Gender and the Political Novel in Egypt through Two Works by Salwa Bakr & Sonallah Ibrahim

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical analysis of two major works of Arab prison literature in the last quarter of the 20th Century, *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr and *Sharaf* by Sonallah Ibrahim. Through an analysis of each author's style and use of symbolism, the approach taken by Arab commentators that women's writing is fundamentally different from that of men is challenged. The value of such works is not determined by gender, but rather is an expression of the personal experiences of each author. Ibrahim, through his long period in an Egyptian prison, sees the country around him as trapped by corruption and imperialism. Bakr, while addressing these same concepts, focuses on the role of women and calls for the re-evaluation of traditions that have for so long relegated women to a secondary place in Egyptian society. Each of these works has had a profound impact on Egyptian literature, not only through their attention to the continuing problem of abuse in Egyptian prisons, but in calling for an end to the daily injustice faced by regular Egyptians, male and female, at the hands of both imperial powers and their local agents.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire présente une analyse critique de deux œuvres majeures de la littérature carcérale arabe du dernier quart du 20ème siècle, *The Golden Chariot,* de Salwa Bakr et *Sharaf*, de Sonallah Ibrahim. Au moyen d'une analyse du style de chaque auteur et de l'usage du symbolisme, l'approche adpotée par les commentateurs arabes selon lequel l'écriture féminine serait fondamentalement différente de celle masculine se voit contesté. La valeur de ce type d'œuvres n'est pas déterminée par le genre, mais se veut plutôt une expression de l'expérience personnelle de chaque auteur. Ibrahim, au cours de son long séjour dans une prison égyptienne, perçoit le pays autour de lui comme piégé dans la corruption et l'impérialisme. Bakr, en abordant

les mêmes concepts, se concentre sur le rôle des femmes et appelle à une réévaluation des traditions qui ont, pendant si longtemps, relégué les femmes à une place subalterne au sein de la société égyptienne. Chacune de ces œuvres a eu un impact profond sur la littérature égyptienne, non seulement de par l'attention portée au problème constant des mauvais traitements dans les prisons égyptiennes, mais aussi de par l'appel lancé à mettre fin à l'injustice quotidienne à laquelle font face tous les Égyptiens, hommes et femmes, que ce soit entre les mains des pouvoirs impérialistes ou de leurs agents locaux.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Citations from *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr are taken from the translation of Dina Manisty. I have translated citations from the original Arabic of *Sharaf* by Sonallah Ibrahim, as there is no published translation to date. Names of Arab authors (such as Sonallah Ibrahm and Salwa Bakr) and secondary source materials that have a standard English spelling will be presented without any transliteration. Otherwise, for names and terms used by authors whose works are exclusively in Arabic, the system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) is used.

Chapter One - Introduction

In the 20th Century, many Egyptian novelists expressed the political and social problems of their society by addressing the struggle with the governing regime and their stance against oppression and injustice in their works.[1] For example, prominent author and women's rights activist Latifa al-Zayyat was just one of many who were jailed twice for opposing the signing of the Camp David Accords by President Sadat in 1978.[2] Many other writers experienced the dismissal of their works, house arrest, detention, and assassination because of their political and ideological writings such as Fatḥiya al-'Assāl, Nawal El Saadawi, Bahaa Tahir and Ihsan Abdel Quddous to give just a few examples.[3]

This thesis seeks to investigate the relationship between politics and literature, particularly with regards to the Egyptian novel in the latter half of the 20th Century. The study will focus on two works by important contemporary writers, Salwa Bakr and her novel *The Golden Chariot* (1991) and Sonallah Ibrahim and his novel *Sharaf* (Honour) (1997). Focusing the study upon two particular novels allows for a deeper understanding of some of the features of politics in Egyptian society and takes as a starting point Muhammad Siddiq's definition of the novel as a place of conflict and discourse, where cultural and political change can be discussed and cultures interact.[4]

