

Documenting Incarceration: A Perusal of Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*

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Abstract

Women's writings from the prison are remarkable for their power to break the chains of silence so as to disrupt the power structure often characterized by the male dominance. The women prison authors become warriors for safeguarding the rights of ordinary women and that of the women prisoners. They strive to challenge the oppressive and patriarchal notions promulgated by the regime and the society. The collectiveness in these works serves as a mouthpiece for all oppressed women irrespective of their class, colour, religion, nationality etc. These works also have more gravity in experiences compared to the ordinary feminist writings as it emanates from the hostile spaces of prison. Prison literature is dominated by the writings of men and the writings of women are often sidelined. What differentiates women's prison writing from that of men's is the sense of double victimization. Their writings delineate the sufferings not only within the society but also inside the prison. The prison authors discover their own ways to inscribe their harrowing experiences where toilet papers, cigarette covers, barks of tree etc act as writing material and blood, coal etc as alternative tools for them. This paper discusses how the documentation of carceral experience surpasses the challenges inside the bars as well as disrupts the power structure of both patriarchy and the state, thereby giving ample opportunity for Saadawi's memoir to excel over men's prison writing.

Keywords: Double Victimization, Patriarchy, Prison Literature, Resistance, Survival

Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi is a physician, writer and activist who strives for the protection of the rights of women. Being a well-educated personality, she openly states her views against the oppression of women and tries to make the women aware of their rights through her writings and speeches. The publication of her book *Women and Sex* (1974) containing her ideas on female genital mutilation led to her dismissal from the Ministry of Health and from the position of Chief Editor of a health journal. Her unyielding nature resulted in obtaining the wrath of the authorities and finally culminated in her imprisonment at the Barrages Women's Prison, being charged with false crimes. She was imprisoned in 1981 by Anwar Sadat's regime so that the statesmen could prevent her from turning the people against them. The authorities used imprisonment as an instrument to silent the dissenting voices and as a warning to all those resisting their power. It is in this context, the prison authors go with writing which led to their arrest, even in the restricted spaces of prison.

In her writings, Saadawi does not limit her own experiences of oppression exclusively to Egypt but extends it to the USA too. She was actually fed up with the treatment of women in Egyptian society and escaped to the USA only

to recognise that women's conditions remain unchanged even in the developed nation. Her imprisonment can be apprehended as the consequence of her decisive stand against the male dominance as well as the authoritarian government. She was against limiting the role of women to give birth, to raise children and to maintain the house. Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1984) captures the hardships and struggles of women in the patriarchal world. She has set a model for the oppressed women by exploring the possibilities around her even during the worst circumstances like incarceration. The victimization of women in the prison is nothing but a continuation of their travails in the outside world, as both spaces are being dominated by patriarchal ideas. The simultaneous critique of patriarchy and government is the unique feature of writings from prison authored by women. Saadawi's prison memoir is not based exclusively on her prison experiences, but it has societal, cultural and political implications on the status of women in the society.

Writing Behind the Bars and Contesting the Power Structure

In the field of research, women's prison writings do experience neglect by the scholars and the critics to some extent. Judith Scheffler identifies that women's prison writings are scattered and fails to get recognised as a body of literature with its own features (57). Mechthild Nagel observes that the men's prison writings always portrayed women as passive bystanders and further elaborates that "In men's prison narratives, women usually get relegated to the roles of stoic, heroic mothers and wives who silently endure and support their son's or husband's endeavour to advance the cause of liberation of the people" (75). Saadawi along with her cellmates go against this notion when they take up the role to fight actively against male dominance. Saadawi's outspokenness in real life and in her works clarifies that she was totally against the patriarchal ideologies ingrained in the society as well as in the realm of writing. The upper hand of men's prison writing over women's prison writing will definitely confine them in the academic circles and could hinder its development. Women prison authors confront the

issue of double victimization both inside and outside the bars. During the imprisonment, the domestic abuse gets transformed into carceral abuse leading to their mental agonies. The horrific conditions of women within the bars range from verbal and sexual abuses by the officers and fellow inmates to overcrowding, untidiness in the prisons and so on. Often denigrated in prison, writing provides a chance for the women prisoners to open up their feelings and thereby attain some kind of mental relief. Prison in its belligerent nature has provided another venue for Saadawi to continue her literary enterprise marked by the resistance against patriarchy.

