



Muslim Feminist Consciousness: Reading Nawal El Saadawi's Memoirs of a Woman Doctor Isma Hamid

*Asst. Professor, Dept. of English Language and Literature,
Islamic University of Science and Technology, Jammu and Kashmir, India*

Received: 23.03.2026; Accepted: 30.03.2026; Available online: 31.03.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

The paper analyses Memoirs of a Woman Doctor (1988) by Nawal El Saadawi as an early and forceful critique of gendered power in modern Egypt wherein her memoir positions female selfhood at the crossing point of body, class, medicine, religion, and nation. It also emphasizes that the memoir exposes how patriarchal authority borrows the language of morality and religion in order to naturalize women's subordination, while never reducing Islam itself to oppression. Further the paper explores reveals how the modern female doctor is produced inside institutions shaped by colonial modernity, class hierarchy, and state reform, so that professional advancement never fully frees the woman doctor from masculine power. Saadawi's memoir is thus not only a narrative of personal awakening but also investigates how the female body becomes a battleground on which patriarchy, modern science, and national respectability struggle for control.

Key words: patriarchy, Muslim feminism, writing back, life writing, memoir

Introduction:

Nawal El Saadawi (1931- 2021) holds a singular place in modern Arab literature who wrote as physician, novelist, memoirist, critic, and public intellectual, and she made women's bodily and social experience central to literary form itself. In her works, fiction and testimony rarely merge where narrative becomes a way to expose what polite discourse suppresses, with regard to sexuality, class, religion, medicine, and state power. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, was first published in 1958, and belongs to Saadawi's early phase, yet it already contains many of the concerns that later made her one of the most debated feminist voices in Arabic letters. The memoir foregrounds her struggle not only against men as individuals but also against an entire cultural system that conditions her to despise her body and distrust its desire, that leads her to find refuge through professional success, but to her disillusionment discover that even modern institutions reproduce the same hierarchal order. Thus, through postcolonial Islamic feminist lense, this paper argues that women's oppression is often justified through patriarchal religious discourses rather than divine decree. Secondly, it shows that for women freedom cannot be achieved through modern professions as they themselves are fractured by class power, masculinist science, and the residue of colonial modernity. Thence Saadawi's writing remains essential to any account of feminist Muslim women's thought because it contests the historical uses of religion in gendered domination.

Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla Egypt and studied medicine at Cairo University, her medical profession enabled her to merge medical experience, social critique, and literary experiment into her body of literary work. Due to her explicit and unapologetic views, her literary career was marked by public controversy over censorship, imprisonment, exile, heresy and these conflicts and historical pressures shaped her prose to a large extent. Saadawi's immense contribution to Arab literature in terms of making women's embodied experience a central literary subject rather than a marginal moral theme and fused autobiographical voice with fiction, testimony, and polemic, widening what counted as serious Arabic prose. She inscribed Arab women's writing inside both local histories and transnational feminist debate, refusing the false choice between cultural authenticity and imported feminism (Amireh 230) and treated "medicine not as neutral knowledge but as a field entangled with gender, class, and power" (Valassopoulos 77). From her early work such as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1958) and her seminal nonfiction like *Women and Sex* (1969) to her best-known indictment of gendered violence in *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), the foundational transnational critique of *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), and later autobiographical works including *A Daughter of Isis* (1999) and *Walking Through Fire* (2002), Saadawi's scholarship consistently linked feminist prose to questions of narrative voice, genre experimentation, and political risk. Her prison memoir *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1983) and novels such as *God Dies by the Nile* (1974) and *The Fall of the Imam* (1987) further reveal her sustained critique of patriarchy, state repression, and religious authoritarianism *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi* (2010), her collected work substantiates, that she permanently reshaped both literary expression and feminist thought in the Arab world.

