

Hans Ulrich Obrist
**In Conversation
with Nawal El
Saadawi**

e-flux journal #42 — february 2013 Hans Ulrich Obrist
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01/11

On July 25, 2011, I sat down for a conversation with Egyptian writer, activist, physician and psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi while she was in London for a workshop as part of the Edgware Road Project at the Serpentine Gallery. It was a beautiful July week in London and an equally bright time for the ongoing revolution in Egypt that had begun only a few months before, and I found Nawal full of the ferocious optimism she is known around the world for. As darker clouds now loom over the horizon in Egypt, Nawal's reflections on the role of creativity, literature, dissident work, and feminism are absolutely crucial to return to now. Published here for the first time, a different version of this interview will be published in the third volume of my Pars Pro Toto series of books with artist Susan Hefuna.
– Hans Ulrich Obrist

Hans Ulrich Obrist: What encouraged you to start writing? Was there an epiphany that brought you to literature, or literature to you?

Nawal El Saadawi: What encouraged me to write? Well, since my childhood my dream was to be a dancer. To express my feelings in dance. I loved to see dancers perform. Then, I wanted to be a musician, to express myself on the piano. However, dancing wasn't possible, nor was the piano, because we were not rich. I would have needed to have a piano at home to be able to practice. I loved writing, too. I love any creative form of self-expression, be it dancing, music, writing. I didn't dream of being a doctor at all. I never dreamt about that – I hated doctors! I hated teachers and professors and all that too, and I ended up being both a doctor and a professor. But I've written all my life. What really encouraged me to write was my dissatisfaction with my surroundings. I was angry with society. As a girl, I felt there was something wrong in the world around me, in my family, school, in the streets. I also felt there was something wrong with the way society treated me. So I can tell you writing came from dissatisfaction, from anger.

HUO: Out of protest.

NS: Revolutionary protest! I wanted to revolt by writing!

HUO: And did you have any heroes, or heroines – authors who inspired you from the past?

NS: Well, many, but there was my grandmother, who was a peasant woman – and she was also a revolutionary in her village. She led the villagers to revolt against British colonialism and King Farouk. She inspired me a lot, as did my mother and my father.

HUO: And did you have any writers from the Arabic language who inspired you?

