawi's push to publish her book, she faced discrimination and censorship. The fact that she was restricted in the writing of her own book about restrictions on the freedom of women, is a bit ironic. She recounted that Rose el-Yusuf had published her work by cutting out some sections of it. She tried to get her whole book published, "but the publisher absolutely didn't accept to publish the novel in its original form" (el Saadawi, 1988: Introduction). Saadawi said that because of her young age and



excitement about her book, she settled with it being censored. It is interesting to see how the topics in her book played out in her life and the publication of "Memoirs of a Woman Doctor". This book was released in 1957, four years after women were given more political rights, including the right to vote. Women were suddenly allowed to have a say in government, and the first women were elected into parliament soon after. This was just a year after the government restricted all political parties in 1952, which resulted in the banning of women's movements and organizations. The beginning of the 1950's was full of quick changes, and superficial benefits to the women's rights campaigns. The problems in the home lives of women and the way they were treated did not really improve, although the government granting women more rights did make it feel like things were headed in a positive direction. The social and cultural problems having to do with the freedoms of women were unfortunately left unchanged during this time period.

This decade experienced a bit of a lull in feminist activity, however, Saadawi is credited with having helped revive the feminist movement in the 1970s with her book, "Women and Sex." Current day affairs are still very unstable. In a study done by The Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2013, it was revealed that out of the 22 Arab countries they surveyed, Egypt was the worst for women in terms of violence, rights, home life, and economic and political involvement combined. Plagued with sexual harassment and female genital mutilation, Egyptian women are not only confined by their society, but abused. The Foundation also mentioned a problem with, "discriminatory laws and a spike in trafficking." On a more universal and recent scale, The <https://assignbuster.com/how-saadawis-memoirs-of-a-woman-doctor-works-to-show-the-oppression-and-feminist-sentiments-of-women-in-modern-day-egypt/>

Global Gender Gap report in 2015 named Egypt one of the top ten worst countries for gender equality. The Global Gender Gap from 2017 put Egypt way below the average for women's rights, and they came out as the 6th worst in incorporating women into the labor force. Although the unemployment of women is high, the participation of women in education and their access to it has grown tremendously. The implantation of "The National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women" was an acknowledgment by the government of the terrible conditions women live in, and was enforced by the United Nations' Global Database on Violence against Women. It was put in place in 2015 and will be redone in 2020. They try to understand why women are oppressed in Egypt, and what things need to happen to correct this situation. They say that the, "misinterpretation of religious texts, wrongful traditions and customs and the inability of the legislator to provide sufficient protection to women" have caused major problems for the fair treatment of women in Egyptian society. Although the constitution declares everyone as equal, women face discrimination in their home lives and in the government. The report even goes as far to say that Egyptian society, "opposes the development of women." Because violence is one of the largest problems facing Egyptian Women, it is the main concern of organizations and women's rights groups. The National Council for Women in Egypt has taken a stand on violence and women's rights, and is a main force in advocating for this. It is really amazing to see how even as things have not progressed much socially, there is a huge increase in the government participation and the foundation of many organizations to

combat the oppression and to facilitate the growth of Egyptian women's rights.

As Saadawi and various other Egyptian writers have spread awareness about the treatment of women in Egypt through literature, various other forms of media have come out to advocate for women's rights. The film "678" set in Cairo was released in 2010 to protest against the harassment of women on public transportation, while "The People's Girls" was made in 2016 to address sexual harassment on the streets. A multitude of Egyptian women are finally speaking out and creating content to help further their cause. It is imperative to realize that women in Egypt still have a long way to go in terms of gaining equality in both the government and in home life, however great achievements have been made. Cultural laws are barriers to even progressive government legislation, but the increasing government involvement and women being vocal about equality are helping to slowly shift this. In "Memoirs of a Woman Doctor," Saadawi shows the struggles of a young Egyptian woman that has reached wide audiences and helped to bring awareness to the plight of the Egyptian women.

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