Situating Saadawi within Arab feminist literary history, Malti-Douglas focusses on placing Saadawi within Arab and Islamic textual traditions rather than treating her as an isolated figure, whileas Badran and Cooke's anthology positions her within a century-long output of Arab feminist writing. However, Saadawi's transnational reception has been mediated by Western feminist and Orientalist discourses that often flatten her intellectual complexity and complicates the discussions of her writings (Amireh). Most of the scholarship on Saadawi focusses on secular and anti-religion stance of her works placing her wholly outside Islamic feminist paradigm, whereas scholarship shows that her work consistently attacks patriarchal uses of religion and opens space for a justice-based critique of gender oppression. Therefore, this paper fills this critical gap by forging in Islamic feminist concerns about patriarchal religious discourse into a sustained dialogue with postcolonial analysis of medicine, class, and modernity, thus analysing the memoir through both frames simultaneously rather than treating them as separate interpretive frameworks.

This study begins with close reading of the memoir as a literary text, analyses its first-person voice, recurring images of the body, the figure of the woman doctor, scenes of marriage and work, and the narrative movement from alienation toward critical awareness. It then adopts a postcolonial Islamic feminist frame in order to study *the memoir* as a narrative of feminist consciousness formed within intersecting structures of power to examine how the memoir represents the relationship among women, religious discourse, and patriarchal authority in Arab Muslim society. Finally, the paper employs a postcolonial feminist lens to show that gender domination in the memoir is shaped not

only by family custom but also by medicine, class hierarchy, nationalist reform, and institutions formed within colonial and postcolonial modernity. This approach is especially useful because the memoir centres a woman doctor, a figure produced by modern education and state medicine who nonetheless remains trapped within social arrangements that make female achievement conditional and fragile. As a result, the memoir contests patriarchal interpretations embedded in Muslim social life while also rejecting the colonial assumption that modern institutions alone can emancipate women, and Saadawi emerges as a writer of internal critique who writes from within Arab culture's conflicts rather than from outside them.

The memoir follows a young Egyptian woman who grows up hating the fact of being female as she associates femininity with weakness, blood, vulnerability, and social humiliation while as male body appears to her at first as freedom, strength, and distance from pain. She advances in education and becomes a doctor, to find salvation in study, discipline, and medicine, where knowledge seems to promise escape from the bodily destiny assigned to women and where she gains intellectual authority and a degree of social mobility. Despite this understanding her professional achievement does not end her alienation as the medical world she inhabits teaches her to medically explore the bodies, but it does not heal the forms of contempt and hierarchy that structured her own relation. Further this alienation is intensified by the event of her marriage as she experiences the possession, expectation, and inequality within the institution of marriage. With this she comes to realise that her earlier hatred of her body was itself produced by a social patriarchal conditioning that led her to experience womanhood as inferior. Therefore, while emerging out from the fantasy that she can become free merely by imitating masculine detachment she learns the hard lessons of self-recognition, where she rejects the idea of femininity built on submission and silence. The result is an emergent selfhood grounded in dignity, labour, and equality rather than obedience.

The memoir remains one of Saadawi's most revealing early works because it condenses the larger structure of her thought. The memoir traces how a girl taught to despise her femaleness becomes a woman able to name the structures that produced that hatred. From its opening, the narrative frames this internalized hatred as a consequence of social conditioning imposed through the family. She recalls, "the conflict between me and my femininity began very early on, before my female characteristics had become pronounced and before I knew anything about myself, my sex and my origins, indeed before I knew the nature of the cavity which had housed me before I was expelled into the wide world". (9). Therefore, it exposes the joint force of patriarchy, moral authority, medicine, and social respectability.

This primordial conflict is actively cultivated by her mother, who polices the little girl's every movement and bodily expression. Saadawi describes how her body is marked as inherently shameful, "I was a girl. I had to watch every movement I made, hide my longing for the food, eat slowly and drink my soup without a sound" (9). The mother's gaze internalizes this surveillance, so much so her own body becomes an object of shame, "shameful! Everything in me was shameful and I was a child of just nine years old" (10). This impacts her psychologically, "the first real tears I shed in my life weren't because I'd done badly at school or broken something valuable but because I was a girl. I wept over my femininity even before I knew what it was" (10).