Similarly, Ṭaha Wādī defines the novel as "a literary experience that is expressed in the style of prose, either descriptively or through dialogue, while depicting the lives of a group of individuals or characters that move in a social system limited by time and place."[5] This means,

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[1] Wādī, Ṭaha. *Al-Riwāya al-Siyāsiyya* (Cairo: al-Sharika al-Miṣriyya al-'Ālamiyya li al-Nashr, 2002)
[2] Elsadda, Hoda. *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel – Egypt, 1892-2008* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012)
[3] Wādī
[4] Siddiq, Mohammad. *Arab Culture and the Novel Genre: Identity and agency in Egyptian fiction* (London: Routledge, 2007)
[5] Wādī, 56

therefore, that a novel must contain a number of specific parts including a time, place, characters, and a social framework in which the characters function and the events occur. Literary critics often then define a number of sub-categories based on the type of content such as novels focused on politics, history, love stories, autobiographies, etc.

The novel represents an important form of literary expression in Arabic today. According to Abdelrahman Munif, the previous centuries of Arabic literature were dominated by poetry. The novel, on the other hand, is considered today as the mirror of society and its historical repository. He elaborates on this point by stating

> The novel will be the history of those who have no history, the history of the poor, the marginalized, and those who dream of a better world. The novel will be filled with the names of those who do not come from prominent or shining backgrounds, and it will tell how they lived and how they died as they dreamed. It will also speak boldly about the oppressors who have sold off their nations and their peoples, and it will expose the beaters, torturers, the middlemen and the destroyers themselves. It is necessary that future generations read the history that we live now not from polished history books, but rather from novels of this generation and the next.[6]

This thesis uses these general understandings as the starting point for analyzing the works of Salwa Bakr and Sonallah Ibrahim.

In addition, to explore the depths of the dynamics between politics and literature, this study will also investigate the question of women's writing. Both works represent the subcategory of prison writing, one written by a male author and the other by a female author. I will assess the extent of their similarities and differences in style and the topics they chose. This comparison is important because, as critic Bouthaina Shaaban puts it, "Women and men write differently because they are creatures that possess different historical, psychological, and cultural experiences, in the same way that Australians write differently from Africans even if they are

[6] Munif, Abdelrahman. *Al-Kātib wa al-Manfā: Humūm wa Afāq al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1992) 43

writing in the same language. This doesn't mean of course that all women write in the same manner or for that matter all men, but there are general characteristics most probably found in writings by women more than those of men, and other features that distinguish the writings of men from that of women."[7]

Taking Shaaban's statement as a reference to think about women's writing, the study will examine if there are such distinguishing features in women's writing compared to that of men. If such a difference exists, where is it found and to what extent does it appear in the works?

The main reason for choosing Salwa Bakr and Sonallah Ibrahim is that they both, in addition to being very popular authors in Egypt, dedicate much of their writing particularly in these two novels to discussing political issues and gender dynamics. Bakr for example argues, "I cannot analyze a woman who is politically active in a society's whose values say that a woman's only function is to bear and raise children. If you fight against these values, then we can create a democratic society."[8] Sonallah Ibrahim also is known for his political engagement in literature and defence of gender equality. Ibrahim was sentenced to seven years in jail with hard labor because of his political activities and he "stresses the close link between economic and political developments and the changes in women's roles through increasing of women's independence and power."[9] Both novelists engage the complex and challenging links between sex, gender, religion and politics in their writing. These writings are bold and break the boundaries of forbidden topics. To date, no study in English or in Arabic has done a comparison of these two works, studying them as political writings and drawing out questions of women's writing.