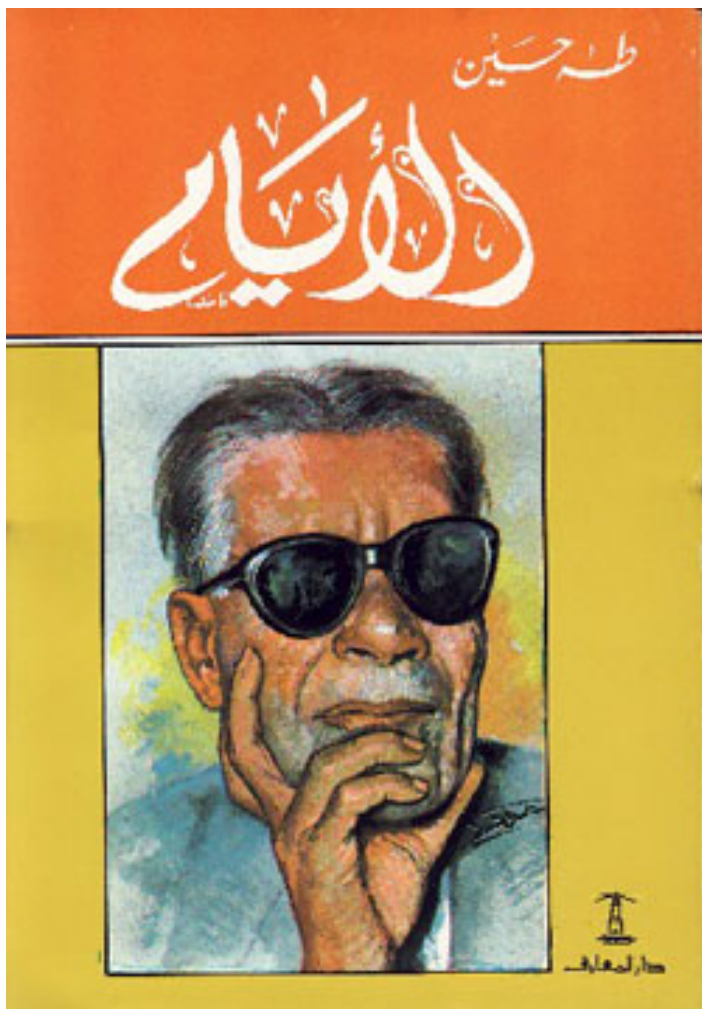
NS: Many, because I was reading mainly



Author Nawal El Saadawi, date unknown.

Arabic. In primary school I went to a British missionary school. That's why I studied English in our village and why in school we read Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë. I read Arabic and English at the time. I was nonetheless inspired by many Arab writers, by Taha Hussein and other Egyptian writers.

03/11



Book cover for Arab edition of *Al-Ayyam (The Days)* by Taha Hussein.

HUO: What inspired you about Taha Hussein?

NS: He wrote a wonderful book called *Al-Ayyam – The Days*. This is his autobiography and it's a beautiful book. It's about his life in Egypt as a poor child and how he was blinded when his mother put something wrong in his eyes and how he was educated. It's one of the best books written in Arabic.

HUO: Was Mahfouz important for you?

NS: No, I'm not inspired very much by Mahfouz. He is not revolutionary enough. He is a writer of the establishment. Taha Hussein was revolutionary. But Naguib Mahfouz is pro-Mubarak, pro-Sadat, as far as I am concerned. And I prefer revolutionary writers.

HUO: So you see yourself as part of a

tradition of revolutionary writers?

NS: Yes. In fact, since I was ten years old I've been participating in revolts – in my primary school, my secondary school, and in medical school. I was basically dreaming of the revolution since I was ten. For me, the January 2011 revolution was delayed seventy years!

HUO: And were there any women who inspired you, women writers?

NS: The Lebanese-Egyptian writer May Ziade, and others – Aisha Tamour, Koakab Nasr [phonetic/07:26], and so on.

HUO: And what was the first text where you thought you had reached a revolution? What do you think is your earliest revolutionary text? Do you consider all your books to be revolutionary? *Zeina* is one, for example.

NS: When I was ten years old I was already going to demonstrations. I felt I was in a prison, and I constantly dreamed of flying, of escaping. But where to? I don't know. I have a book called *Woman at Point Zero*. The woman in it is very revolutionary. *The Fall of the Imam* and *God Dies by the Nile* are about the revolution too, about people revolting: men, women, and children. *Zeina* is about a children's revolution.

HUO: Can you tell me about what prompted *Zeina*?

NS: It was what I saw in the streets. I live in Shubra, which is a poor district. So I frequently meet homeless boys and girls by the Nile, sleeping on the street. One of them was Zeina, who inspired the novel. It was through these young children that I foresaw the revolution that would arrive in Egypt.

HUO: And when did you realize that the revolution would happen? From our perspective in the West it seemed to happen so suddenly.

NS: We had been demonstrating all the time long before it. Sadat put me in prison. Mubarak exiled me from the country. We started demonstrating against Mubarak, first in small demonstrations, unlike the scale of January 2011. I felt that a revolution was coming. It grew until there were a million people. Just before Mubarak resigned, we grew to twenty million, not only in Tahrir Square but from Aswan to Alexandria, all over Egypt. And with a population of eighty-five million, this is quite a number.

HUO: One in every four people made the revolution.

NS: The power of the people.

HUO: What role did you play during the revolution?

NS: I was there throughout it, physically, moving. There were many young people under the tents. I held seminars under the tents of Tahrir Square, invited by young men and women who knew my work, because my books have been reprinted in Egypt several times. I have a very big

04/11



Nawal El Saadawi defending women's rights to pray alongside men in mosques, Tahrir Square. Photo: Al Jazeera.

readership in Egypt and in the Arab world.