This internalization of patriarchal authority through maternal discipline becomes a "tyrannical femininity" the socially imposed construction of womanhood that constrains female subjectivity from within (Guèye 162). Guèye argues that the protagonist's struggle throughout the memoir is precisely against this "tension opposing the cultural construction of femininity and women's subjective consciousness" (160). Through her own internalization of patriarchal ideology, Saadawi's mother comes across as tyrannical figure who forces the same gendered evaluation on her daughter. Capturing this paradox Saadawi observes, "Could any human being love someone who'd been forced upon them? And if my mother loved me instinctively in spite of herself, what credit did that do her? Did it make her any better than a cat which sometimes loves its kittens and at other times devours them?" (Saadawi 15). Saadawi thus demonstrates that the patriarchal system operates not through overt force alone but through the covert intimate, daily labor of mothers who pass on the hierarchy of female subordination to their daughters. The subsequent rebellion of young Saadawi is directed not only against men but against the women who have internalized the patriarchal norms and imposed them on others.

The second phase of medicine initially appears as a path to freedom from this gendered destiny as she chooses medicine as a means of escape and revenge, "I would become a doctor then, study medicine, wear shiny steel-rimmed spectacles, make my eyes move at an amazing speed behind them, and make my fingers strong and pointed to hold the dreadful long sharp needle" (Saadawi 20). Her motivation is explicitly framed as a rejection of femininity and an assertion of intellectual power over the body, "I'd prove to nature that I could overcome the disadvantages of the frail body she'd clothed me in, with its shameful parts both inside and out. I would imprison it in the steel cell forged from my will and my intelligence" (20). Therefore, her admission into medical school becomes a moment of defiant self-assertion where she asserts, "I drew myself up to my full height. I'd forgotten about my breasts and their weight on my chest had vanished. I felt light, as if I could move as easily and freely as I wanted. I had charted my way in life, the way of the mind. I had carried out the death sentence on my body so that I no longer felt it existed" (Saadawi 21). This reveals the violence inherent in the modernist promise of liberation is basically a freedom purchased through dissociation from the body, a 'death sentence' that repeats the earlier patriarchal injunction to despise the female self.

As Anastasia Valassopoulos argues, Saadawi's early fiction uses medical metaphors to interrogate how modern institutions both empower and discipline women and how "much existing criticism in the West" has often missed the complexity of this dual dynamic, reducing Saadawi's work to simple narratives of liberation rather than recognizing her nuanced critique of institutional power. Saadawi's pen becomes "sharp as a scalpel" a tool that can both dissect oppressive structures and risk reproducing the objectifying gaze she seeks to escape (81). Similarly, Saadawi portrays medicine as a disciplinary regime that "promises liberation through knowledge while often preserving masculine hierarchy in new form" (Kassem 148). The dissecting room becomes a site where the body is stripped of all dignity and where the girl learns a cold, objectifying gaze.

The student doctor Saadawi, describes her first encounter with a naked male corpse, as "this was my first encounter with a naked man, and in the course of it men lost their dread power and illusory greatness in my eyes. A man had fallen from his throne and lay on a dissecting table next to a woman" (Saadawi 22). This lets her to dismantle the myth of male

superiority it also desensitizes her to human suffering as she later recalls with horror how her training taught her to see patients as mere collections of organs,

How had I been able to examine patients in the past? How had my teachers led me to believe that a sick person was nothing more than a liver, a spleen or a collection of guts and entrails? How had they made me look into people's eyes, shine my light into them, turn up the lids with my fingers, without noticing their freshness and innocence? How had they made me look down people's throats without hearing their cries of pain? (Saadawi 41-42)

Fedwa Malti-Douglas, in her foundational study, *Men, Women, and Gods: Nawal el Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* argues that "no Arab woman inspires as much emotion as Nawal El Saadawi" and that "no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures" (105). This violation includes the sacred enclosures of both patriarchal religion and scientific authority. She further contends that Saadawi's work "cannot be read in isolation from its Islamic and Arabic heritage," yet her critique of both traditions is unflinching (177). This dual orientation deeply embedded in Arab-Islamic culture while radically critical of its patriarchal interpretations is precisely what makes Saadawi a writer of internal critique rather than an outsider.

