At one level, Nawal’s writing is a passionate appeal to our basic feelings of humanity, justice and compassion. Nawal is not a writer in the ordinary sense. Her books are an expression of her political activism which also extends into participation in the organised women’s movement and to advocating women’s rights in every public forum available to her. She helped to establish the Arab Women’s Association which is the first staunchly feminist organisation in the Arab world. She is also playing a significant role in setting up a women’s publishing house. Her recent visit to Australia as part of the Adelaide Festival Writers’ Week was as much used to forge links with Australian feminists as it was to promote herself as a writer. Predictably, she was one of a very small number of international women writers invited to the festival. At least, the good press coverage generated by her visit offered some compensation and extended further her already well established reputation as a writer, a socialist, and a forthright advocate of women’s liberation.

Part of her familiarity can be explained by the very practical fact that she is one of the few Arab women writers whose work has been translated into English. As she herself points out, there are other brilliant Arab women writers who are well known in their own region, but who are simply not accessible to a Western readership. This is not to dismiss her considerable literary achievements, not to underrate her important contribution in assisting Western readers to develop a more informed understanding of women’s oppression in the Arab world.

Nawal has written twenty-two books but, unfortunately, only five are
currently available in English. Nevertheless, they do give an indication of Nawal’s major concerns and her approach as a writer of both fiction and non-fiction.

The Hidden Face of Eve was the first of Nawal’s books to be translated into English. Using the straightforward style which is characteristic of her writing, she describes her own personal experiences of growing up in Egypt, and explains what it is like to become a woman in the Middle East. This book is remembered by many feminists for challenging our rather glib assumptions about Arab women. Regrettably, in hindsight, our tendency had been to pronounce that the oppression of women in so-called Third World countries was a result of religious superstition and underdevelopment. We pointed to the practice of clitoridectomy (the excision of the clitoris) and women being forced to wear veils, as evidence of extreme backwardness in the Arab world and, by inference, we viewed Western women as more liberated.

In The Hidden Face of Eve and throughout her other writings, Nawal emphatically rejects these notions. She asserts that Western imperialism, patriarchal relations and capitalism combine to maintain women’s inferior status and to keep the majority of the population in extreme poverty. This oppression is justified on religious grounds, but it is not necessarily inherent in Islamic teachings.

The widespread practice of clitoridectomy is used to illustrate her point. Nawal traces the origins of this practice to earlier than the advent of Islam and beyond the confines of Arab countries.

She argues that clitoridectomy is not religious, but patriarchal. By diminishing women’s sexuality it is more possible to keep women monogamous and thereby secure the patriarchal family line. Nawal points out that, in the West, the Freudian notion of infaltilc clitoral orgasm serves a similar function in stunting women’s sexual pleasure.

But Nawal is in no way apologising for this cruel practice. In fact, the terrifying experience of clitoridectomy is a recurring theme in her novels and, as she explains in the opening chapter of The Hidden Face of Eve, had a devastating impact on her own girlhood:

I was six years old when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful in that pleasurable state halfway between wakefulness and sleep ... They carried me to the bathroom ... I did not know what they had cut from my body and I did not try to find out.

The pain here is not only physical. The nightmarish quality is also the result of being kept in ignorance about her body. Nawal recalls other significant events which should have been natural parts of growing up, such as her first period. She remembers feeling dirty, ashamed and frightened. Yet Nawal came from a relatively well-educated family who at least understood the basics of physical health. Through her studies on women and sex, Nawal uncovered a level of ignorance and superstition too horrific to contemplate, including the widespread yet hidden incidence of sexual abuse and incest.

In the second half of the book, the earlier chapters on women’s sexuality are placed in the wider context of the limitations placed on women’s education and work opportunities, their lack of protection from abuse and their ensnired secondary status under the law. Hardly surprisingly, women in Arab countries share common ground with women all round the world. Yet, while the similarities should be emphasised, Nawal sees the differences as crucial. They mean that Arab women have different priorities from those of Western women, including national
liberation and fighting against dire economic hardship.