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[7] Shaaban, Bouthaina. *Mi'at 'Ām min al-Riwāya al-Nisā'iyya al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1999) 13

[8] Al-Ali, Nadje. *Gender Writing /Writing Gender: the Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994) 64

[9] Ibid, 96

In addition, the works of Salwa Bakr and Sonallah Ibrahim are important beyond their value as popular literature. Sabry Hafez describes this saying: "The novel is a direct outcry against the imprisonment of those who cared for their country - a strong protest against the torture of those who are innocent of any crime except for love of their country and the courage to defend its aspirations and to dream of a just and better future."[10] Following Hafez's idea, this study recognizes that both novels deliver messages to their readers. They express precisely that which Hafez indicates in that they reject injustice, oppression, and torture undergone by ordinary Egyptian citizens at the hands of a political system that continuously failed to achieve the simplest of ambitions such as democracy, justice, and respect for human rights.

1 - Methodology

This study will analyze and compare the two novels in literary terms. This means investigating how the two novels are constructed in terms of place, time and events, understanding the specific contexts they portray as well as the contexts in which they were written. The study will pay particular attention to the description of conflict, especially when this has gendered implications. There will also be a focus on more specific techniques like the drawing of primary and secondary characters, linguistic styles and experimentation and, the titles of the works and their implications. Importance will also be given to an analysis of symbols used in both works.

I will rely upon the original Arabic versions of both texts. Although Dinah Manisty has translated the work by Salwa Bakr into English and the work of Sonallah Ibrahim has been translated into French, I have preferred to use the original Arabic works in my analysis. This is

[10] Hafez, Sabry. "Torture, Imprisonment, and Political Assassination in the Arab Novel." *Al Jadid*, Vol. 8, No. 38 (Winter 2002). Retrieved from: http://www.aljadid.com/content/torture-imprisonment-and-political-assassination-arab-novel

because Arabic is my mother tongue and reading the novel in its original language will allow me to understand the text better compared to reading it through translation. In addition, using the original text will allow me to present a deeper analysis of the contents of each novel and avoid, as much as possible, changes that occurred during the translation process. However, when citing from Salwa Bakr's novel, I provide the published translation by Dinah Manisty because other secondary sources rely upon it and the translation is easy to follow for the English reader. When necessary all translations from both these and other Arabic works provided in the text are mine unless otherwise mentioned.

2 – Literature, Politics, and Prison Literature

When discussing the relationship between the Egyptian novel and politics and how political circumstances greatly impacted the creativity of Egyptian authors it is first necessary to briefly discuss the history of the relationship between literature and politics. Politics permeates every element of Egyptian life, as the policies of the state impact even the smallest decisions of average Egyptians. For example, author Yūsuf al-Qa'īd referred to the level of political involvement in the daily life of the average citizen by saying "It is hard to separate the life of a person into political and non-political. The young man who cannot get married because of the housing crisis suffers from a political problem. The man who is impotent because of oppression is paying the price of a problem caused primarily by the politics of our age. We breathe politics day and night."[11]

Therefore novels often include a particular message that the author wishes to portray to his or her readers. This point of view can either be regarding events current to the time of the novel,

[11] 'Abd al-'Adhīm, Ṣāliḥ Sulaymān. *Sosiolojjiyyat al-Riwāya al-Siyāsiyya.* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Organization, 1998) 192-3

or a reflection of other historical periods. For example Gamal al-Ghitani in his novel *al-Zaynī Barakāt* published in 1974 describes the political conflicts of the Mamluk Period but is a statement on the reign of then President Anwar al-Sadat. Wādī also adds that the writers of novels that tackle political issues are brave individuals who risk their lives and the anger of ruling governments to convey political points of view. However, not all of these works represent opinions contrary to the existing regime. As we will see in the conclusion of this essay both Sonallah Ibrahim and Salwa Bakr, although strong critics of the Mubarak regime, supported the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood.

What other factors connect politics to the Egyptian novel in the 20th Century? Here a number of Egyptian literary historians present a long history of oppression and domination faced by Egyptian citizens that stretches back to the end of the 18th Century and lasts until today. This was either carried out at the hands of foreign occupiers, their agents or the Egyptian government itself as seen in the post-1952 political environment.