HUO: I'm very fascinated by this idea of the revolutionary seminar. Can you tell me what you talked to them about?

NS: When I was in Tahrir Square, young men and even veiled women with the *niqab* came to me. They came and hugged me. And the younger generation of the Muslim Brotherhood also came and hugged me. They told me: we've read your work, we disagree with some of what you've written, but we love you. So in Tahrir Square I felt I was surrounded by people who loved me. And then, because we were spending so many hours together, walking, shouting, and so on, they invited me to sit in the tents. The tents became like small houses. "Please come talk to us about your knowledge, about your book, the revolution, Mubarak, Sadat, America and Israel, about creativity." So while moving around I was invited by different people in Tahrir Square to do seminars on things like music, creativity, revolution.

HUO: And how can one teach creativity?

NS: We simply cannot teach it – though I spent my years in exile doing precisely that. I hated being in exile without work so I accepted an invitation by Duke University in the US. They asked me to be a professor and teach whatever topic I liked. I told them I hated teachers, so I didn't know what to teach. I wanted to do something related to writing and creativity. So I invented the topic "Creativity and Dissidence," on the relationship between creativity, dissident work, and being revolutionary. Since January 1993 I've been teaching this topic. Usually, on the first day of class I tell my students that I cannot teach creativity. What I can try to do is to undo what education has done to them, because educational systems everywhere in the world kill creativity.

HUO: You basically try to remove the damage of education. As Ivan Illich proposed, you try to de-school people.

NS: Yes. Decolonizing the mind, undoing the damage of education, of fear towards the media, of religion, religious education, and so on.

HUO: Rainer Maria Rilke, the German poet, wrote a little book of advice to a young poet. I was wondering, what is your advice to a young revolutionary?

NS: Number one, I don't like to give advice. Number two, I wouldn't know how to do it. I try to let my students discover themselves, and I tell them not to listen to me too much. I tell them that they should try and listen to their own voices, their own advice and not expect me to give it to them. They need to look for a deep inner voice that they haven't heard since childhood, a voice that has been stifled and silenced since then. Giving advice means killing the inner voice.

And I want them to flourish.

HUO: Like an awakening.

NS: An awakening, yes, exactly.

HUO: What else did you tell the people who made the revolution? You went from tent to tent and spoke to them?

NS: Because each tent was like a home, I could not go uninvited. One or two people at a time came from different tents to invite me. So I was moving around, very interested. I also met many university professors in the tents and we talked and had seminars. There were people playing music, reciting poems and plays, acting in Tahrir Square. It was amazing.

HUO: And you've also written plays such as *Isis, A Play in Two Acts*, among others.

NS: Oh, yes. I wrote two plays, *Isis* and *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*, which created many problems for me. The police went to the publisher and told him to burn the book. The Mubarak regime felt *God Resigns* was a dangerous book because it could open people's minds. To be a dictator and control people you must veil their minds. Our role, as writers, is to unveil it. So they burnt the book.

05/11



Nawal El Saadawi in primary school playing goddess Isis's character.

HUO: It's a very powerful title. But why did it create such an uproar?

NS: Well, because I spent ten years of my life studying religions. I even went to India to



Kissinger and Sadat, August 25th, 1975. Library of Congress.



Nawal Al Saadawi speaking at an Occupy protest, London, 2011.

study the Gita. I compared the Old Testament to the New Testament and read the Quran very carefully, and I discovered many things, many contradictions in religions, many negative value systems. They are full of double standards, and *God Resigns* is about the many negative things in holy books. All religions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I've criticized a number of religions simultaneously.

HUO: And what about Buddhism?

NS: Well, it's a better religion. But it is still very patriarchal and class-oriented.

HUO: How do you connect the many plays you've written to history? *Isis* has to do with history. As you claim in the introduction, "This play is the Egyptian Isis as I understand her from history. History belongs to everyone who possesses an amount of imagination."

