

Discours prononcé par MM. les Recteurs Benjamin Van Camp et Philippe Vincke à l'occasion de la remise des insignes de Docteur Honoris Causa à
Madame NAWAL EL SAADAWI
Cérémonie ULB-VUB, le 28 novembre 2007

Excellencies, colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla, a small village outside Cairo. Raised among a large household, her family was relatively traditional Islamic. Despite limitations imposed by both religious and colonial oppression on rural women, Nawal Al Saadawi attended the University of Cairo and graduated in 1955 as MD specialised in psychiatry. She practised psychiatry at the University Hospital of Cairo until 1965, when she became Egypt's director of public Health.

In addition to her medical activities, Nawal El Sadaawi began to write fiction and non-fiction books. More than 30 novels, plays, and short stories have since been published. Most of her work focusses on the "condition humaine" of Arab women, specifically their sexuality and legal status. From the start her books were considered controversial and dangerous. She was forced to publish them outside Egypt.

Her book "Women and Sex" (1969), which critically addressed the highly sensitive issue of female sexuality and its link to economic and religious oppression, was condemned by the theological and political authorities. In 1972 the ministry of Health was pressured to dismiss her as director of Public

Health. The journal "Health" which she founded was barred from publication and she lost her position as assistant secretary general of the Medical association of Egypt.

From 1973 to 1976 she studied the neuroses in women at the Ain Shams University's Faculty of Medicine. Her insights into this field inspired her to write her famous book "The Hidden face of Eve". It discusses topics relative to Arab women, such as female genital mutilation, prostitution, sexual relationships, marriage, divorce and Islamic fundamentalism. Although El Sadaawi was the United Nations Advisor for the Women's Program in Africa and the Middle East in 1979-1980, she was jailed in September 1981 under Anwar El Sadat's regime for alleged crimes against the state.

In spite of her imprisonment, El Sadaawi formed the Arab' Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) which became the first independent feminist organisation in Egypt. Although very successful in generating programs for women in rural areas, the AWSA was banned in 1991 after criticizing US involvement in the first Gulf War.

After her release from jail she published in 1983 "Memoirs from the Women's Prison". She stated in the afterword: "Nothing is more perilous than truth in a world that lies. Nothing is more perilous than knowledge in a world that has considered knowledge a sin since Adam and Eve. There is no power in the world that can strip my writings from me".

So, she continued to write and speak freely although her name appeared on a list of death sentences published by fanatical

religious movements. In consequence, several of her books like "The Fall of the Imam", were banned upon publication. For several years armed guards were stationed in front of her house in Giza until she left the country in 1991 to become a visiting professor at several North American Universities and since received 5 Honorary doctoral degrees.

In 1997 she returned to Egypt and continued to devote her time as a writer, an active feminist, and a political activist. In the latter context she contributed to the Report on United States War Crimes against Iraq, by former US attorney general Ramsey Clark and served on a mission to bring medical aid to Iraq in defiance of US sanctions, before the invasion.

In 2005 she received the North-South Prize by the council of Europe.

In January of this year 2007 together with her daughter Mona Helmy, the author and poet who is here with us today, she was officially charged with apostasy. Her play "God Resigns" was specifically called into question.

On her birthday, October 27th, Mrs Saadawi learnt that her daughter and she had won the case.

But another threat is still looming : on December 4th, her play and the whole of her literary work is to be judged.

This action is undertaken by El Azhar, the highest muslim authority, which seeks to deprive her of her Egyptian nationality, to earmark her as "wanted" in all Egyptian airports, and to ban all her books from bookshops.

Dr El Sadaawi,

Your individual approach to change society reflects the founding

principle of both our universities “ le libre examen” or “free inquiry”, which implies a permanent questioning of every accepted truth, particularly of those truths which come wrapped in a mantle of authority. Since you yourself have pointed out that education can be a force for progress, but that educational institutions have a tendency to side with the authorities, the spirit of free enquiry can place a university, or an individual in an ambiguous position. One of the striking aspects of your militancy is the instinct with which you refuse to become tied down by potential ambiguities. Options need to be clearly exercised and clearly expressed. It is a refusal to be sidetracked into arguments about words, or about intellectual posturing, which is crucial to the spirit of free enquiry.

In your life and work you have emphasised another aspect that is central to the tradition of humanism, nl that of the relation between dissidence and creativity. Your writings cover an enormous range of literary genres (novels, short stories, plays), factual reports, social polemic, political analysis, yet they converge to make the same points in many different ways. This marshalling of creativity serving a dissident militancy, is in fact a political-pedagogical lesson in how to develop individual consciousness among masses of people. It reveals an educational ethic that is fundamentally humanistic.

Both our universities, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Université Libre de Bruxelles - where one of your plays , “Isis”, has recently been translated by our colleague Xavier Luffin,

professor of Arabic language - are honoured and proud to award its Doctor Honoris Causa to the physician, the feminist and the tireless militant and free thinker that you are, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi.