There are some metaphors that are so striking and so unusual that they instantly transform one’s way of thinking about the subject matter. Consider, for example, this saying from China: The women of the world hold up half the sky.

This sentence conveys a unique picture of the human female condition, one that is miles away from the legend of Adam’s spare rib or from the Freudian cry of exasperation and impatience: ‘What do women really want?’ In China itself, the saying would have made no sense in traditional, pre-revolutionary times when foot-binding was imposed for purely aesthetic reasons on women of a certain class, making it virtually impossible for them to walk.

The metaphor does not question or suggest; it merely tells the whole story about where and what a woman is. It places her not in the male’s shadow but in the world; it refers to her status in the universe, not in the home or the kitchen or the field. Above all, it does not define women by their body or their biological functions but shows them expressing their purpose on Earth, which is to use their strength to hold up half the sky…which otherwise could come crashing down on all below.

The questions then follow: Who holds up the other half of the sky? Is it held up at all? If so, is it held up by the men of the world? If so, is it the same sky that both women and men are holding up, over the same planet, for the same purpose, the same dharma?

Nawal al Saadawi, Egyptian writer, doctor, psychiatrist, political analyst and fighter for the human rights of women, was born in rural Egypt in 1931. At the age of 6, she underwent an experience which most women readers of this article will never know but which was - and still is - commonplace in Egypt, namely, the ritual genital mutilation of little girls.

This is how she described the experience in a Guardian interview: ‘The daya (midwife) came along holding a razor, pulled out my clitoris from between my thighs and cut it off. She said it was the will of God and she had done his will’. The ordeal left its mark; apart from the bleeding and the unimaginable pain, she was left wondering, at the age of 6, ‘what other parts of my body there were that might need to be cut off in the same way’ (Guardian interview with Homa Khaleeli, 15/04/2010).

This happened to Nawal in 1937. According to Unicef’s Global Data figures for 2008, female genital mutilation (FGM) was performed on 95% of girls in rural Egypt and this despite the introduction in 2007 of laws against the practice. The World Health Organisation has also found that legislation in itself has made no impact; what is needed is a nationwide campaign specially designed to negate the cultural and psychological legitimacy that this form of violence and abuse has obtained in Egyptian society since time immemorial. The practice is a pre-Islamic ritual and is nowhere mentioned in the Koran.

In April 1997, the WHO, Unicef and UNIFEM made a joint appeal against this custom which affects 140 million women worldwide. The appeal said FGM constitutes ‘violence against womens’ rights and against their physical and psycho-sexual integrity’. The procedure is ‘dangerous and potentially life-threatening’ and its physical and psychological effects impact on ‘womens’ health and well-being for the rest of their lives’. 
The entire network of UN agencies regularly draws attention to this problem measured with reference to the various specialised fields of competence (health, education, labour, etc). The UN has even instituted 6 February as the annual International Day of Zero Tolerance of FGM. But the practice continues, on a massive scale in Egypt, Sudan (89%) and Somalia (98%).

It can be safely predicted that this hideous and criminal custom will continue to be practiced for centuries to come unless the public health, educational and religious authorities of Egypt take responsibility for its elimination. Legal instruments cannot, on their own, wipe out such deeply held and tradition-bound aberrations, especially in societies where 44% of the female population is illiterate, and where nearly half the population lives on two dollars or less a day, as is the case in present-day Egypt (UNESCO/World Bank country profiles).

The young Nawal survived this abuse and went on to fight another pernicious custom prevalent in her village in rural Egypt at that time, childhood marriage. It was normal for families to marry off their daughters at the age of 10 or 11 but Nawal refused and fought to continue studying. Her ardent desire was to study medicine and this she was finally permitted to do so by her parents. She went on to do further studies in public health and psychiatry, in Cairo and at Columbia University, New York.