Since the entry of Napoleon into Egypt during the end of the 18th Century, Egyptian society has seen itself as under foreign occupation. During the period a large number of novels expressed this chaotic political reality, encouraged the people to revolt against the occupier and called for the liberation of the nation from these invaders. Examples of these works include *Return of the Spirit* published in 1933 by Tawfiq al-Hakim, which has been highlighted by critics as one of the driving forces behind the 1952 Revolution as well as his *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* published in 1937. This novel reflects the hardships faced by the Egyptian peasant under British occupation where poverty, disease, ignorance, and unbearable injustice were commonplace.[12] As the country regained its freedom from foreign occupiers it was then faced with another challenge. A new generation of authoritarian rulers who took control of the country

[12] Wādī

following the Revolution began to subject people to imprisonment and torture. These new rulers were not able to realize the ambitions of freedom and social justice demanded by the people. This began with Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970) who, despite building nationalism and instituting some social and economic reforms, failed to create a democratic environment that could encompass other opinions but rather developed a system that arrested and used violence against its detractors. These views could lead to time in prison, torture, the confiscation of their works, exile, the accusation of being a foreign agent and committing treason, or even death in extreme cases.[13]

With this understanding of the relationship between Egyptian literature and political events, this thesis focuses more specifically on the genre of "prison literature." Both novels analyzed here fit into this category because they discuss political problems in Egyptian society and both of the authors, Salwa Bakr and Sonallah Ibrahim, also spent time as political prisoners and expressed this creatively through their novels. Sonallah Ibrahim, for example, described his imprisonment in the following way, "I experienced repression and death, and saw some rare aspects of men; I learned a lot about his inner world and his varied life. There I preoccupied myself with observation and introspection, and read journals; there also decided to become a writer."[14] Prison literature is thus a genre of Egyptian literature.

Sabry Hafez sees the purpose of prison literature as expressing an experience of prison and torture that the author was personally exposed to and describes in detail in their literary work. He states, "Arabic literature is perhaps one of very few literary traditions that have a distinct literary genre known as the 'prison novel.' This is not only because a great majority of writers have themselves lived the experience of arrest, imprisonment, and even torture, but also

[13] Ibid
[14] Elimelekh, Geula. *Arabic Prison Literature: Resistance, Torture, Alienation and Freedom* (Göttingen: Otto Harrassowitz, 2014) 131-32

because the history of the contemporary Arab intellectual is one of constant struggle with the authorities. The colonial authorities and their local agents were succeeded after independence by national authorities who in many regions of the Arab world have surpassed their predecessors in the various methods of tyranny and oppression. Thus, imprisonment and torture and even political assassination became important topics in the Arab novel."[15]

In recent times, the Egyptian novel once again confronts oppression, injustice, torture, and the silencing of oppositional voices by criticizing rulers. *That Smell* by Sonallah Ibrahim is one example (1966). Initially this work was confiscated by the government and banned. In this novel, Ibrahim depicts what happens inside prisons by stating,

> Does it not take so much ugliness to describe the ugly physiology of what happens when a person is beaten to death, has a blower stuck up his ass, or has an electric cord placed in his genitals? Is all of this because he expressed an opposition opinion or defended his freedom and national identity? Why is it made incumbent upon us that when we write it must only be on the beauty of flowers or the wonder of its fragrance, while shit fills the streets and polluted sewage water covers the land and everyone can smell that disgusting odor and complain about it?[16]

The novel also successfully predicted the second fall of the Egyptian army in its confrontation with Israel in 1967. In this short novel, which is under 80 pages, Ibrahim uses a prose narrative to combine the present day and flashbacks. The overlap of time periods, places, and characters reflect the depressed political, social, and economic realities of Egyptian society in the late 1960s. When the protagonist, for example, is released from prison he states that the most beautiful streets of the city have been drowned in sewage, emitting a terrible smell that