NS: I have seven plays in total, although five of them haven't been translated into other languages yet. We are taught history in a very limited way, wrongly so. It is the rulers, it is power who writes history. It's not the oppressed, but men who write it; that's why they call it history. Our story, as women, is her-esy. So when I started to reread ancient Egyptian history I discovered Isis in a way that was totally different from how the Egyptian writer Tawfik Al-Hakim wrote about Isis. I decided to answer Al-Hakim by writing of another Isis, a truer one. Tawfik Al-Hakim's play is very patriarchal, with Isis as just Osiris's wife. I considered her a philosopher. Her husband was her follower. But with patriarchy, everything shifted and Osiris became the main figure.

HUO: To come back to your fiction books, you said that many of your books have to do with different revolutions. And you talked about *Zeina* and the children's revolution. What about *The Fall of Imam*? What kind of revolution happens there?

NS: In fact, the idea behind writing *The Fall of the Imam* came to me while I was in prison under Sadat in 1981. I was very much against his political, economic, social, and religious policies. Sadat the dictator imprisoned me. He brought us the fundamentalists and made Egypt a US colony. Poverty under Sadat increased and he was a patriarchal dictator. He called himself the Father of Egypt, the Father of Nature. So, while I was in my prison cell, I closed my eyes and I imagined Sadat. To me, he became the Imam, as he called himself "the Believer." "*Sadat al Rayyis al Mo'min*" – the President, the Believer. He related himself to God and so he became for me a semi-God, a pharaoh. Religious and political authority were together under him. As I closed my eyes, I imagined him on stage, as the Imam who is falling. Then, although Sadat was shot before I was released, Mubarak kept us imprisoned for two months after the

assassination. Can you imagine? He kept us there two whole months longer. I was imagining the Imam, Sadat, being shot by his illegitimate daughter. So the novel is about that, the illegitimate daughter of this person the Imam, who is accused of shooting her father. Throughout the whole struggle, they run after the girl.

HUO: It's fascinating too that very often your novels have predicted history. The artist anticipates.

NS: Exactly, they anticipated many things. And I'll tell you, while we were in prison, my cellmates were crying out that Sadat would kill us, that he was threatening to do so. I just laughed, danced, and did other exercises telling them that he would die before us. And so he did.

HUO: Just as *Zeina* predicted the revolution of the youth, this book predicted the end of Sadat. There is also *Two Women in One*, which is a masterpiece about being a doctor and having been a medical student. What was the inspiration for *Two Women in One*?

NS: Well, in my life, I make no distinction between novels and autobiography, between fiction and facts, the physical and the social or political, the body and the mind. In fact, creativity is the ability to link everything. So the novel *Two Women in One* is about the schizophrenia that women and men inherit from patriarchy and slavery. It is because of this schizophrenia that the woman in the novel is divided into two by patriarchy, by sexual and political oppression. At the end, she also makes a revolution. In all my novels, you'll find that something revolutionary happening at the end.

HUO: Can we then say each of your books contains a revolution? What was the revolution in *The Innocence of the Devil*?

NS: In this story, God and the devil were in the same mental hospital. When the devil was killed, God died as well. That's my philosophy in life: divinity is not separate from the devil. And so if there is no devil, there will be no God.

HUO: That's very beautiful. I'm also interested in your work as a doctor, and how this connects to other aspects of your work. For example, when I was in Egypt we went to see Alaa Al-Aswany, who is a dentist and a writer. And for him, being a dentist is very important for maintaining a connection to the people of his country.

NS: I didn't want to be a doctor at all. And I don't think a doctor is connected to the people. No, the profession is horrible. I didn't choose to be a doctor, my parents, my father especially, wanted me to be a doctor. The medical profession and education can kill your creativity. I had to undo my education to be a good doctor. Now, in good medical colleges they teach music

07/11

e-flux journal #42 — february 2013 Hans Ulrich Obrist
In Conversation with Nawal El Saadawi

and literature to medical students, to encourage them to be good human beings and good doctors. No doctor can really communicate with people without undoing the heritage of the medical profession. I was a chest surgeon, and a surgeon cannot talk to patients, just to other doctors. I am now a psychiatrist, which I chose to be, but I am still against psychiatry. I've also tried to undo my psychiatry education and training in order to be a good psychiatrist.

