

Revisiting History Through Memory: A Study of Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from a Women's Prison*

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Abstract: The idea of recollecting the past through memories has travelled from St. Augustine's *Confessions* in 397AD. In the twentieth century, it was French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs who explored the relationship between individual and collective memories in his works. Halbwachs maintains, unlike others, that the dynamics of collective memory lie not with the event that took place, but with the people who experienced them, providing a direct link between history and memory. Historian Hayden White discusses the relationship between history and narrative, which gives us a paradigm to interpret personal narratives with a historical perspective. Extending these links, this paper proposes to explore the links between memory, history and self. To hypothesize the study, I propose to study *Memoirs from a Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian physician and political activist, who raised her voice against women's physical and psychological problems in Egypt. As a consequence of her 1972 book *Woman and Sex*, and her political activities, she was dismissed from the Ministry of Health, and after a few imprisonments, she was forced to flee Egypt. *Memoirs* contains her experiences of Qanatir women's prison in Cairo where she was incarcerated with many other political prisoners by President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat. Establishing a relation between self and history, this paper shall also discuss how human self is constituted and understood in relation to the times in which one lives.

Keywords: Memory, History, Prison, Identity

Though the idea of recollecting the past through memories has travelled from St. Augustine's *Confessions* in 397AD, it was around the twentieth century that scholars from different disciplines became interested in the intersection between culture and memory. Memory Studies

has established a link with disciplines as diverse as literature, sociology, psychology or history emphasising the necessity for an inter-disciplinary approach.

Maurice Halbwachs, a French philosopher and sociologist, explored the relationship between individual (autobiographical memory) and collective (historical memory) memories in his book *La Memoire Collective* in 1950. As per Halbwachs, an individual's memory intersects with the collective memory when recalling an event that affects the nation or masses on a large scale. At the same time, however, individual memory maintains its unique aspects as it emerges from the subconscious of the one who actually experienced the events (50).

French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur explains that a life understood as a narrative constitutes self-understanding. As per Ricoeur, a narrative can help us reach a higher understanding through the three-step process of Mimesis (Mimesis1, Mimesis2, and Mimesis3). Ricoeur emphasises *emplotment*, a part of Mimesis 2, which means situating the events of a story (fictional or historical) in time (83-87). Furthermore, Historian Hayden White discusses personal narratives in "Postmodernism and Historiography." He explains that after the Holocaust and the Atomic genocide, the survivors of these events became more interested in telling how it had felt rather than what had happened. Just knowing the facts was no longer enough. White has also enumerated three ways of documenting historical events in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." The first is the Annals, the second the Chronicle, and the last, History proper. History, explains White, is closer to narrative in structure as it explains causal relations between the events and brings the story to a close. White's prerogative towards a narrative form of writing gives us, the students of literature and memory, a paradigm to interpret personal narratives.

This paper looks at a person's memory as an alternative literary genre; the focus is to move from history to histories, to understand the past in the present, while also shedding light on the self of the writer. When thinkers and activists document their memory, such narrativization becomes a source to understand not only the ideology of the thinkers, but also their struggle. Their writings provide an alternate view to political, historical and cultural aspects of their epoch.

The paper will discuss *Memoirs from a Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian physician and political activist, who raised her voice against women's physical and psychological

problems in Egypt. Owing to her political writings and activities, she was dismissed from the Ministry of Health and later from the position of Chief Editor of a health journal. *Memoirs* contains her experiences of Qanatir women's prison in Cairo where she was incarcerated with many other political prisoners by President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat. She was released only after his assassination. While reading the memoir, one learns much about the culture of Egypt, gets a glimpse of history, and gains insight into Nawal El Saadawi as a woman, a writer and a political activist.

El Saadawi's political activism may have been recognised much later, but her struggle against everything that discriminated, differentiated, otherized or marginalized started as early as her childhood. Her protests, both loud and subtle, are interwoven in her life which is quite evident in her writing. When she writes about blaming God for treating her mother and father differently, when she writes in her autobiography about not using any powder or make up because she "did not believe in a femininity born with slave society and handed down to us with class and patriarchy" (Saadawi 7), one finds a mind that is rational. Because of a self-respecting mother who demanded and commanded respect in her marriage, and a patriotic father who fought against the monarchy of King Farouk, and later against the British, El Saadawi learnt to question and to stand up to abusive display of authority.