[15] Hafez, Sabry. "Torture, Imprisonment, and Political Assassination in the Arab Novel" in *Al Jadid*, 8:38 (Winter 2002). Retrieved from: http://www.aljadid.com/content/torture-imprisonment-and-political-assassination-arab-novel
[16] Ibrahim, Sonallah. *Tilka al-Rā'iha wa Qişaş Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār Shādi, 1986) 10

expresses the rot found in everything in this society, a clear political expression of what was happening in that period.[17]

The novel played a role in contesting the rule of Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981) who signed the Camp David Accords with Israel that destroyed not only the hope of liberating Palestine but also the dream of Arab nationalism. Domestically, Sadat's regime also continued to suppress freedoms and placed thousands of opposition figures in jail, for example, Nawal El Saadawi who wrote about this in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. She completed this novel in 1990, eight years after she was released from prison, aiming to clarify the extent of the dictatorship, corruption, and oppression that the average Egyptian citizen was facing during the rule of Sadat. Saadawi says in her introduction to the novel

> Because I was born in this time it was not a strange occurrence that I would enter prison, for I committed many crimes. I wrote stories, novels, and poetry…but the greatest crime is that I am a free woman in a time when only obedient whores and female slaves are wanted. I was born with a mind that can think in a time when reason was being wiped out.[18]

In this novel, Saadawi criticizes the actions of the police and their relationship to the Sadat government, particularly how they dealt with Egyptian writers and thinkers. She states that she had asked one of the more famous writers at the Al-Ahram Newspaper why he expressed one opinion when speaking to her but when he wrote, something else entirely appeared. His answer was "If they fire me from my job will you be able to take care of my family financially?" Saadawi comments on this statement by saying that in Egypt people live humiliated, in constant fear of the dictatorial ruler and that they won't be able to eat.[19]

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[17] 'Aṭiyya, Aḥmad Muḥammad. *al-Riwāya al-Siyāsiyya: Dirāssa Naqdiyya fī al-Riwāya al-Siyāsiyya al-'Arabiyya* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1981)
[18] El Saadawi, Nawal. *Mudhākirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī') 11
[19] Ibid, 22

Many novels appeared later after the assassination of Sadat, Muhammad Hosni Mubarak took control of the country (1981-2011) and followed many of Sadat's policies. He became a client to American and Israeli interests at the expense of Palestinian and greater Arab causes. During his rule, democracy was not expanded, and instead new areas of the country were brought under the absolute control of the National Democratic Party, and election results were falsified while the police regularly arrested and tortured opposition figures. While this was taking place, the Egyptian people saw their economic livelihoods dissipate. Novels tackled all of these problems and criticized the policies of the Egyptian government, two of the most important of which are the subjects of this study, *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr which will discussed in detail in Chapter 2, and *Sharaf* (Honour) by Sonallah Ibrahim which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

3 – Approaching Women's Writing in Literary Criticism

Women in the Arab world have not always been able to achieve their full potential because they live within a dictatorial, patriarchal system that often does not give them the opportunity to be full and active members of society. Their activities are restricted to specific domestic areas such as taking care of the home and raising children, while attempts by women to participate actively in public life can often be quickly suppressed. At the individual level, some men oppress women directly by restricting their movements and dominating them, for example, as a father or a husband. Nawal El Saadawi has expressed forcefully

> Because of the patriarchal capitalist system which oppresses particularly women, women's physical, intellectual and psychological abilities dwindle from childhood until the end of their lives. Only a few are saved that fate. Women remain wavering between two things: their intellectual faculties and their femaleness, because they have been

> brought up to believe that their role in life is marriage and bearing children and not intellectual creativity.[20]