HUO: But you have said, "The unifying force in all my work is a mixture of feminism and a strong sense of social justice. I'm a doctor, but I do not separate medicine from politics and economics."

NS: Or literature.

HUO: "Or poverty from sickness, or mental from physical illness." So in this sense, you teach the connectedness of things.

NS: Yes. Education is built on specialization. Creativity undoes the splitting that comes from specialization.

HUO: You have written a number of memoirs, including *The Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* and *The Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. Can you talk about your memoirs?

NS: Well, there is a very close connection between memory and creativity. And that's why

those who oppress us want us to forget. Oppression makes people forget their childhood, their life. It disconnects their childhood from their adulthood. So I train my memory by writing memoirs. It's very important to write memoirs.

HUO: And what are you writing at the moment?

NS: I am writing a new novel. I started a novel six months before the revolution. I was in the middle of it when the revolution came. In the process I became another person, I changed. So I threw the old novel out. I started a new novel, because I felt I was a new person. This revolution was amazing. When you've lived with people in Tahrir Square, people who you don't know, you feel you are one with the millions. That's my novel. About the oneness, the unity, this unity that you dissolve into. You dissolve among the people. The revolution is like love. You dissolve into another person, yet you are still the same person. You feel you've dissolved into the millions.

HUO: You were once saying that writing is like an orgasm.

NS: Yes, creativity is more pleasurable than sexual orgasm. Creativity gives more pleasure than food, sex, money, or anything else. And that pleasure is what kept me going. Many people ask

08/11



A tree with signs of protest inside a camp in Tahrir Square, 2011. Photo: Nicole Salazar.

me where my energy comes from. And I tell them: creativity!

HUO: And amongst all your books, do you have any unrealized projects or dreams?

NS: I have many. We still live in a jungle, but I want to live in a human world. The world we are living is very inhumane. This is not a human world. I am dreaming of a world where people are peaceful. These past two days I've been walking the streets of London, under the sun. Children were walking and playing in Hyde Park, men and women were happy. I thought to myself, why isn't everybody like that?

HUO: They were beautiful sunny days. So that's your unrealized project – peace?

NS: Real peace. Not the peace of Sadat. Real peace, real social justice, real happiness, real equality between people, regardless of gender, class, nationality, religion. Why don't people become equal human beings? Why do America and the EU invade us and take our resources? Why did the British colonize us? Why has America colonized the world? Why is Israel taking another people's land? Nobody answers these questions. That's my dream, my unrealized dream. Peace and justice. There is no peace without justice. Politicians always try to separate peace from justice, and this usually means humiliating a country or women.

HUO: Doris Lessing was speaking to me a couple of weeks ago about censorship and self-censorship – often our unrealized projects are those we don't dare to do. What do you think about self-censorship?

NS: I agree with her that self-censorship is the most dangerous thing. We are oppressed by other oppressors and then we oppress ourselves with self-censorship, self-humiliation, self-injury, masochism. Masochism is one of the diseases of oppression. Sadism and masochism are two sides of the same coin.

HUO: Can you tell me about one of your most important books, *God Dies by the Nile*? How is it related to the fact that you don't respect money because your father said most rich people don't develop their mind?

NS: *God Dies by the Nile* is a story from my village about a mayor, and how the mayor and the men around him, the people who aid him in ruling the village, used the idea of God to oppress the villagers. So whenever there is a disaster, the mayor and his men tell the villagers that it was God's will, destiny. Zakia, the woman who kills the mayor, always believed it was God who sent her son to war, God who killed her children by poverty and disease. It was God who raped her daughter. Because for every catastrophe, the mayor and his men tell her it was God. But suddenly, at the end of the novel, certain information that came to Zakia drop by drop

suddenly accumulates and she is awoken, realizing that it's not God, but the mayor who is responsible. So she kills him. And when she goes to prison, one of the poor women asks her, "Where is God? We are poor." So she answers, "God? I killed him. He died by the Nile." That was the story.