Nor is it surprising that The Hidden Face of Eve, along with her book Women and Sex, was extremely controversial. As she explains in the introduction:

There is no doubt that to write about women in Arab countries, especially if the author is herself a woman, is to tread on difficult and sensitive areas. It is like picking your way through territory chwasy with visible and hidden mines.

To question the moral codes justified as part of Islam did indeed prove a dangerous occupation. Her book Women and Sex led to Nawal's dismissal from her influential post as Director of Health in the Egyptian Ministry of Public Health. In 1981 she was imprisoned for her political writing.

During her visit to Australia, Nawal was cheerfully philosophical about this experience. When asked about her stay in prison she replied that, although it was a very difficult time, there were also compensations which made the experience worthwhile. She met many brave and wonderful women, she said, and her time was not wasted because it had provided the inspiration for two new books.

One of these, Memoirs from the Women's Prison has recently been published in English. Like all Nawal's books, it is immensely readable. It shows Nawal's tremendous courage and resistance amid harsh and extremely squalid conditions. But, far from purposely depicting herself heroically, her crucial role in maintaining morale and organising resistance is considerably understated. Yet even a dispassionate record of events indicate her positive effect on the other prisoners.

Her descriptions of prison show that there was very little to be positive about. There were twelve women huddled together in the one vermin-infested cell, with disgusting food, wooden benches for beds, no proper toilet facilities, no contact with the outside world and no indication as to if or when they would be released.

They were political prisoners ranging from the extreme left to the ultra right. With Nawal placing herself as "more or less the independent writer in between". This combination is hardly a recipe for harmonious relations. Still, they managed to live together remarkably well. Their dire circumstances forced them not only to accommodate each other, but also led to strong attachments which have endured well beyond their three months' confinement.

Memoirs from the Women's Prison is much more than a diary of a difficult experience. It is a study of political suppression under Egypt's President Sadat and the consequences of repression at a personal level. The life of an extreme fundamentalist woman entails being deprived of physical movement and independent thought. They are not allowed to laugh or cry or to show any signs of human emotion. They must be covered at all times and ordinary bodily functions are a source of unspeakable shame. At the other end of the spectrum, the dogmatic marxist revolutionary is also repressed. Every emotion has to be subdued to the revolutionary cause, thereby stunting her capacity to communicate with others. Nawal's simple but significant point is that religion's fanaticism and political dogma converge to produce personal and political repression.

In both The Hidden Face of Eve and Memoirs from the Women's Prison, Nawal emerges as her own best character. Those of us lucky enough to have met her during her brief stay in Australia would testify that she is indeed a striking and dynamic personality, with a strong sense of the dramatic and an infectious sense of humour. Fortunately for her readers, she is able to transfer these characteristics to print. But such personal exposure is threatening for any writer, especially for a woman writing from a feminist perspective. By placing herself at the centre of her writings, Nawal not only challenges the assumption that objectivity is confined to academic conventions, she discards the protection offered by being removed from her subject matter.

From a literary perspective, Nawal also stretches the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. Much of The Hidden Face of Eve is highly dramatic and, on one level, Memoirs from the Women's Prison can be read like a novel, with an identifiable plot and well-drawn characters. It is when Nawal moves into the realm of conventional third-person narrative that her writing often lacks the warmth and vitality infused into her other works. Two Women in One and God Dies by the Nile fall into this category. While still dealing with her central concern of women's oppression in the Arab world, the characters fail to do justice to this theme.

Two Women in One tells the story of a young woman caught between the powerful forces of tradition and the enticing but scary possibilities of an independent life. Although Nawal's political message is clear, the central character is one-dimensional, reduced to a mere vehicle for her feminist purpose.

Similarly, God Dies by the Nile can be read as a fictional account of the subject matter in The Hidden Face of Eve. A peasant family is relentlessly exploited and victimised at the hands of a corrupt village establishment. The novel is a metaphor for the Sadat regime, landlord oppression and the vulnerability of an illiterate and poverty-stricken population.