In the same vein and from the beginning of the 20th Century, male critics and writers have undervalued women's creative work. For example, 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād (1889-1964) attacked the status of women in three of his most famous works *This Tree, Another Person, and Women in the Qur'an*. He claimed it was impossible for a woman to live independently, as she was created by God to be weak and therefore is always in need of a man. Likewise, Maḥmūd Fawzī in 1987 conducted a study comparing the works of 60 female writers and entitled it *The Literature of the Long Nails*, sarcastically indicating that critics should stay away from such works.[21]

Bouthaina Shaaban uses George Tarabishi to elucidate this theory, citing his criticism of Nawal El Saadawi in his work *Woman Against Her Sex*, and a later article "The Female Nawal El Saadawi and the Legend of Exclusivity." In these texts, Tarabishi says

> It is not enough to say that female novelists are always lesser when compared to male novelists, but we must also add that even in the rare cases when women have taken on the art of the novel, their treatment of the subject differs from that of men. A man's writing reconstructs the world while a woman focuses on feelings and emotions. A man writes a novel with his mind and reason while a woman writes with her heart. The outside world is the center of a man's work while the self is the center of women's writing.[22]

It is within this framework of bias that a number of issues appear in the discussions of Arab literary scholars. Due to the claim that works produced by women are restricted to supposedly marginal "domestic" issues, most works written by women are therefore understood to be autobiographical. This strand of criticism looks at women's literature in a reductionist way and is part of the history of paternalistic oppression faced by women. This underestimates women's

[20] Zeidan, Joseph. *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995) 22
[21] Ibid
[22] Shaaban, 32

ability to write creatively or tackle important social issues.[23] Shaaban clarifies this point by stating that most Arab critics have traditionally believed that the experience and imagination of women was limited. Additionally, they have argued that women only work within one limited universe and that their literary creations couldn't extend beyond these borders. They therefore failed to honestly engage the political and economic problems of their societies.

Shaaban further argues that, "There is a sort of criticism often leveled against women who write is that they draw excessively on personal experience in their creative writing. The literary canon considers what it labels women literature to be inferior, limited, self-centered and autobiographical rather than creative, while the same is not true of literature by men."[24] She responds to these claims by showing how women have indeed produced no less than men in the literary field. She supports this by stating that women throughout history were the first to preserve the cultural and sociological aspects of their societies. Done mainly through oral transmission, they passed their stories from generation to generation, confirming Shaaban's statement "The popular story was a female invention."[25] With the advent of writing in Arabic, and the recording of history in written form, this changes of course, and often women's roles as the bearer of oral histories and stories were then devalued in favour of male, written transmitters of this material.

Today, one problem is that the literary critics who control the field, most of whom are male, consistently use their power to minimize the role of women in literature. This is particularly true in the case of Egypt, where male critics by and large hold sway over who is published and who receives critical acclaim. Women also face numerous biases in terms of

[23] Ibid
[24] Ostle, Robin, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild. *Writing the Self: Autobiographical writing in modern Arabic literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1998) 284
[25] Shaaban, 45-46

publishing and media access. Many non-Arab scholars also do not speak much of the contributions of women to Arabic literature, such as Roger Allen's *The Arabic Novel: A historical and critical introduction* that only has four pages out of over 170 that discuss the contributions of women authors.[26]

Abū ʻŪf also responds to these accusations against women writers by citing Latifa al-Zayyat as one of the pioneers of women's literature in Egypt and the wider Arab world. Her writings are an expression of national struggle, creativity, and the call for the freedom and independence of women. She struggled over more than fifty years for the liberation of women from the oppression of men in a society that typically sees women as a product that can be owned and act as the object of male sexual satisfaction.[27] Michelle Hartman also sees that women in general were not marginalized only at the literary level but additionally as characters within novels such as was done by Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988 in his novel *The Thief and the Dogs*. In his writings, he was heavily influenced by stereotypes of traditional Egyptian women and he never expresses a woman as anything other than a lover or a whore who sacrifices to satisfy her man and fulfill his sexual instincts. She has no important or influential role in society. The characters of Nūr and Nabawiyya in the novel, for example, are a duo that has no role at all as opposed to the protagonist Saʻīd Mahrān who controls all the events of the novel.[28]