Imprisoning the intellectuals is a method used by the regimes to suppress their ideas from reaching the public as it could eventually result in the downfall of the government. The political prisoners were strictly forbidden from talking with prisoners in other cells, from walking into the courtyard, from obtaining letters from their family and so on. Newspapers, radio etc also were not allowed in the political prisoner's cell since these could establish contact with the outside world. In fact, for them, the world has been shrunk inside their cells and within those limited spaces they had to discover the ways contributing to their survival. The authorities were in fact afraid of their power of writing. Having pen and paper for the political prisoners was considered to be a serious crime and the transgressors were brutally beaten by the officers. Saadawi records the words spoken to her by Shawishwa: "one written word in the political cell is a more serious matter than having a pistol. Writing is more dangerous than killing, doctor" (*Memoirs from the Women's Prison* 73). Unlike her fellow writers, she was unafraid of writing her views against the government and was ready to face its consequences. For her, the pen was the most valuable item as she was aware of its potential to thwart her opponents.

Saadawi and her cell mates are the warriors against the hegemonic, oppressive and misogynist ideas in the society. Apart from her own experiences, Saadawi includes the life stories of the fellow inmates and her own mother in her memoir to emphasize the varied experiences of victimization, giving way to their unified stance for the emancipation of women from the male supremacy. In this manner her memoir

becomes a collection of firsthand experiences of the struggle against the subjugation of women. Her cellmate Fathiyya killed her husband using a hoe as she found him raping her daughter. She was living like a slave to her husband and wanted to find him another wife to give him a son and to help her in the household activities. Fathiyya never regretted her crime as she considered the prison life better than the life with her husband. Her preference of prison life itself reveals the horrific encounters with her husband. The saddest part of it is that Fathiyya's daughter lost her father and mother in a single day. Early marriage of women is another issue which Saadawi addresses in her prison memoir. All the opportunities are thereby shut before the women after marriage. Saadawi's mother wanted to continue her education but she had to get married to her father. She had to look after her husband and their nine children. She even jumped from the balcony to abort the tenth child and she was guilty of it later. Saadawi also had pressure from her family to get married at the age of ten and she boldly resisted it. Her mother told her that Saadawi's father was not happy when she was born since he longed for a son to preserve the legacy of his family (Suwaed 241). Here Saadawi points out the condition of women undergoing multiple pregnancies for getting a son. Men preferred to marry young girls for accomplishing their sexual fantasies and they never cared about the physical or mental conditions of women while undergoing multiple pregnancies. Saadawi also talks about the condition of mothers imprisoned with their children born in prison. Three hundred mothers and their three hundred children were put in a single cell. In her memoir, Saadawi describes mother's cell at the Barrages Women's Prison as the hell on earth (43). In her writings, she mainly voices for the education of women which could efface the superstitions and discrimination of women in the society.

Familial and religious restrictions were also imposed upon women. The holy books have a vital part in the propagation of patriarchal views as it manipulates its verses. For instance, being a boy, Saadawi's brother received more love and attention in the family. When Saadawi questioned it, her father replied that he believed the idea in Koran that the daughter is half of the son (Suwaed 240). The religious views

are manipulated by men to bring the women under their control. Saadawi also mentions a prisoner who tried to cover her hair before the officers while being beaten by them. Egyptian society bestowed women an inferior status and never allowed women to excel over the men. Saadawi wanted to preserve her mother's name along with her name but the teacher replaced it with her father's and grandfather's name. This act can be understood as her attempt to assert the identity of women by freeing them from the phallocratic knot appearing along with their names. Religion also played a pivotal role in restricting the feelings of women. Saadawi had to undergo "Khitan" or female circumcision in her childhood at the age of six and she recalls it in her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* (1999): "when I was six, the daya (midwife) came along holding a razor in her hands, pulled out my clitoris from between my thighs, and cut it off. She said it was the will of God and she had done his will" (qtd in Rejila 126). This practice was carried out with the religious sanction that it was meant to reduce the sexual desires of young girls. The prisoners like Boduur and Fawqiyya considered laughing as haraam and were against the expression of happiness by their fellow inmates. Saadawi's mother looked at her angrily when she jumped with joy. In this manner, the women were made to suppress their emotions from their childhood onwards. This suppression is in fact extended to their adulthood along with the societal expectations that an ideal wife is the one who endures the humiliations of her husband.