HUO: It's an awakening, again. In all your work there is an aspect of awakening, no?

NS: The revolution is the awakening of the millions to the need to change the system. Zakia revolted and she killed, but I am against killing.

HUO: You're for peaceful revolution. Is Gandhi important for you?

NS: Yes, peaceful, like the Egyptian revolution, political peacefulness. I am not as peaceful as Gandhi. Gandhi's philosophy is very good, but a bit passive. I am talking about a positive, peaceful revolution in which you change the system and criminals are tried. I don't believe in what they call forgiveness. Gandhi, to me, was a bit too forgiving.

09/11



Graffiti in Cairo commemorating the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

HUO: There has to be justice.

NS: Exactly. Many people who are pro-Mubarak now exploit the idea of forgiveness, compassion, and God. I want social justice. I want criminals to be tried, although in a peaceful way. In Egypt we need to build a system, a new constitution – a secular constitution. We need to change all the laws, the political parties, family, labor, economic laws, all of them have to be different to make Egypt independent. New parties need to be formed for the young. We have to build a system for equality within families because you cannot have democracy in parliament without democracy within families. So we have to do our work to build a new system before we can hold elections.

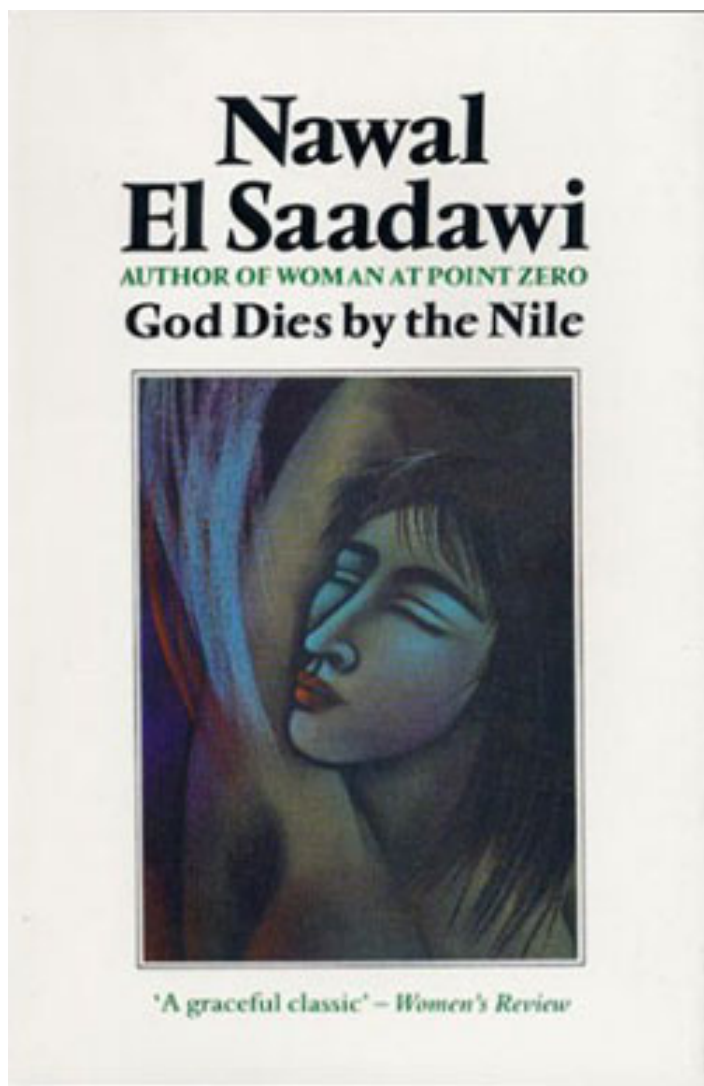
HUO: Sometimes writers go into politics. Could you imagine playing a role? Could you

imagine being a politician? I read that you were a candidate for president.

