



The Chicago Reporter

OUR VOICES

El Saadawi Was Much More Than News Media Portrayed



by The Chicago Reporter

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On March 22, 2021, renowned Egyptian Arab feminist Nawal El Saadawi died of natural causes. A former **comrade**, she authored **more than 50 books** and her work has been translated into more than 30 languages. It is no surprise that many corporate media obituaries have misrepresented her contributions, focusing only on aspects of her work that align with the sensationalized racist ideas that circulate across U.S. society about Arab and Muslim women.

In the **Washington Post**, for example, the story goes like this: El Saadawi fought for women's rights and against female genital mutilation (FGM), and received death threats for criticizing Islam. To be sure, El Saadawi fought for women's rights, against FGM, and received death threats. Yet she fought through the

framework of international socialist feminism, arguing that patriarchy is strengthened by international capitalism, not necessarily Islam. The reductionist views about her, however, miss the primary point underlying all of El Saadawi's life's work: The fight for women's rights cannot be separated from the fight against global capitalism and imperialism.

When **I worked with** El Saadawi in the 1990s, she helped grow the political consciousness of many young Arab American feminists by repeatedly reminding us that you cannot separate patriarchy from class oppression, U.S.-led imperialism and war. By framing her struggle as only a problem of women's rights, obituary readers are left to assume that the problems Arab women face are simply internal problems of Arab society, culture or religion. As The New York Times puts it: El Saadawi fought for women's rights in the "patriarchal Arab world."

The corporate media would have readers believe that what makes her a hero is that she fought against Arab patriarchy — supposedly the most violent patriarchy in the world. Ironically, the western celebration of her life contributes to the very harm she challenged: the harm of western imperialism.

Remembrances of El Saadawi call to mind many politician's "safe" embrace of **Martin Luther King, Jr.** These politicians cast aside much of the radical challenge he posed. They cite his "I have a dream" speech (of a nation where people will not judge one another by the color of their skin), but too many leave aside his critique of economic exploitation and militarism, particularly the US war against Vietnam and deny the full **vision for social change** he promoted.

Arab feminists have been **challenging** the corporate media's limited understanding of feminism for decades. In this case, reductionist views about El Saadawi's worldview begin and end with a focus on her critique of religion/Islam and Arab culture's treatment of women. Yet her critiques of religion **assume that** a global patriarchal class system encouraged religious fundamentalism across the globe and that Reagan and Bush encouraged Christian fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism. She **said**, "They needed God to justify injustice." Out of this viewpoint, she used to refer to Islamist extremism and Christian fundamentalism as two sides of the same coin.

El Saadawi came of age around the time of what were then known as Third World liberation movements, a period when social movements in the Arab region relied upon international socialism as a framework for resisting western imperialism. From this context, and as a medical doctor, she challenged U.S. development policies for blaming poor people for poverty, such as population control policies that **she said** work with multinational pharmaceutical corporations to exploit poor people and women in the global south.

The U.S. corporate media has also sensationalized El Saadawi's **imprisonment** under Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, failing to mention the context, leading readers to believe it was simply, because she was a

feminist in an Arab country. Yet she was imprisoned after criticizing Sadat for his lack of democracy and his expansion of Egyptian markets to global capitalism, contributing to a larger gap between rich and poor, which devastated the lives of poor women.

Why then would the U.S. corporate media erase the full spectrum of El Saadawi's view? We have learned from history that European and U.S. colonizers — from the British Lord Cromer in late 1880's Egypt to George Bush with the launch of the 2001 war on terror — have relied upon the Orientalist stereotype that Arab and Muslim society is the most patriarchal and misogynistic in the world. Better defined as “colonialist or imperialist feminism,” this viewpoint relies on racist ideas about Arab culture and Islam's treatment of women that, like the obituaries about El Saadawi, remove and isolate women's issues from history and politics. This reinforces the stereotype that this is just how people, culture, and religion are in that region. The view that Arabs and Muslims, as this thinking holds, have savage ways of treating women has been repeated by elected officials, Hollywood, and the news media and it has become a commonplace way of thinking in the U.S.

From El Saadawi, I learned the term the “feminization of poverty” and how Iraqi women have been made poorer by the war on Iraq in the name of development and democracy. She stood in stark contrast to Laura Bush and U.S. feminist groups like the Feminist Majority who used the argument that wars can liberate women to justify the war on Afghanistan.

Journalists writing for U.S. corporate media would benefit from learning more about feminism from the Arab region, and from U.S. feminist of color movements. INCITE!, a network of radical feminists of color organizing to end state violence and violence, for example, has rightly insisted that wars do not liberate women and that genocide does not equal justice.

El Saadawi's more expansive feminist view has been overlooked by too many journalists. With Republicans and Democrats alike pushing for military “solutions” around the world, and the growing crisis of racial capitalism exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, her voice and broader feminist politics will be missed. Let us not forget what El Saadawi affirmed: Capitalism, imperialism, racism, and war are indeed feminist issues.

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