She joined the ministry of health and rose to become its Director of Public Health in Cairo where she concentrated on the task of freeing her fellow-citizens from the tyranny of FGM, the ravages of which she saw on a huge scale among rural and urban girls and women. Given her medical training and her own first-hand experience, it was only natural that she also considered the social, cultural and essentially patriarchal context for this ancient, barbaric custom. These and other considerations she put down in a book, Women and Sex, the first such work in Arabic on the subject, published in 1969.

In any halfway self-respecting country of the developing world, such a person would have been given all the support of the state, even in those early days, in order to solve a major public health problem affecting half the total population. Not so in Egypt where the narrow-minded establishment considered the book to be so scandalous that she was dismissed from her post as Director of Public Health in 1972. The military and religious authorities were so outraged by the very mention of FGM in the book and the links she made between female sexuality, male-domination and economic and political oppression that they banned the book and also the magazine Health which she had founded and edited for three years. They in effect banned her from working in public service altogether.

From this event onwards, Egypt’s religious-military ruling circles have heaped their outrage and anger not on obscurantist and harmful customs such as FGM, but on Dr. Nawal as a woman who uses her training, her brains and her pen to denounce this and other violations against women. According to the distorted logic of patriarchy, it is the messenger of change who must be attacked, especially if she is a woman, for daring to suggest that things need to be changed. The fact that generation after generation, millions of little girls are forced by their mothers to have their private parts butchered by adult women for no good reason seems to be of no consequence whatsoever...in a man’s world.

After the first book, she continued to write on the situation of women from different angles, publishing titles such as Woman is the Origin (1971), Men and Sex (1973), Women and Neurosis (1975), The Hidden Face of Eve. She also wrote novels, including a most important one on the effects of FGM, Woman at Point Zero (1973), which has become a classic and has been translated into some 30 languages.

In the 40 years since 1972, Dr. al Saadawi and her homeland have existed in two separate and parallel planes. Her own career and life have been marked by a relentless programme of persecution, harassment and exile at the hands of Egypt’s military authorities and fellow-male citizens, some of them religious fanatics. In patriarchal structures, the military and the religious constitute two faces of the same misogynist, anti-women coin.

At the beginning of the Sadat regime, in 1972, she was kicked out of her post at the health ministry and towards the end of his disastrous rule, in 1981, she was imprisoned for three months together with 1,500 other intellectuals by the paranoid Sadat for ‘crimes against the State’. In the end, it was not an intellectual but one of his own soldiers who assassinated Sadat, on the parade ground in October 1981.
After their release in November, many of the fellow-intellectuals kept silent, but not Dr. Nawal who founded the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association in 1982 and co-founded the Arab Association for Human Rights in 1983. And she began to write, book after book after book, fiction and non-fiction. By now she has written some 50 books, translated into over 30 languages.

Her books on and about women in Egypt and the Arab world so disturbed the religious circles that her name began appearing on the death list of several fundamentalist organisations in 1988. In 1991, the government authorities forcibly closed down the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association and handed over its funds to one of its own creations called Women In Islam. In 1993, fearing for her safety, she left to live in the US where she taught at several universities.

On her return, she found the country even more in the grip of religious fundamentalist attitudes encouraged by Saudi and Gulf influences and further mired in poverty, especially in the countryside. In both these circumstances, it was the women, as usual, who were the worst hit; here, as elsewhere, poverty and religious extremism work hand in hand to victimise women and their children. She continued to write and to criticise this situation and in June 2001 made some factual comments about so-called religious customs in a newspaper interview which once more made the Cairo mullahs furious.

The comments concerned the sharia rules of inheritance under which women are accorded only half of what men inherit. She said this rule was unjust and should be abolished (as has happened in Tunisia, for example). Secondly, she said there was nothing in the Koran requiring women to wear the veil and thirdly, that the pilgrimage to Mecca is a ritual dating from pre-Islamic times. These last statements are concrete facts, not mere opinion.