NS: I am not a politician. And even when I ran in the election against Mubarak in 2005, I did it for specific reasons. Number one, to challenge Mubarak; number two, to encourage women to do it; number three, as a symbol; number four, to expose the hypocrisy of Mubarak's democracy, and the hypocrisy of a so-called multi-candidate system. I ran against Mubarak, but I was boycotted. The police were after me. I succeeded in all these goals when the election was boycotted. I am not a politician and will never be one. Politics is not a clean game.

HUO: Do you have manifestos?

NS: Philosophical manifestoes? I have a philosophy, a new value system, but not a manifesto. A connection between politics, medicine, art, and science is the new vision. However, I don't call it a manifesto.



English edition of *God Dies by the Nile*.

HUO: Your work has been pioneering for feminism. How do you see feminism now in

Egypt, and in the world?

NS: Well, there was a backlash against feminism, especially from the right wing. What is feminism? Feminism is humanism. Feminism is social justice. I was a feminist when I was a child because I was angry that my brother had more rights. So feminism, to me, is not a theory that I read in English. It's a way of life, like socialism, like equality. And I don't believe in feminists who separate sexual rape and economic rape. In the West, in England, in America, some feminists are very fond of speaking only about sexual rape. And they separate it from economic, mental rape, as when someone is brainwashed by the media or education. So I see all that as feminism in a broader sense.

HUO: So you would have an expanded notion of feminism.

NS: Yes. Socialism, feminism, humanism, creativity – I want to link all that. There are many splits, many divisions, one of which is the global and its separation from the local, which is wrong. There really should be no separation whatsoever between the global and the local. The very, very local is the very, very universal.

HUO: And as Edouard Glissant once told me it can only be global if it is deeply rooted. There are obviously also your nonfiction books like *Women and Sex*, *Woman is the Origin*, *Man and Sex*, *The Naked Face of Arab Women*, *Women and Neurosis*, and your essays such as "Breaking Down Barriers" and "The Hidden Face of Eve." Among your many different types of writing, what role does nonfiction play?

NS: I am above all a fiction writer, a novelist mainly, but I often write nonfiction. I'm writing a weekly article for *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, an independent opposition newspaper in Cairo. I write an article every Tuesday. My articles aren't only nonfiction – I combine politics, creativity, and literature. I've collected many of these articles in books.

HUO: Like *Breaking Down Barriers*. One of your first books in English was a nonfiction book, *Women and Sex*, published in 1969.

NS: Yes. One of the other nonfiction books in English was *The Hidden Face of Eve*. That was translated in 1980 by Zed Books. They also issued a new book called *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi*, which came out last year.

HUO: And what do you think about art?

NS: Art cannot be separated from writing and painting, just as you cannot separate writing and dancing. When I was young I wanted to be a dancer. But dancing is not only physical, it's also in the mind. I now dance with my mind and I write with my body.

HUO: And do you often write poetry?

NS: I wrote poems when I was younger, and now more sporadically. You can find my poems in

10/11

some of my collected works.

HUO: What's the role of traveling for you, as you seem to travel a lot?

NS: I wrote a travelogue called *My Travel Around the World*. I love traveling, although not so much now. At this point, I would like to settle down in Cairo and write.

HUO: Do you have a library and archives in Cairo?

NS: When Mubarak and Sadat banned my organization, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, I was dreaming of having a library for women. Now we are in the process of establishing the Egyptian Women's Union, with its own library and archives. The union was previously banned by Suzanne Mubarak.

HUO: So that's an unrealized project, your library.

NS: Yes, my library is an unrealized project. My friends want to establish a Nawal El Saadawi Foundation to help other women, give awards, and collaborate with universities. But I don't have even a secretary, can you imagine? I don't have an agent or a lawyer. I don't have somebody to do accounting, so I lose money. I'm not rich. I should be rich. Where are my royalties? I don't know, I have to collect them.

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11/11

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