Additionally, when approaching the role of women in literary criticism scholars often address the categorization of literary works by women into a subgenre labeled "women's literature." This categorization is used by many critics and leads to the marginalization of works

[26] Ibid
[27] Abū ʻŪf
[28] Hartman, Michelle. "Re-Reading Women in/to Naguib Mahfouz's *al-Liss wa'l kilab* (*The Thief and the Dogs*)" in *Research in African Literatures* (1997) 5-16

written by women. Literature is thereby divided into two groups, "male literature" that is real, creative, and honestly approaches all social problems, and a second-class "female literature" that is inferior in both quality and importance. Hoda Elsadda, in her work on the role of women in Arab history, also stated the following in support of this argument

> Women formed a critical part of society and played an important role in the formation of Arab history…however they have been largely left out of written history or, to put it another way, had their roles marginalized and the importance of their contributions reduced to nothing.[29]

There are many critics and scholars who reject this division as an artificial classification, and argue that literary works should be judged purely by their technical and creative merits and not by who wrote them. Shaaban, for example, asks whether literature has reproductive organs so that it can accurately be divided into two genders. "The popular understanding of the term cannot be based on a thorough examination of Arab women writing rather it is simply a prejudgment made on the basis of the gender of the author and not of the written text," says Shaaban. "Despite my belief in the idea that women and men differ in their writings because they each have their own different experiences, I fear that women's work will always find is place as second-class in our Arab societies, as is the state with everything that is related to woman."[30]

Algerian writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi echoes this by stating, "I don't believe in the term 'women's literature' and whenever I read a book I don't ask myself whether a man or woman wrote it." Syrian writer Ghada al-Samman also comments, "As a matter of principle there is no such thing as a categorization between men's and women's literature."[31] Elsadda also adds that

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[29] Elsadda, Hoda, *Sumayyah Ramadan and Umaymah Abu Bakr. Zaman al-Nisā' wa al-Dhākira al-Badīla* (Cairo: Multaqā al-Mar'a wa al-Dhākira, 1998)
[30]Shaaban, Buthaina. *Voices revealed: Arab women novelists, 1898-2000* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009) 2
[31]Mosteghanemi, Ahlam. "Ishkāliyyat al-Adab al-Nisawi bayn al-Muṣṭalaḥ wa al-Lugha" in *Maqālīd.* 2 (December 2011) 49

injustice against women writers actually accelerated during the 1990s when a large number of new female writers entered the field. At that time, critics inappropriately classified their output as "girl's literature" or comment on their literary works as "women writing their bodies." The criticism became so intense that Somaya Ramaḍan, another Egyptian author, complained that they represent an insult to the work presented by women and are a continuation of paternalistic Arab culture.[32]

There are others, however, who disagree with this understanding and state that the classification of literature by who writes it might not hold such a subversive intent. Rather, it could be used to distinguish women's writing from that of men. For example, Abū Niḍāl refers to the statement made by Ghālib Halsā who said, "Through women's novels I have felt that I am learning things about women that I never knew before."[33]

The remainder of this study will therefore attempt to present a critical analysis of the two novels, challenging the bias present in secondary studies of Arab literature. Particularly in my study's treatment of Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, I will identify the artistic characteristics of it as a modern novel and respond to accusations that a woman's novel might lack artistry or be solely focused on discussions of the self. This thesis's chapters are divided as follows. Chapter Two provides an analysis of Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*. Chapter Three undertakes the same process with Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Sharaf.* Then, following this portrait of the two novels independently, Chapter Four is a comparison of the two novels, focusing on the role of gender in its expression of conflict and prison. The conclusion summarizes my findings.

