

Creativity, Dissidence and Women

Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021). Writer, Egypt

In Egypt, the paternal surname confers honour and legal rights while the maternal falls into oblivion or leads to dishonour. This is only one example of the lack of citizen visibility and participation of women in the country, which extends to the whole region of the southern Mediterranean. In the case of Egypt, given the increase in Islamic political power, women have been forced in recent decades to be physically invisible (through the veil) and socially invisible (through the obligation to stay at home). The Egyptian Women's Association has fought for some time to open minds and organise as a group with the aim to resist the oppression of the system. Thus, the fight is effective thanks to two values instilled in women: creativity and dissidence.

Fighting against the Invisibility of the Mother's Name

An Egyptian woman writer was severely attacked when she published an article in an Egyptian weekly (*Rosalyoussef*, 18 March 2006) and signed her article using both her mother's and father's names. In her article, she asked: "Why should I only bear the name of my father Helmy? Why is the name of my mother Nawal invisible? In Egypt, why do we celebrate Mother's Day on 21 March although mothers' rights are neglected in the family, in society and in the state? On Mother's Day, radio and TV proclaim a mother's love as the greatest love, that paradise lies at the feet of mothers, and we give presents to our mothers, such as a bottle of perfume, a kitchen utensil, a vacuum cleaner and other things like that but I," she said, "decided to give her a much more valuable present: to make her name visible, like the name of my father."

Egyptian society had never heard of such a thing before. The names of mothers have been buried in history ever since the sin committed by our Mother Eve. Even though Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, as Eve did, he became an innocent prophet, whereas the name Eve is not mentioned at all in the Koran. She is referred to as "Adam's wife". In the Bible she is mentioned by her name, Eve, but only to be cursed as a sinner.

In modern western civilization children only bear the name of their father, while their mother bears the name of her husband. But after the struggle of feminists in the West some wives no longer bear the name of their husband. They prefer to keep the name of their father after marriage.

In Egypt, we do keep the name of the father after marriage. For only the name of the father gives honour and legal rights to children. As the name of the mother has no value and no honour, if a child has no father and only bears his or her mother's name, he or she becomes illegitimate, without social



Nawal El Saadawi (Basso Cannarsa / Opale).

or moral rights: this will be a stigma for life. They are considered to be sons of bitches or daughters of whores.

Children with no father's name are not accepted in our society, they live a life almost like death, with no human rights, not even animal rights, while dogs and cats and other domestic animals receive more honour, are better fed and better cared for than these illegitimate children who bear their mother's name.

The Egyptian woman writer Mona Helmy, who decided to honour her mother's name on Mother's Day by keeping it along with her father's name, was not only accused by most men and women of being against Islam and against the moral code, but also of encouraging sexual freedom for women. Only a few men and women supported her and even some of them decided to keep the name of their mother along with the name of their father.

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I was among those who supported her and decided to bear my mother's name Zaynab beside my father's name. In fact, in my childhood, I got very angry when my teacher in primary school crossed out my mother's name and ordered me to use my father's name only.

We will carry this struggle on until the names of our mothers become visible, legal and honourable, exactly as it is with the names of our fathers. Some people think that this battle is not important and that it will not lead to the liberation of women in Egypt, nor to increasing their citizen participation.

But it is an important issue because it will help mothers to feel that they have the same honour and rights as fathers. It means overturning an important symbol of patriarchy and patrilineality.

Creativity and Dissidence

In the last three decades with the increasing political power of the Islamic groups in Egypt, women were pushed back to wearing the veil and to considering that their role in life was at home, within the family, under the absolute authority of men.

The veiling of women means that they should be invisible physically whereas staying at home means that they should be invisible socially. Both are instruments intended to decrease their citizen participation.

In the Egyptian Constitution unmarried women are citizens like their male colleagues and they are governed by state laws but mothers and wives remain under the authority of both the husband and the state. All laws in Egypt are secular except the family law, which is religious, and it is based on the father's name as a symbol of his dominance, of patriarchy.

Whether living under a patriarchal system in the West (Christian), or in the East (Islamic), a creative woman should be dissident. Indeed, women are looked upon as inferior to men in the three monotheistic religions but feminist organizations in the West helped increase women's personal and political rights and their citizen participation. They are, however, still far from their goals because women cannot be really liberated in a capitalist patriarchal society, whether modern or post-modern.

In general terms, women in every country are still fighting for their human rights because most human rights organizations do not include women's rights in their programmes. Thus, they are not yet looked upon as humans as men are.

To be a creative woman one has to fight two battles: the battle against class discrimination and, additionally, the battle against patriarchy

To be creative means being sensitive to paradoxes and injustices, being against class exploitation and patriarchal oppression, against all types of discrimination between people by race, class, gender, religion, colour, creed or nationality, etc. To be creative means fighting for freedom, justice, equality, love and peace. It means standing up against war, against colonial and neo-colonial aggression and the exploitation of people. But to be a creative woman one has to fight two battles: the battle against class discrimination and, additionally, the battle against patriarchy. Women are faced with a dual burden, exactly like those dual burdens borne by women who work outside and inside their home.

Creativity Leads to Dissidence

In society, women have to struggle to be visible physically and to have a role, but also to have their name, their own name, instead of their husband's name, their father's or their grandfather's name.

To have one's own name is important as a symbol of one's existence. Without a name people do not exist. If an author does not

sign his name on his book, then he is not the author of the book.