After witnessing the death of a young woman in childbirth despite all medical intervention, she reflects, "Science toppled from its throne and fell at my feet naked and powerless, just as man had done before". She comes to understand that the "path of reason" leads to "a huge, impenetrable barrier" (36). The critique of medical authority culminates in her disillusionment with science itself and this recognition forces her to abandon the city and retreat to the countryside, where she begins to unlearn the objectifying gaze of medical training. Subsequently her retreat to the village marks a turning point where she confronts the alienation produced by both patriarchal and medical regimes. For the first time, she learns to feel,

For the first time in my life I was feeling without thinking, feeling the warm sun on my body, feeling that beautiful placid greenness which clothed the earth, the enchanting deep blue covering the sky. Face to face with nature, I saw its enchanting magic unspoilt by the hollow clamour of the city; the debased, imprisoned womanliness of woman; the arrogant overbearing masculinity of man; and the limited, ineffectual chatter of science. (Saadawi 37)

This implies patriarchal gender relations and scientific rationalism have alienated her from her own embodied existence. She recognizes that her earlier rebellion was self-destructive as she states, "I'd wasted my childhood and adolescence and the dawn of my young womanhood in a fierce battle: against whom? Against myself, my humanity and my natural impulses" (38). Her reconnection with her body is also a reconnection with her capacity for empathy as she experiences pain for the first time not as a clinical symptom but as shared human suffering when a sick old man comes to her door,

I was in pain but I felt the pleasure of pain, the pleasure of my humanity as I exercised its redundant powers and investigated its unfamiliar horizons. My whole being drank this pleasure to the lees, and my soul sucked the sensation of pain dry. This made me feel dizzy and I fell back into a nearby chair, shut my eyes and began to cry. I cried as I had never cried before, as if my eyes had never known what it was to cry. (Saadawi 42)

This experience of shared vulnerability becomes the foundation for a new ethical relation to others as she recognizes that the old man, in his suffering and his compassion for her tears, possesses something she had lost, "I felt that he was the doctor and I the patient" (43). This inversion of roles signals her recovery of a form of knowledge that neither patriarchal authority nor medical science could provide, "it was a little smile from dry, cracked lips but it contained the meaning of life... That meaning was love – a love of life and all its pleasure and pain, in sickness and in health, the known and unknown parts of it, the beginnings and the endings" (43).

Therefore, the memoir refuses to accept women's subordination as sacred destiny and distinguishes between justice and patriarchal religious discourse. Miriam Cooke's foundational work *Women Claim Islam* (2000), examines how Arab women writers, including Saadawi, "are using Islam to empower themselves," theorizing "the conditions that have made the appearance of these new voices possible" and "claim Islam" to "reclaim their right to their individual identity," engaging in a critical reinterpretation of religious tradition rather than a wholesale rejection of it (Cooke 134). In the marriage contract scene, Saadawi's critique of how religious authority is imposed to sanctify gendered hierarchy is most strongly articulated, her horror at the legal document that reduces marriage to a commercial transaction is noted as,

My eyes fell on unexpected words, words that I associated with contracts for renting flats and shops and plots of agricultural land: "On this day... in my presence and by my hand... I so-and-so... official attached to such-and-such a court... marriage of so- and-so to so-and-so... on payment of such-and-such a marriage portion by the husband... an amount to be paid at the present time... and an amount to be deferred... legal marriage according to God's Book and the Law of His Prophet, God bless Him and grant Him salvation... with the legal consent of the aforementioned husband... consequent on both parties being verified as free from any religious or civil impediment and on the wife having no income or salary from the government and no wealth exceeding... in the presence of the witnesses..." (Saadawi 60)