The characterisation of Zakeya and her family relies heavily on imagery from the natural world. Often it is as if they experience life through a series of inexplicable sensations and emotions. Even Zakeya's moment of revenge appears to come from a force outside herself. At times, the limitations of character development make very irritating reading. Evil characters are signalled by long, clinical descriptions of their nasty characteristics which are, in turn, linked to disgusting personal habits, a depraved sexuality and moral bankruptcy.

These devices are also used in Women at Point Zero, yet this book is by far Nawal's best novel to date. It is a powerful and inspiring account of a woman who is imprisoned and about to be hanged for killing a piper. The novel begins with Nawal describing the events leading to her meeting Firdaus in prison. At first, Firdaus refuses to meet with Nawal. When she changes her mind, we are
Transported into Firdaus’ cell. The rest of the novel consists of Firdaus telling her life story just hours before she is to be hanged.

*Woman at Point Zero* is based on the true story of a woman Nawal met while conducting her study on women and neurosis. Nawal has said that the novel is, in fact, eighty percent non-fiction and twenty percent fiction. Perhaps this firm basis in reality distinguishes this novel so markedly from the others. Certainly, the simple, direct and totally unsentimental voice of Firdaus, as she talks about her deprivation, abuse and ultimate revenge, is not unlike Nawal’s own style in *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison*.

Undoubtedly, the situations described in *Woman at Point Zero* contain the compelling combination of drama and tragedy, a fact recognised by several producers who lost no time in adapting it for the stage. For women readers, especially, Firdaus’ revenge, however short-lived, on the pimp who threatened her life merits our applause. Equally, we cannot help but admire her refusal to grovel to the authorities for a pardon, though we would not condone violence as a means of combatting deprivation, abuse and ultimate revenge, is not unlike Nawal’s own style in *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison*.

While so much more can be said about Nawal el Sa’adawi both as a writer and a political activist, my purpose here has merely been to tempt potential Sa’adawi fans to delve more deeply and discover for themselves the many pleasures and insights found in her books. Hopefully, we can also help create some pressure for the remaining seventeen books still not available to us to be translated into English.


**MARTINA NIGHTINGALE is a member of the *Scarlet Woman* editorial collective in Melbourne, and a member of the Communist Party. She interviewed Nawal el Sa’adawi on her recent visit to Australia.**

---

**Guilty feelings**

*Eating Your Heart Out* by Ramona Koval (Penguin, 1986). Reviewed by PAVLA MILLER.

On the back cover of *Eating Your Heart Out*, the publishers tell us that the book is for “everyone who worries about their weight”. They are wrong. The book is also for those, worried or not, who want to understand the making of one of the overwhelming concerns of people today. In her book, Ramona Koval takes on two important tasks. Firstly, she sets out to demolish the seemingly natural character of the “ideal” bodily shape. Secondly, she exposes the trickery and dangerous practices of many sections of the weight control industry.

Only fifty years ago, advertisements in Australian newspapers invited women to “transform ugly hollows into graceful curves”; a few years earlier, an advertisement offered to “put 10, 15, yes, 20 pounds of solid ‘stay there’ flesh on your bones”. Today, teenage models, looking “like pipe cleaners”, entice mature women to “bite chunks out of their weight problem” and to “create a slim, sexy great body in record time”. The ideal changes, but the pressure on people to conform to it remains. Women in particular, Ramona Koval argues, channel many problems and frustrations of their everyday life into an obsession with food. Rather than attempting to deal with the causes of these problems, the “body industry” aggressively and enthusiastically cashes in. Conforming to a changing and elusive ideal body shape is presented as an easy solution to problems ranging from unemployment to poor health or an unsatisfactory sex life. In fact, dieting and other weight-control measures may be a source of greater health problems than those which they are used to solve.

With a degree in Microbiology and Genetics and a delightful sense of humour, Ramona Koval does a convincing job of demolishing the link between health and thin bodies — so much so that many thin people might feel a slight twinge of unease. Certainly, “those thin people who maintain their weight through a combination of rigorous dieting, food obsessions and self-hatred do not fall into the category of healthy”. Fatness,