The Mufti, however, condemned her for breaking Islamic laws, a ‘fault’ which allows any private citizen to start legal proceedings against a person so condemned on behalf of the community. So a lawyer duly brought a case against her for apostasy, a medieval notion about wrongfully ‘abandoning religion’. The punishment demanded for this so-called crime was equally medieval—forcible divorce from her husband! Her husband of 45 years, Dr Sharif Hatata, declared he would do no such thing! She fought the case and won.

In 2007, it was her daughter, Mona Helmi, writer and poet, who faced trouble for writing about her mother on Mother’s Day. She wrote a poetic piece about choosing a gift for her mother on this day. ‘What shall I give her, shoes, a dress? No, I will give her the gift of bearing her name’. And she signed herself Mona Nawal Helmi. For this she was taken to court for ‘heresy’ because ‘it was written in the Koran that a woman takes the name of the father, not the mother’.

Both Mona and her mother were interrogated by the General Prosecutor in Cairo but in the end they won the case. This case also led to change in the law in Egypt; children born out of wedlock now have the right to be named after the mother. Soon afterwards, Dr. Nawal left the country once more, to live in exile in the US.

In the same year, 2008, another case was brought by a lawyer who wanted the courts to deprive her of her nationality because of her ‘controversial ideas and thoughts’. This charge was too ridiculous even for the Egyptian justice system which rejected the case.

In another incident, a fundamentalist lawyer was so upset at her play, God Resigns at the Summit Meeting, that he brought two cases against her. In the first case, he demanded that her nationality be revoked and that she be refused entry back to the country; in the second case, he wanted all her books to be banned by the culture ministry. These cases were also rejected by the Higher Administrative Court in 2009.

Dr. Nawal returned home to Cairo to her husband and her family in 2010 and in January 2011, she was in Tahrir Square with thousands of citizens, old and young, women and men, to see the fall of Mubarak. ‘I have been dreaming about this revolution since I was a child of 10 years’ she said (Guardian, July 2011). She is now over 80. It may be that she will now be able to live in peace in her own country for Egyptian society, in some ways and in some quarters, has finally caught up with her
and is able to understand what she has been saying and writing about since 1970.

She is called a feminist writer, but in writing about Egypt’s women in over 50 books, fiction and non-fiction, she has also been describing the mental states of the men who have ruled over them and the political choices these rulers have made over the past 40 years. The denigration of women, starting with FGM practices against the vast majority of girls, does not take place in isolation; the violence done to women is a reflection of the violence that prevails in the society in general. It reflects above all what men think of women and of themselves in a society built on patriarchal and phallocratic ‘religious’ notions, some of them passed down from the dark ages.

Similarly, the persecution and harassment aimed at women like Dr. Nawal did not occur by chance; the context was the military regime’s suffocating control over Egyptian society for over 40 years. The country’s defeat in the 1967 war with Israel and the death of Nasser three years later in 1970 delivered devastating blows to the morale of the army leadership from which the ruling clique has never quite recovered. As a result of this defeat and humiliation, Sadat chose to capitulate completely at the American led talks at Camp David in 1979. Many Egyptians felt betrayed by the Camp David Accords with Israel signed by a servile Sadat, as did many Arabs. Mubarak chose to go even further by collaborating in the promotion of American-Israeli interests and objectives in the region at the cost of neglecting the political, economic and social needs of millions of Egyptians.

In return for two billion dollars a year of US aid, Egypt’s dictatorial military rulers handed the country’s sovereignty over to the paymasters and their allies in the region. Egypt, once the the cultural and progressive centre of the Arab, African and Non-Aligned worlds, retreated into purdah and, with astonishing speed, became the headquarters of US interests and strategies for control over the entire Arab oil producing region.

As Samir Amin, the Egyptian political thinker puts it:

This period of retreat lasted almost another half-century. Egypt, submissive to the demands of globalised liberalism and to US strategy, simply ceased to exist as an active factor in regional and global politics. In its region the major US allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, occupied the foreground. Israel was then able to pursue the course of expanding its colonisation of occupied Palestine with the tacit complicity of Egypt and the Gulf countries (Pambazuka News, Issue 534).

