

Interview: In conversation with...

“We link secularism with feminism. We cannot have democracy with half the society oppressed”

Saturday 6 February 2010, by [ASHLEY Brian](#), [El SAADAWI Nawal](#) (Date first published: November 2009).

Egyptian writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi is widely acclaimed in Arab countries and in many other parts of the world for her outspoken views. Her writings explore the situation of women in Egyptian and Arab societies. She is also an outspoken political commentator, and has endured prison and the banning of her works in Egypt as a result of her critical views. *Amandla!* editor Brian Ashley conducted an exclusive interview with Ms El Saadawi.

Amandla!: Can you please tell our readers about the situation in Egypt today? Has there been a revival of the labour and social movements since the occurrence of strikes in the textile industry?

Nawal El Saadawi: Aside from the situation in the textile industry, things seem to be going backwards in Egypt. Many people have lost hope in the governing regime and in the political situation in the Middle East. The Palestinian problem and Gaza reflects on Egypt. People in Egypt and in all the Arab countries are very dissatisfied with American foreign policy and its total support of Israel, especially since the Gaza massacre.

The economic invasion of Egypt by neo-colonialism has led to an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. We do not produce what we eat and we do not eat what we produce, and this vicious circle increases poverty. We import food like wheat from the US and export very little because of the unequal trade relations, the so-called “free market”. Sixty per cent of Egyptians live under the poverty line. Many factories, particularly in the textile industry, have closed down and scores of workers were dismissed. University graduates cannot find jobs. People are angry and tired.

How is the anger that people feel channelled?

Egyptians cannot be liberated from external or internal powers unless they are aware and organised, and this is largely not happening. Serious and progressive organisations that want to be proactive, for example about poverty eradication, are hampered by government interference and banning.

I imagine that the global economic crisis has had a severe impact and aggravates some of the circumstances you’ve outlined.

Yes, Egyptians have suffered a great deal, like most people in the world. The government has tried to blame Egypt’s poverty on women’s fertility causing over-population and that we should practise

family planning and diminish birth rates This is partly true, but the real cause of poverty is not the fertility of Egyptian women; it is that our resources are exploited by neo-colonial powers. Also, we do not develop our agriculture and industry. Our development stopped under so-called "development", and American aid also is a very negative thing because the aid does not go to the poor people; it goes to the rich people and also to America.

In South Africa we are beginning to talk about the convergence of multiple crises, such as the economy, climate change and poverty. Does this notion of a crisis of civilisation have a resonance in Egypt amongst progressive forces?

Yes. But in Egypt there is also huge cultural crisis which has grown since Sadat's regime. People are really threatened by the conflict between fundamentalist Muslim and Christian religious groups who are supported, ironically, by the local government and by the US neo-colonial power - the three unholy alliance. Even Obama himself supports so-called freedom of religions.

How has the rise of fundamentalism impacted on the organisation of people into movements that can resist the neo-colonial onslaught of which you speak?

People are diverted from the real battle: the economic battle, the neo-colonial battle to side battles. For example, a few days ago the whole of the country was in conflict speaking about the nicob, whether women should cover their faces according to Islam or just have the hijab cover the head and the body but the feet should be shown. Can you imagine that this absorbed the energy and the minds of everybody? It is as if people are hypnotised by religion; there is no thinking. They are just increasing the doses of religion in schools. Education is deteriorating; people graduate from universities not knowing anything, ignorant.

There is corruption in the government, a lot of bribes - all this makes people passive. There is a lot of oppression to any real opposition. Those who are active are hindered; some people who go out in demonstration are beaten by the police. Of course we have opposition, but I call it the legal opposition. Under Nasser we had a one party system. When Sadat was in power and the US supported him, they gave him US aid, which is a very corrupting element to countries in Africa. One of the conditions of US aid to Sadat was that he should have a so-called "democracy", to have a multi-party system. So Sadat started a multi-party system, he started the opposition. In fact, the net result of those parties created by Sadat, because of US pressure and the US aid, resulted in division of the people, not in organisations. The parties were just ink on paper, not representing the people and not coming from the people - it came from above, from the government. So our upcoming elections have not produced a candidate that can stand in front of the son of Mubarak who is going to inherit the throne. Ultimately the multi-party system did not really fail because it did not come from the people.

Is there a sense in which Egyptian and Middle Eastern writers are beginning to reflect on these issues in their work? And what do you see their responsibility as being?

Yes, because everything has a positive and a negative. The intellectuals in Egypt were oppressed by fundamentalists and the government. I myself experienced this: Following a play I wrote in 2005/2006, Al-Azhar, an Islamic university and the fundamentalists took me to courts as a heretic, an apostate, and that I should lose my Egyptian nationality. I then lived in Europe and in the US for three years and I continued writing all the time. Many other poets and creative writers in Egypt have been oppressed, accused of being a heretic and against Islam. But in spite of that, writers are challenging and they are not stopping. And the younger generation are using the internet, Facebook, blogs, YouTube and Twitter to communicate, to organise and to protest. While I was teaching in Atlanta we started the Global Solidarity for Secular Society with Iranians, Egyptians, Somali and

also Americans who were fed up with the Christian coalition in the US, especially in the south in Atlanta, the Bible Belt. When I came back to Cairo two months ago we started the Egyptian Solidarity for Secular Society. We want to separate state from religion: we want a secular constitution, a secular society, a secular family code. And this movement is growing among the young people.

That's very encouraging. I think one of the outstanding contributions you've made in Egypt and in the Middle East and generally has been your contribution at the level of promoting a feminist perspective and analysis - and I would imagine that's rooted in this society for a secular future.

Exactly. I've been writing for 55 years, I have written 47 books in Arabic, and they are almost in every home in Egypt and in the Arab countries, and translated. I came back to Egypt because I am optimistic. I see that it's time now to work and it's not only me. When I arrived back hundreds of young people contacted me that they want to do something, and groups are forming. So what gives me hope is the younger generation; they are fed up and they want to do something.

What is the essence of your feminism and the message that you tell young people today?

We link secularism with feminism. We cannot have democracy with half the society oppressed; without the liberation and freedom of women, without equality between the sexes. Women are oppressed by religions – by Christianity, Islam, Judaism – and a secular society helps the liberation of women. A big international conference organised by different organisations in Egypt and other Arab and European countries will be held in Cairo from 16 to 18 December 2010 on feminism and secularism. There is a connection between different feminist organisations in Europe and the States and the International Arab Women Solidarity calling for secularism because religion interferes everywhere.

Turning to climate change - what is your opinion on how the new element of neo-colonialism is impacting on societies by bringing into existence a mechanism of carbon trading which in effect would make the south, make Africa, a place where pollution can be bought and sold?

Cairo is one of the most polluted cities in the world. We have what we call the “black cloud” and the sky of Cairo is black especially in autumn when you don't see the sun. You cannot imagine the effect on the health of people. Obama speaks a lot about that – it was global warming, now climate change – I think they change only the names. But in fact because of these neo-colonial powers, because of these very unjust global laws, nothing is happening. Nothing. Profit – how can we stop the profit of the private sector? They want profit only.

And thus they don't wish to shift their methods of production and their exploitation of the natural resources.

Yes. Human beings are very cheap labour, especially from poor places in Africa or Asia. They don't care about the health of people, they care about profits – that's why they don't change ways of industrial production and continue polluting the soil, the air, the water, everything. So long as there is no equality between nations or countries – it is power that dominates, military power – we will have this climate problem.

P.S.

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