El Saadawi demonstrated her absolute refusal to accept unlawful display of abusive power throughout her life—whether it was against people in her own family, colleagues, the Internal Security Officer in the prison, or Anwar Sadat himself. *Memoirs* narrates El Saadawi's experience of meeting Anwar Sadat before he took on the Presidency of Egypt. She had seen Sadat about two or three times in person. She had never spoken directly to him, but had spoken in the gatherings where he was present. She recalls one such instance which, as she explains, must have taken place "earlier than 1970 because Gamal Abdel Nasser was still alive" (Saadawi 76). Anwar Sadat was then the Deputy to the President of the Republic. Saadawi was a member of the Council of the Physicians' Syndicate, and in that meeting of about 300 doctors, lawyers, engineers and people from other professions had waited for two hours for Sadat to arrive. On a public platform, during this session, El Saadawi spoke against this delay which no one had even dared mention. Sadat had spoken about making the economy great by increasing production everywhere, yet people had to wait for two hours which meant they were kept from working and

producing for two hours, reasons El Saadawi. Her comments were dissed; no one responded to any of the points she raised.

On a later occasion, El Saadawi recalls a gathering in 1962, the national conference for the popular forces, in the presence of the then president, Gamal Abdel Nassaer, where a question was asked, “Who is the peasant?” Nobody answered for a long time. When her turn came to answer, El Saadawi replied, “The peasant is the one whose urine is red” (Saadawi 111). By narrating this incident, El Saadawi educates the reader about the plight of an average peasant in Egypt. It was believed to be normal, even healthy, for a peasant to have red coloured urine. Unfortunately, no one ever realised that it was blood, that it was a serious disease that affected the kidneys. Her paternal grandfather, who was a peasant, was “feeble and perennially ill, always urinating blood; he died while still young” (Saadawi 109).

El Saadawi’s activism continued inside the prison, too—against the living conditions in prison. The book covers El Saadawi’s experience of being held in a cell with 13 other women, who sported different political and religious ideologies, and hence, they did not get along that well. However, personal differences or political focus was the least of their worries. El Saadawi writes, “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” (Saadawi 41). It did not matter that the veiled women were from opposing religious groups and thus had more disagreements than agreements; it did not matter than the bareheaded women shared similar ideologies, all 14 of them agreed to get the toilet fixed. Additionally, the worm-infested bread, lack of clean clothes, and the habitation of insects of all sorts were only some other issues the women faced. They were living a subhuman existence. At the same time, they were constantly being told by the prison warden and the Internal Security Officer that this prison and these conditions are heavenly, as compared to other cells, and other prisons.

El Saadawi spent almost three weeks in that jail cell, under these unbearable conditions, before she could deduce the reason behind her detention. El Saadawi was taken forcibly from her home, without a warrant, without any knowledge of why or where she was being taken. Those who had heard the President’s speech and those who had read the newspaper that morning were prepared for it. El Saadawi was clueless. Moreover, political prisoners were forbidden to contact their families. So she could gain no information from that front either--or at least tell her family where

she was. The mention of pen and paper to write a letter home was enough to order a strict search of the jail cell to ensure that no one had any on her person or hidden somewhere in the cell. The Internal Security Officer had gone so far as to say that it would be easier to give them guns, but not pen and paper. The comparison shocked El Saadawi, but it betrays a truth. The power of a political prisoner does not come from a weapon she may wield, for none of Saadawi's cellmates in the Barrages Women's prison owned or had ever owned a firearm. The power of a political activist comes from their thoughts, ideas and ideologies that have the courage to challenge an oppressive government. Those thoughts find expression on pen and paper and spread through the common man like wildfire. To stop this from happening, the state of course had to ban activists from exchanging information and knowledge. Knowledge was taboo. To explain this point, El Saadawi mentions that in her culture those who aspired to gain knowledge were seen as aspiring to know something only God had a right to know. El Saadawi, however, was always hungry for knowledge. She believed that not knowing was like dying.

One also learns that political prisoners were not allowed to go out into the courtyard to sit in the sun or under a tree, they could not talk to prisoners from other cells, and newspapers and radios were off bounds. Basically, they were to be isolated from any contact.

But they found a way—El Saadawi wrote this book on toilet paper in the dim light of the night when the whole prison slept. It was difficult to write on, but easier to obtain and hide. Slowly, the prisoners also smuggled a small radio into their ward. And one fine day, El Saadawi could finally manage to sneak a letter out to her family. The reply of her letter also had to be smuggled in. Among other things, she learnt from the reply that people from all over the world, those who have read her books, are with her and against this unlawful detention. She was, at the same time, appalled and worried by the fact that no one from Egypt had spoken for them. She contacted many of her colleagues at the Egyptian Syndicate of Physicians, and her writer friends at the Writer's Union. But in reply she received total silence. People were afraid to raise their voice against Sadat. They chose to hide.

