

"FEMINISM IS NOT A WESTERN INVENTION": EGYPT'S ANTICOLONIAL FEMINIST HISTORY

AHMED ABDELHAMID AHMED

In March of 2021, visionary Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi died after an accomplished life of nearly 90 years.¹ Given the controversial figure she was, her death prompted varied reactions, from those who derived inspiration from and mourned the loss of a literary giant in the region, to those who were pleased with the retirement of her contextually radical writing. Regardless of one's stance, it is undeniable that her work was profoundly influential in shaping the sociopolitical consciousness of the Arab world and feminist and liberatory discourses.

El Saadawi was born to a political family in a small Egyptian village called Kafr Tahla. Her father was a government official who had campaigned against British colonialism in the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, and the influence of his anticolonial sentiments would become apparent in her future work. After attending university, El Saadawi became a psychiatrist, working primarily with rural Egyptian women. Through her medical practice, she surveyed and connected the hardships her patients faced to wider societal issues of patriarchal, classist, and imperialist oppression.² She published a plethora of foundational books, including *Woman and Sex*, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, and *Memoirs from a Women's Prison*.³ In my personal favorite, *Woman at Point*

Zero, El Saadawi writes that "truth is like death in that it kills." She refutes the assertion that her character Firdaus is a "savage and dangerous woman" for being in control of her sexuality and highlighting the contradictions of patriarchal sanctimony, insisting that Firdaus is simply "speaking the truth [...] and the truth is savage and dangerous."⁴

Although death was not the price El Saadawi paid for expressing her truth, the costs were plentiful. She was jailed as a political prisoner under the Sadat regime and exiled to the U.S., where she lectured at elite academic institutions such as Harvard, Duke, and Georgetown University. She self-identified as a historical socialist feminist and navigated anticolonial class considerations in her analysis of women's subjectivities.⁵ Despite El Saadawi's acclaimed revolutionary life, however, Western media dismissively described her as "the Simone De Beauvoir of the Arab world" upon her death.⁶

This essay aims to deconstruct this characterization by analyzing the faux East-West dichotomy in feminist discourse. What does it mean for El Saadawi to be defined in relation to a Western—in this case, French—subject? How does this understanding of feminism as an inherently Western invention impact women in the Arab world and



the larger formerly colonized global South? And how would El Saadawi feel about such a characterization?

Distinguished Egyptian-American journalist Mona El Tahawy criticizes the West's eulogy of El Saadawi by emphasizing that "[Egyptian feminists] are not local versions of white feminists."⁷ This Western association is indeed ironic given the fact that El Saadawi frequently asserted that she was "critical of the colonial, capitalist, racist, patriarchal mindset" of the imperial superpowers.⁸ Rather, this characterization is just one of many consequences of the West's monopolization of feminism. Feminism is often regarded as a Western conception, leading to the wrongful perception that feminists from the East are pursuing a Western agenda or devoid of their own agency. This aligns with the wider historical phenomenon of feminism's co-optation by the West in order to justify imperial and colonial pursuits. For example, American politicians were quick to justify the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan by highlighting the lack of freedom enjoyed by Afghan women and the supposed liberation that would arise from U.S.

military occupation.⁹

In 2001, New York City Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney donned a burqa on the House floor as a visual prop for her argument that the invasion of Afghanistan was somehow feminist because Muslim women needed the United States to save them. Yet even after two decades of war, a tumultuous U.S. withdrawal, and the subsequent Taliban insurrection, Maloney held fast to her white savior complex and Islamophobic views, claiming that the "war helped women [...] and overall helped the country."¹⁰ If feminism and women's rights were truly of concern, the U.S. would not have funded the extremist, fundamentalist, and anti-women Afghan mujahideen—the group that later became the Taliban—in their proxy war against the Soviet-backed Afghan government during the Cold War.¹¹ But feminism is not the empire's objective; instead, it is performatively and strategically used to manufacture mainstream approval for violent imperialist endeavors.