In 2009, Wikileaks found a cable sent from the US embassy in Cairo which put it this way: ‘President Mubarak and other military leaders view our military assistance program as a cornerstone of our military relations and consider the 1.3 billion dollars annual aid as ‘untouchable compensation’ for making and maintaining peace with Israel. The tangible benefits are clear; Egypt remains at peace with Israel and the US enjoys priority access to the Suez Canal and to Egyptian airspace’ (quoted in Wikipedia).

Looking back, the period under Nasser (1952-1970) was a short parenthesis, a brief period - after independence - of nation-building, social development through mass education and health programmes and basic strategies for industrialisation and employment. It was followed by a complete policy turn-about in internal and external affairs under Sadat and by the gradual collapse, over three decades, of the national and nationalist projects under Mubarak.

As regards the education of girls, it is instructive to consider the statistics that prevailed before and after 1952 when the Free Officers took over. The illiteracy rate among girls was 90% at that point. Soon after the officers’ coup, free education for all was introduced by the state; the budget of the ministry for education doubled between 1952-1962, spending on secondary school construction increased by 1,000% and doubled in the case of primary school construction between 1952-1976. The rate of women in pre-university education increased by 300% and the rate for women in universities increased by nearly 600%. (Source: Library of US Congress as quoted in Wikipedia).

However, since 1976, the situation has regressed dramatically; state education for girls has been abandoned and responsibility for the entire education sector has been given to the religious authorities. Thanks to this and to the introduction of the policies of privatisation, 80% of the ministry of education budget is now spent on salaries. Today, the illiteracy rate for girls is 45% and there is
an acute and a chronic shortage of teachers, especially in the rural regions.

The Sadat-Mubarak military regimes opened the door to so-called free market economic ideas and the results have been catastrophic for the general public. The stability of the country much praised by the US and the World Bank is based, to quote Samir Amin again, ‘on a monstrous police apparatus amounting to 1.2 million men (the army numbering a mere 500,000) free to carry out daily acts of criminal abuse’ under a regime of emergency rule.

The Western powers claim they supported army rule because it was ‘protecting’ Egypt from the threat of Islamism, but in reality, reactionary political Islam, of the local homegrown variety and of the imported wahabi school, was incorporated very early into the central power structure by the army. The soldiers gave the mullahs control over education, the justice system and the information media, especially television. The regime’s ‘de facto support of political Islam has destroyed the capacity of Egyptian society to confront the challenges of the modern world’ (Samir Amin, Pambazuka News Issue 534).

Political islam not only believes that women be subjugated to men in the social order by being under the authority of fathers, brothers and husbands, but that this subjugation is of divine origin. Sharia is universally considered to be the law of Allah, unchanging and unchangable, and thus providing men with the unquestionable power to oppress women and to deny them their human rights.

This ideology, however, must be placed in its historic and cultural context, says Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist: ‘The assumptions behind the Muslim social structure such as male dominance, the ‘dangerous’ nature of female sexuality, and so on, were embodied in specific laws which have regulated male-female relations in Muslim countries for fourteen centuries’ (Fatima Mernissi, Beyond The Veil).

It is unlikely that, after 14 centuries of unchallenged rule, the mindsets of such men can change during the course of a single Arab spring. Besides, the oppression of women has had its impact on the men who oppress them as is shown by their hysterical and violent reactions when faced with women who question their ideas. Such is the emotional disturbance caused to their core identity that they resort to violence rather than coherent argument.

As Dr Nawal herself explains, ‘We live in a very religious, patriarchal and capitalist world. They burned my book in Egypt; the publisher himself burnt it (under police pressure). But if I said everything I wanted to say, it would be me they would burn at the stake’ (Guardian Weekly, 06/03/2009).