Furthermore, the woman who obeys the patriarchal laws and remains silent is glorified in the society. Through her prison memoir, Saadawi tries to break this myth by uniting her fellow inmates against their oppression stemming from the patriarchal views. Liberation of women, according to her, rests on the view that they must be capable of expressing their thoughts freely and that they should preserve their identity. She does not allow herself to be defined by religion or gender. She was not following the tenets of femininity as granted by society. As revealed in her autobiography, she held a dislike for makeup and removing hair from the body. She maintains in the autobiography that she "did not believe in a femininity born with slave society and handed

down to us with class and patriarchy” (qtd in Kaur 3). She preferred a strong body rather than the stereotypical soft and tender body of women. She was also impressed by the male like physicality of Fathiyya. Saadawi further writes in the memoir that “I realised early that I needed two strong arms with which I could defend myself when necessary in the street, or in a bus, wherever any man would try to turn my being into a female body which he could grab from behind or from the front” (41). Saadawi wanted to possess the characteristics of male body to combat with men and she thus deconstructs the idea of femininity. Rachel Knighton argues that Saadawi’s rejection of the cultural expectations of a female body is accompanied by the politicisation of the body (138-39).

The prisoners like Dhuba believed that there was a man behind the entry of every woman into the prison. Dhuba’s husband was responsible for making her a prostitute. Similarly, Souad the thief was forced into stealing by her father. The beggar Sabah was arrested on account of Sadat’s guest visiting Egypt, to create an impression that his country is clean. From this, it can be inferred that the victimization outside the bars resulted in their victimization inside the bars. For these women, the toxic relationship with men ended up in murder or other crimes, making prison as their final destination. Women were not free from patriarchal notions even inside the prison. Prison administration too followed the structure of patriarchy where women were restricted from the jobs like police, army, judiciary and so on. Moreover, Munaqqabads who wear niqaabs and gallabiyyas cannot think of standing before men with their hairs unveiled. Physically and mentally such women were imprisoned by the religious, patriarchal or political strictures. Saadawi was looking forward to the liberation of women covering all these kinds of confinements.

Saadawi’s memoir presents the ugliness in the prison with its pungent smell emanating from the toilet, poor sanitation, hovering of flies, scurrying of cockroaches etc. Saadawi and other political prisoners were not isolated even when two of the inmates in their cells were affected with scabies. Hence the circumstances inside the cell were enough to weaken her both physically and mentally.

Saadawi gave up her habit of smoking during her imprisonment since she was preparing herself for the struggles ahead. She was also capable of dealing with the fear of lizards during the imprisonment. It was a moment of self-discovery for her and she thus noticed the ability of her body to adapt in the prison. She remarks that “In prison, I learned what I had not learned in the College of Medicine” (*Memoirs* 33). It is clear that she considered prison as another avenue for procuring knowledge like a university or a school. It is this realization that helped her to overcome the problems inside the prison. Saadawi spent three months inside the prison but she felt that she was away from her home for years or centuries. This mirrors the monotonous life inside the prison where they are unaware of the day, month or time. In order to kill time in prison, Saadawi resorted to various activities like breaking the earth using a hoe, gardening, group sessions, discussions etc. Saadawi scribbled her thoughts in toilet rolls and cigarette papers. She hid her writings under the tiling in the corner of the toilet. She also developed the ability to forget and not to anticipate anything so that it could make her survival easy within the bars. Within the prison, she had to wage battles against sickness, death and pessimism. She was trying to strengthen her mind like a knife. Saadawi has been a lover of solitude from her childhood onwards. Writing was impossible for her without solitude. In the cell, she was disturbed by the penetrating light and the sounds from the mother’s cell. She penned her prison memoir during the night when the whole prison slept. In the afterword of the memoir, published thirteen years after her release, she writes that “I wrote page after page in my imagination, virtually able to see the words before me, written or perhaps engraved on the wall itself. By night I would reread from memory, reviewing my writing, adding sections and deleting others, as if I were putting pen to paper” (qtd in Rejila 139). Saadawi wrote on the toilet paper using eyebrow pencil. She looks for solitude to expose her feelings through writing within the cell. Hence, she was trying to convert the negative aspects of her prison life for her benefit. Within the oppressive system of prison, she tries to follow her interests rather than renouncing it. She was trying to continue her routines during her imprisonment such

as exercising and writing within the carceral spaces, so that these could definitely play a role to preserve the strength of her body and mind. Her resistance is notable for making possible everything that is forbidden inside the prison.