In contrast with Western narratives regarding Middle Eastern women and their presumed need for saving, feminism in Egypt has historical-



The artificial distinction between civilized and uncivilized has repeatedly allowed the West to claim ownership of the classical liberal values.."

ly operated within an anticolonial framework, in large part due to the parallel rise of feminist mobilization and anticolonial nationalism in Egypt. Contrary to the British assertion that their empire served women's interests, Egyptian women organized politically through participation in nationalist demonstrations during the Revolution of 1919, becoming crucial political actors in the partial removal of the British from Egypt in 1922.¹² Although spotlighting individuals in the retelling of history tends to diminish the importance of collective action by the masses, in this specific analysis, it is helpful to allude to notable anticolonial feminist leaders like El Saadawi in reflecting on wider trends in 20th-century Egyptian feminist consciousness.

Another such leader is Huda Sha'rawi, who founded the Egyptian Feminist Union and was a pioneering figure in both Egyptian nationalist and feminist discourse, often combining both in the form of anticolonial feminism. She served as the first president of the Wafdist—the leading political party at the time—Women's Central Committee, holding meetings to organize the boycott of British goods and leading revolutionary anticolonial women's demonstrations. She also attended feminist conferences across the world in cities like Rome, Istanbul, Paris, and Geneva, and later sponsored the Eastern Women's Congress for the Defense of Palestine in 1938.¹³ In her autobiography, Sha'rawi discusses the intersection between nationalism and feminism, writing, "Let it nev-

er be said that there was a woman in Egypt who failed, for personal reasons, to perform her duty to the nation."¹⁴ In other words, Egyptian feminism's propensity for anticolonial praxis debunks the often assumed East-West binary in Western feminist discourse and theory while also demonstrating that the assertion that feminism is inherently Western is both invalid and ahistorical.

Palestinian academic and author Edward Said has argued that this East-West dichotomy contributes to the "manufactured clash of civilizations"¹⁵ which has historically functioned as the cultural justification for colonialism. Violent colonial endeavors have been portrayed as emancipatory, "civilizing" missions, in which Europeans would finally enlighten the Eastern peoples who were seen as barbaric and primitive by the West. In essence, imperial powers constructed the division between "The East" and "The West" to expand their territorial dominion, pillage colonies' economic resources, and dominate indigenous populations. The artificial distinction between "civilized" and "uncivilized" has repeatedly allowed the West to claim ownership of the classical liberal values of freedom and natural rights while simultaneously rationalizing colonialism, since these values are selectively applied to only Western, white subjects.

Conceptualizing the East-West dichotomy as a product of racism and colonialism is essential to understanding the implications of its application to feminism. The West has historically weaponized the feminist struggle to justify colonialism and neocolonialism in the Middle East, even though feminists in Egypt and the wider Arab world outspokenly rejected and resisted colonial rule. Thus, when Lord Cromer, the British consul general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, proclaimed in his memoir *Modern Egypt* that Islam "as a social system has been a complete failure" and defended

the British occupation of Egypt because “Islam keeps women in a position of marked inferiority,”¹⁶ we must remember that this sentiment does not stem from a desire to protect women, but rather a desire to preserve empire. Cromer’s performance of feminist solidarity is even more hypocritical when contextualized with his views regarding the emancipation of women; he was a leader of the anti-suffragette cause in the United Kingdom, even serving as president of the Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage in 1908.¹⁷ Cromer’s hypocrisy is indicative of how the West’s weaponization of feminism operates—women’s struggles are used to reinforce the faux East-West divide, while, in reality, patriarchy permeates the social fabric of both eastern and western cultures.

As El Saadawi notes, “Feminism is not a Western invention. Feminism is not invented by American women, as many people think [...], no, feminism is embedded in the culture and in the struggle of all women all over the world.”¹⁸ Indeed, the patriarchy is blind to borders—it transcends the boundaries of nation-states and affects women around the globe. As such, the colonial West’s notion that feminism—the act of rebelling against patriarchy—can be attributed to a single region is unequivocally false. However, this argument in no way denies the fact that patriarchy can manifest itself in a particularly brutal manner across the Middle East. Although we must bear in mind that Western colonialism and imperialism hold significant responsibility for the instability and inequality seen today across the Middle East, at a time when morality laws and religious fundamentalism continue to stifle the civil liberties of women and other sexual minorities in the region, it is not credible to blame the colonial west for all these current patriarchal issues.^{19,20} Ultimately, the very imposition of the East-West dichotomy in this discourse is flawed because it positions feminism—the liberatory struggle of women—as inherently Western, and in doing so, neglects the anticolonial feminist tradition that Nawal El Sadaawi, Huda Sha’rawi, and countless other feminists established in the Middle East.