But in spite of the letter and radio, the reason behind her detention still remained a mystery. We learn that she was detained following the President's speech wherein he orders "precautionary detention measures against the instigators of sectarian rift." However, when El Saadawi goes for the investigation three weeks after her incarceration, these charges come unfounded. The charges

had been manufactured. After much bewilderment and speculation, El Saadawi concludes that she must have been detained because she did not support the peace treaty with Israel. She arrives at the said conclusion after meeting fellow activists who were sitting in the waiting hall, awaiting their turn to speak to the prosecutor. The only thing she found common in all of them and in herself was opposition to peace with Israel, which Anwar Sadat believed was necessary to stop the war and thus the depletion of economic resources.

A memoir or an autobiography can tell us much about the person who has written it. And when the person in question is an activist, the narrative becomes a rich source to understand their ideology and identity. Revolutionaries go beyond these parameters and attain a human identity. They cease to identify themselves with and therefore limit their actions according to the identities imposed on them by birth or gender. Instead they identified themselves with humanity; issues of larger humanity concern them. This removal of oneself, this refusal of letting gender or religion or race define oneself is very strong in Nawal El Saadawi's work and life. She absolutely refuses to accept society's definition and thus treatment of what it is to be a woman. In her autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi explains her dislike of make-up or removing hair from the body. She preferred exercise and a strong body instead. In *Memoirs*, she writes "I realised early that I needed two strong arms with which I could defend myself when necessary—in the street, or in a bus, whenever any man would try to turn my being into a female body which he could grab from behind or from the front" (Saadawi 41). El Saadawi never gave primacy to her gender over her mind, which in itself is a revolutionary act in a society which was so obsessed with assigning power and rights with the male sex and helplessness and the right to be abused with the female sex. El Saadawi's narratives tell us that a body can be abused, particularly, a female body. A man can exert his will upon, either through his stick with which he would beat his wife, or through his genitals with which he would again establish his supremacy over any woman—his wife, his niece, his colleague. Men and women were seen as just that—men and women; never more than that, never going beyond what their bodies were; never recognising the brain, the soul, the intellect, the feelings that the body carried, never allowing a woman to an identity all of her own. To highlight this lack of identity, El Saadawi quite often uses the term "body" to refer to her fellow cellmates or others in *Memoirs*. From her autobiography one learns that school girls, with whom El Saadawi studied, had dreams and ambitions, but they were married off as early as eleven or twelve, because that is what a female is supposed to do—marry

and raise children. The girls and women feared; they feared the men in their families. In the jail cell, the veiled women were afraid that men would see their hair uncovered more than they feared death.

While reading *Memoirs*, one learns about yet another fear that even men have. El Saadawi worked for the UN from 1979 to 1980 because she believed that here she would be free of the government and thus the subjugation of it. However, what she found surprises the reader. She found that the UN experts “fear for their monthly salaries as all civil employees do” (Saadawi 3). And racism and sexism are just as prevalent in the UN as in the most conservative parts of the world. She mentions fellow writers who no longer wrote what they wanted to, and prison doctors who would write fake reports out of fear of either their salaries or of the dictator.

El Saadawi feared neither men nor the system—her parents made sure of that. She is a political activist and her battle is against an oppressive system, a system that wants to gag their voices, and instil fear to kill their will, their agency. At one point, writes El Saadawi, that when the gloom of their reality began to grow on her, she got up and started exercising. She says, as long as she could move her limbs and control her body, all was right with the world. She also says that she had made up her mind to live in the prison just as she had done outside it. It did not matter if the conditions were unfavourable; she would not let them take over her mind and body.

Exercising was a form of protest, ploughing the prison garden was a form of protest, teaching a 17 year old fellow prisoner how to read the Arabic alphabet was her protest against the darkness of her reality, against the endless wait for orders “from above” (Saadawi 52) or the investigation to start or release. It was all a protest against the oppressive government.

Revolutionaries see a romance in protest. El Saadawi’s protest has been against oppressive social practices, against patriarchy, against voices that say “if you rebel against him you get buried in the ground” (Saadawi 118). El Saadawi’s *Memoirs from a Women’s Prison* introduces the reader to a woman who is a proud nationalist, who protested against the British when she was still in school. She loved going to demonstrations and protests, and during one such demonstration, she was the only girl in a crowd of male students proudly hoisting the banner “Men and Women Students of Medicine.” In *Memoirs* El Saadawi writes that unlike her fellow doctors or writers she would never write something that she did not want to out of fear of the dictatorship. She

refused to surrender or compromise on her ideals. Of writing, she says, “The pen is the most valuable thing in my life. My words on paper are more valuable to me than my life itself. More valuable than my children, than my husband, more than my freedom” (Saadawi 116).

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