Her instinct is to tear the document apart, and the persuasion of her husband-to-be that "it's just a formality; nothing more" (60) crystallizes Saadawi's critique of how religious law is mobilized to institutionalize female subordination under the guise of sacred obligation. The sheikh's outrage on her intervention, "how dare a woman speak in the presence of men!" reveals the patriarchal assumptions embedded in religious institutional practice (59). Yet the memoir also distinguishes between religious authority as an institution and the possibility of justice rooted in ethical relation. Therefore, her eventual recognition of love as the 'meaning of life' suggests a turn toward an ethics grounded in mutual vulnerability rather than legal or theological prescription. Saadawi's work represents a "rewriting of patriarchy" that draws upon "knowledge of classical and modern Arabic textual traditions" even as it challenges them. They address the clash between Saadawi and leftist male intellectuals who attempted to delegitimize her writings as "Orientalist feminism," noting that "anti-imperialism can easily become a trap through which nationalism, while seeking to defend the native against the outsider, really defends those in power in the native society" (Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women*). This highlights Saadawi's position where she refuses both the colonial narrative that Western modernity could liberate women and the nationalist narrative that critique of indigenous patriarchy

constitutes treason. Her work instead insists on the possibility of internal critique, a feminism that emerges from within Arab-Islamic culture rather than being imposed from without.

Therefore, the liberation of women can come from institutions that can educate women and discipline them at the same time (Valassopoulos 83). While alienating her from her own body and from the suffering of others, Saadawi's medical training arms her with intellectual authority. Saadawi's fiction reflects the "actual experiences of early women doctors who navigated the tension between professional advancement and institutional sexism" (Maftsir 552) while Saadawi's visibility in the West has been "always been an overtly political matter," shaped by Western feminist and publishing agendas that sometimes distort her work (Amireh 217). This recognition of how transnational power dynamics mediate the reception of Arab feminist writing reinforces the memoir's own skepticism about institutions that promise liberation while perpetuating hierarchical relations. Thus, Saadawi's rejection of the medical profession's commercial logic represents a refusal of the colonial model of professional success. She states, "I felt at that moment that it was not honourable, just or logical for a doctor to take a fee from a patient. How had I held out my hand all these years and taken money from my patients? How had I sold health to people in my surgery? How could I have filled my coffers from the blood and sweat of the sick?" (Saadawi 88).

This leads her to re-evaluate her life, "being a doctor wasn't a case of diagnosing the illness, prescribing the medicine and grabbing the money. Success didn't mean filling the surgery, getting rich and having my name in lights.

Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke's foundational anthology *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (1990), positions Saadawi within a longer tradition of Arab women's literary and political activism. In this context Saadawi's work, document how Arab women writers from the late nineteenth century through the late twentieth century have used their literary production to contest patriarchal authority and to articulate alternative visions of gender justice. Towards the end young Sadaawi moves from autonomous rebellion to a recognition of mutual dependence which is captured in the following lines after helping the dying man, she confesses, "I hid my face against his chest, seeking his protection, clinging to him. I felt as if I'd been stripped of my past life and had gone back to being a child learning to walk. I'd begun to need a hand to support me. For the first time in my life, I felt that I needed someone else, something I hadn't felt even about my mother" (Saadawi 90).

This marks a profound shift from the autonomous, self-sufficient subject celebrated by both patriarchal and modernist ideologies to a recognition of mutual dependence. The girl's earlier rebellion sought to prove that she needed no one; her awakening lies in understanding that freedom is not the absence of need but the capacity to enter into relations of mutual care whereby this is not a return to traditional femininity but a reimagining of human connection beyond both patriarchal subordination and modernist individualism. Consequently, Saadawi's work navigates these tensions without resorting to either wholesale rejection of tradition or uncritical embrace of modernity (Babana-Hampton 24). Her final posture clinging to another while retaining her hard-won autonomy embodies this complex negotiation.