The same damage can be seen in the military mind. The men who have ruled Egypt during the last 40 years have taken the veil, to use another metaphor. The military regimes are headed by soldiers in drag; in reality, they have over the years become faithful handmaidens of US-Saudi-Israeli interests while pretending to be strong and powerful at home. While they and their religious counterparts have been punishing Dr. Nawal for writing her books, which they do not comprehend, they have systematically humiliated their own populations and ignored their economic, social and educational needs. With champions such as these, the dayas (midwives) in the countryside can continue to sharpen their razors as ever.

The women who were in the forefront of the Tahrir Square events last year are furious, understandably, at having been side-lined since then by the powers that are in charge. They should not be surprised at this development; it is a classic pattern in all such revolts. But here, two factors are to be considered. Firstly, the army ruling clique can be counted on to make a mess of the election process which it is manipulating and distorting quite transparently. The aim of the military authorities is to preserve their financial and elitist privileges in the new political structures being negotiated during the current period of transition. In this effort their main partners are the religious factions and parties, not the young women and men who led and who suffered in the mass mobilisation for change last year.

Secondly, despite the contributions of the women in driving Mubarak and his family from power, they are and will remain invisible to the soldiers and to the religious parties; in a man’s world, men only
talk to men. This is a universal truth. The only way to become visible is for women to take the
initiative in identifying the main agenda for change in the social order.

The main priorities of the social order during the last four decades have centred on an obsession
with women’s bodies, their hair, their ankles, their faces, their skirts; which bit of fabric to cover
which bit of the female body is the main existential dilemma in Egypt and in other Muslim societies.
In this process of regression, Muslim women bear full responsibility for they have internalised and
made their own the contempt of the male for the female. If women want to change this state of
affairs, they will have to take on the task of defining the issues and then fighting for them. They could
start with a concrete strategy for the eradication of FGM from their society, for example, instead of
waiting for the failed state to ‘do something.’

They could also try reading Dr. Nawal’s books. ‘My books are relevant today; they deal with issues
of gender, class, colonialism, FGM, Male GM, capitalism, sexual rape, economic rape...’ (Guardian
Weekly). Her aims for women are not about achieving equality with men; given the current order of
values, it is hardly worth having. Hers are higher goals which women must set for themselves and for
their men if they are to free their societies from all forms of subjugation, starting with the sexual.

She is not an easy read; her books come from a source of searing lucidity, born of rage and
unshakeable dignity, the result of personal experience, struggle and survival. She writes from an
inner core which cannot be touched by brain-dead machos stuck in the past. Her creativity is what
preserves her and gives her the strength and the desire to continue. She describes herself as ‘like a
horse, jumping obstacles, obstacle after obstacle. But I am a winning horse; I insist on this; winning
brings me energy’ (Guardian Weekly, 06/03/2009).

If her books are now read all over the world, it is because they make sense to women and men of
many different cultures who see beyond ‘feminism’, and ‘radicalism’, who understand that the
violence and abuse aimed at one half of the human race demeans and degrades the other half in
equal measure.

Nawal Al Saadawi’s voice is recognised all over the world, but not yet in her own country, there she
is still censored in the official media; she still cannot teach in its universities, even after Tahrir. A new
political map is being negotiated by the army for itself and the religious blocks, with a little help from
their respective foreign friends. Those who brought down Mubarak are not consulted. But we will win,
she says, ‘because we are millions and we have hope and hope is power’.

And where there is hope, the sky is the limit.

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* Annar Cassam, a Tanzanian, is a former consultant at UNESCO/PEER Nairobi and former director of
the UNESCO Office, Geneva.

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d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); })(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk');

**Article-Summary:**
Dr Nawal Al Saadawi’s continued hope, after decades of persecution by the Egyptian political and
religious authorities, and the as yet unfilled promise of Tahrir, offers inspiration to everyone challenging the violence and abuses of patriarchy and capitalism.

Category: Governance [7]
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