Companionship inside the cell indeed reflects the declaration of the women prisoners's motive to defeat their common enemy behind their arrest. Saadawi was happy to find some of her colleagues or friends while entering the cell. Even though she describes the fight between the women inmates initially, they developed companionship among all of them afterwards. Their unity is conveyed by the activity of repairing the toilet in the gaol. Saadawi says: "We began our life in prison by repairing the state of the toilet. That was the first point of agreement and it was the beginning of a common ground among all cellmates, veiled and bareheaded" (*Memoirs* 41). It was the love and trust among them that enabled them to open up their life stories. This also made them get to know one another and to understand the fact that even though their charges varied, their fate remained the same as they all were a part of a prison cell. It was through Fathiyya that Saadawi received the letter from her family, when she yearned to communicate with them. On receiving the letter, she smells it to feel the scent of her house and its members. On the day of investigation, the cellmates helped her by bringing comb, dress etc. The investigator entrusted the job of spying on Saadawi to Itidaal rather than dealing with her case. When she took the side of Saadawi, her session was postponed to the next day and she was brought back to prison. Dhuba also revealed to Saadawi that the authorities insisted her to spy on the political prisoners. She confessed to Saadawi that she refused to do so because of the bond developed among them. When the prison officers tried to separate the Christian prisoner Nur from the remaining Muslim prisoners as per the new order, they stood in protest. Besides these, all the prisoners joined Saadawi in the exercise as if they were one body and the authorities were terrified as they considered it to be a provocation for revolt in the prison. Another instance of unity is when all the inmates turned against the prison doctor and refused to be examined by him. They oppose the prison doctor as his activities are against the ethics

of the medical profession. All the ideological or cultural differences were melted away in their fight for release after Sadat's death. Saadawi stood within the toilet enduring the odour of urine and excreta to listen to the news regarding Sadat's health condition. A cellmate took herself the task of giving Saadawi signs regarding the arrival of the authorities. The necessity to confirm Sadat's death in order to put an end to their prison life brought together even the indifferent inmates like Boduur and Fawqiyya. These prisoners started dancing hearing the news of their captor's demise and they were not concerned about their veil or dress since they were overwhelmed by the thoughts of freedom. In other words, for them, this has led to the breaking of the chains of both politics, religion and gender. Saadawi was expecting the return of her prison days even after her release and was always prepared for it. Saadawi writes in her prison memoir, "The days and the occupations of life separated us. As soon as I meet one of them anywhere at all, though, we embrace and remember the days of prison- as if there is something about prison which one misses, or as if the comradeship of prison cannot be forgotten and cannot die. And who knows perhaps it will return" (197). Their friendship is not something which expires after their release but it is endowed with the characteristics of renewal. The friendship with her co-prisoners is so valuable for Saadawi that she tries to maintain it even outside the spatial boundaries of prison. Her concern for her fellow inmates is evident when she visits them after her release, carrying food for them. With warden's support she smuggled a letter from the political inmates and she worked for their release as well. Along with the women prisoners, the female warden too joins in their struggle. As Marilyn Booth suggests, the warden supports the prisoners as they all are the victims of patriarchy (Captan 3). Saadawi even suspected her re-arrest when she saw the officer following her vehicle after visiting the inmates. This indicates the precarious life of the ex-prisoners since the authorities keep on disturbing them. Saadawi successfully smuggled out her writing upon her release by hiding her writings inside the hair rollers and in a way, it was also released from the confinement. She also took away the letter of an inmate to her family and the letter to the President

of the Republic inside her sports shoes. Saadawi's triumph over prison is evident when she says in her memoir that "prison was no longer frightening, unknown spectre" (197). This victory can also be considered as the breaking of chains imposed upon the women by the men.

Conclusion

The dissenting voices of women prisoners intend to secure their human rights and to make them less vulnerable to the injustices from the part of men and the state. As patriarchy is the root cause behind the sufferings of women, the women prison authors in a way extend their struggle outside the carceral spaces. The proponents of patriarchy were in fact setting the boundaries of confinements for women. The men were in fact framing and categorizing the modes of conduct and behaviour to be followed in the society. The patriarchal confinement brings together the women inside and outside the bars to a common ground of resistance. These writings serve the purpose of didacticism as well as an exhortation to attain the rights of women. It instructs women to take an adamant position against the violation of their rights. Saadawi's memoir succeeds in finding a prominent place in the rubric of prison literature as it manages to dispel the patriarchal ideas in the field of writing as well.

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