Conclusion:

The memoir traces a path from rebellion to relationality, from the rejection of the body to its reclamation, and from the objectifying gaze of science to the empathetic recognition of shared vulnerability. The memoir thus stands as a foundational text in Arab feminist literature, not because it offers easy answers, but because it refuses to resolve the tensions between tradition and modernity, autonomy and connection, mind and body, instead insisting that these tensions must be lived through and transformed from within. The memoir's enduring significance lies in its demonstration that feminist consciousness is not achieved once and for all but must be continually forged through struggle against multiple, intersecting forms of authority. The journey from internalized shame to rebellious autonomy to relational vulnerability charts a trajectory that remains relevant for contemporary feminist thought. Saadawi shows that the goal of feminist struggle is not simply to gain access to male-dominated institutions but to transform the very terms of human relation. This transformation requires neither the rejection of one's cultural inheritance nor passive submission to it, but rather the difficult work of internal critique writing from struggle within.

Saadawi's work represents a "rewriting of patriarchy" that draws upon the very traditions it contests which is a paradoxical strategy using the tools of the oppressor to dismantle the oppressor's house characterizes not only Saadawi's literary practice but also the broader tradition of Arab feminist writing that she both inherits and transforms (Malti - Douglas 97) . *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, waswritten when Saadawi was a young woman in her twenties, already displays the formal sophistication, political audacity, and ethical depth that would characterize her six-decade literary career. It remains, as Saadawi herself called it, like "a first daughter, full of youthful fervour and expressing a reality which is still relevant today" (8).

References:

1. Amireh, Amal. "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2000, pp. 215-49.
2. Babana-Hampton, Safoi. "Literary Representations of Female Identity: Feminisms in Arab-Muslim Societies and Clashing Paradigms on Conceptions of Modernity, Tradition and Selfhood." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2002, pp. 23-41.
3. Badran, Margot. "Nawal El-Saadawi: A Fearless Feminist Without Borders." *Wilson Center*, 8 Mar. 2022, www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/nawal-el-saadawi-fearless-feminist-without-borders.
4. Badran, Margot, and Miriam Cooke, editors. *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. Indiana University Press, 1990.
5. Bloomsbury Publishing. *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi: A Reader*. By Nawal El Saadawi, edited by Adele Newson-Horst, Zed Books, 2010.
6. Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*. Routledge, 2001.
7. Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*. University of Texas Press, 2003.

8. Gueye, Khadidiatou. "Tyrannical Femininity in Nawal El Saadawi's Memoirs of a Woman Doctor." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2010, pp. 160-72.
9. Kassem, Rania. "The Medical Gaze in Nawal el Saadawi's Memoirs of a Woman Doctor." 2012, pp. 147-69.
10. Latifi, Yuniar, et al. "The Subjectivity of Nawāl Al-Sa'dāwī: Critique on Gender Relations in Religious Construction in Adab Am Qillah Adab Work." *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2019, pp. 257-86.
11. Maftsir, Sharon. "A Female Country Doctor in Egypt: The Life and Times of Nawal Al-Saadawi." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2021, pp. 551-70.
12. Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. "Medical Science and Sexual Power in the Fiction of Nawal As-SaCDawi." *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, vol. 7, nos. 3-4, 1987, pp. 543-49.
13. ---. *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*. University of California Press, 1995. UC Press E-Books Collection, ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8c6009n4/.
14. Saadawi, Nawal El. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. Translated by Catherine Cobham, Saqi Books, 1988.
15. ---. *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. Zed Books, 1997.
16. Valassopoulos, Anastasia. "Words Written by a Pen Sharp as a Scalpel: Gender and Medical Practice in the Early Fiction of Nawal El Saadawi and Fatmata Conteth." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2004, pp. 74-89.