We are known by our name. Without a name one cannot have a visible role in society. However, a woman can certainly work invisibly as a mother, without a name and without being paid.

Visibility and Citizen Participation

The Virgin Mother lost her name in history. She received the Holy Ghost although she was alone in giving birth to Christ. Equally, female goddesses in Ancient Egypt disappeared in history and the name of the male god dominated the world, East and West. The class patriarchal system started, women's work became invisible, not recognized in official statistics or reports.

Their citizen participation was not needed except in military or economic crises, in war or when their men or the state needed them to work outside their home. Women are brought up to sacrifice their lives for others, to be rewarded later in Paradise after their death.

In Egypt, we still have a long way to go to be independent as a country and as women. We cannot gain visibility and full citizen participation without full independence at the family level and at other levels: national, local and global.

We have to fight in all areas: personal, political, economic, sexual, social, religious, cultural, educational, family, the media, historical, philosophical and others. And although we gained some rights over the years in spite of backlashes, we are still fighting to achieve more visibility and citizen participation.

What Do We Mean by Citizen Participation?

Citizen participation means, in our opinion, active democratic participation in the political, economic, social, cultural spheres, and all other domains of life. Full citizen participation cannot be achieved without democracy. And there is no real democracy without the full participation of women in all aspects of public life.

Democracy is not only political; it is not only related to elections and the existence of several parties (as pluralism and liberalism are). Democracy is related to both public and private life as well as to the economic, educational, religious, emotional and sexual aspects of life.

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Moreover, democracy or real citizen participation cannot be imposed by a presidential decree, or by decisions emanating from the ruling power in the country, as is the case in Egypt or other countries under a dictatorship. In the same way, democracy cannot be achieved under foreign military occupation or political or economic control by colonial or neo-colonial powers, like the examples of Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, etc.

Dissidence and Struggle

To be dissident means to struggle, to liberate oneself and others in one's family, in one's community, locally and globally. In this

sense, we cannot separate the global from the local level, so we call our struggle "glocal".

We need knowledge and passion, freedom and love. We need to demystify those beautiful words used by the ruling class and patriarchal powers in order to deceive and exploit women and the poor as well. For example, the word "femininity" seems to be a very nice word, like the word "beauty". Under such words women are oppressed, they are looked upon as bodies to be attractive to men, to be naked in order to serve the free market or to be veiled for false moral or religious reasons.

Today, in Egypt, women are victims of both the Islamisation and the Americanisation of society. One can see young women covering their heads with a veil while wearing tight fashionable jeans leaving part of their belly naked. The veil is now a fashion among women from all classes and even rich women ornament their veils with jewellery, put on shiny earrings, heavy make-up, artificial eye lashes and high heels.

But, still, the veil of the mind is the most dangerous of all, because it is invisible. The education system and the media work together to veil the mind of women and men and, though this is a universal problem, it is more serious in our countries.

The Price Paid by Creative Dissident Women

We have two main slogans in our women's association in Egypt: "To unveil the mind, to organize". We cannot resist oppression collectively without being organized, without political power. In this sense, the collective power of women to resist has a

role to play. Because women are brought up to fear power, to appear weak, docile or feminine and they are not experienced in establishing political organizations for themselves, since they think that politics is the domain of men. If they are active socially, they restrict themselves to voluntary social organizations providing health or illiteracy services.

In some countries, including Egypt, women are discouraged from establishing their political parties. In Egypt, the Law of Associations (or Civil Society Law) prevents their members from discussing politics or religion. Our women's association (the Egyptian branch of the Arab Women's Association) was banned and closed down by the government in May 1991 under the accusation of being political because we stood against the Gulf War.

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We were labelled "dissidents" because we were independent from the government in our thinking. We were supposed to be a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) but, in fact, it is almost impossible to be a real NGO in Egypt. The government controls every organization, whether governmental or non-governmental.

To be creative, freedom and real democracy are needed. But creative dissident people are punished in our countries: some go to prison, some lose their career, some are forced into exile. For women, the punishment is double or triple: they are punished by both the state and their hus-

band, or by the men of their family. They may also be divorced or lose their rights as mothers or wives. In the eye of public opinion women can be robbed of their reputation of virtuosity or femininity, and considered either mannish or odd or even mentally sick.

But the struggle continues

We started a new organization which we called Itihad Nissa Misr (Egyptian Women's Association). Some of our members are creative and dissident. They supported the idea of bearing the name of their mother alongside the name of their father. They are all women and men who are aware that patriarchy is based on the name of the father, that polygamy and sexual promiscuity were granted for men whereas women should be monogamous.

This double moral standard was inherited from slavery (the class patriarchal system) so that fatherhood could be known. Therefore, in Egypt, men are not punished if they have children outside marriage: it is the child who is punished along with his or her mother. Since their fathers have the right to deprive those children of their names, they become illegitimate.

According to the law they can be legitimate if they bear the name of any man (called "the imaginary father") whereas those who bear the name of their mother are dishonoured for the rest of their lives.

Our new group has other projects but this one is amongst the most creative and most dissident. We were insulted by some writers and media people and have also been accused of corruption and heresy. In spite of that,

we are determined to continue bearing the name of our mother and saying that it is a great honour for us to do so.

We started a web site for our group (www.ithadnisamisr.org) and an electronic magazine in which we sign with our new

names. By the way, my mother's name is Zaynab. My new name is Nawal Zaynab El Saadawi.

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