[32] Elsadda
[33] Abū Niḍal, Nazīh. *Tamarrud al-Untha: Fī riwāyat al-mar'a al-'arabiyya wa bīlūgrāfiyya al-riwāya al-'arabiyya 1985-2004* (Beirut: al-Mu'asassa al-'Arabiyya li al-Dirāssāt wa al-Nashr, 2004) 11

Chapter Two: Salwa Bakr – *The Golden Chariot*

The first chapter of this study presented the common claim made by literary critics that Arabic novels written by women are focused on discussions of domestic issues: the family and raising children, as well as love stories and sentimental topics that are not deemed to be important social issues. According to this view, women writers are therefore not capable of engaging what are seen as the "serious" topics of politics, the economy, societal analysis and critique. This chapter intervenes in this discussion by analyzing Salwa Bakr's *Al-'Araba al-Dhahabiyya lā Taṣ'ad ilā al-Samā'* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 2004) translated by Dinah Manisty as *The Golden Chariot.* It will offer a critical reading of women's writing in the Arab world, investigating how this novel interprets and challenges political, economic, and social problems of Egyptian society contrary to the view that women's writings are shallow and domestically focused.

The events of *The Golden Chariot* take place in a women's prison in Egypt; Aziza, a woman from the coastal city of Alexandria, is the protagonist. She is serving a life sentence for killing her stepfather who raped her when she was thirteen years old. During her teenage years he took advantage of the fact that her mother was often not at home and furthered his sexual relationship with her. When her mother died and she became aware that her stepfather (and lover) wanted to marry another woman – the daughter of a family friend, Nadira – she murdered him as an act of revenge for his betrayal and to forbid him from having the opportunity to love or develop a relationship with anyone else.

In solitary confinement she is haunted by a number of hallucinations and eventually decides to conceive of a project to escape from prison: she will build a beautiful golden chariot pulled by white winged stallions. This chariot will carry both Aziza and a group of other female

prisoners out of their degrading captivity and up to Heaven, a place Aziza believes will be more fitting and appropriate for them than the dark prison they inhabit. Aziza will carefully choose the members of this group after listening to the details of each of their stories and what crimes brought them to prison. This is how she will determine if they deserve a place on the chariot.

As discussed in the introduction to this study, Salwa Bakr analyzes a number of important elements of Egyptian society in this novel. Through her diverse cast of characters and the careful selection of who will ride her golden chariot, Aziza is able to explore societal problems and present them through the lens of gender, an important perspective that has often been ignored in Arab and Egyptian literature. Through this chapter I will therefore analyze the novel in a number of different contexts. I will discuss the time periods and places depicted, primary and secondary characters, linguistic styles and dialogue, symbolism and imagery, and finally how the novel depicts conflict through its political and gender dimensions. To begin, I first turn to the setting of the novel - the prison - and its importance in Salwa Bakr's analysis of Egyptian society.

1 - The Prison and Women's Crime

In the *Golden Chariot*, Bakr uses the prison not only as a place to bring different types of characters together in one setting, but also as a direct reflection of Egyptian society. Each character has made her way to this place because of a particular societal problem, and therefore the prison acts as a microcosm of Egypt. At the same time, however, the prison also is not an imaginary place, and exists as a national institution. As Magda al-Nowaihi argues, "Salwa Bakr has created the prison as a meeting place for these women, who come from very different places, social backgrounds, and cultures. This is done so that they may speak to one another in an

environment that fosters cooperation between them and allows them to feel for one another, a situation exactly opposite from what happens outside the prison."[34]

Salwa Bakr is not the first Arab woman to write about the life of women in prison, and during the mid-20th Century many other authors in the Arab world used the prison as a setting of their works. Shaʻbān Yūsuf, for example, names the works of Latifa al-Zayyat, Nawal El Saadawi, and Ghada al-Samman as prison literature. In his opinion, *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr is the most prominent and visually descriptive of these works and engages the most with the realities of prison life. He adds

> This novel acts as a memoir for those who have been conquered by society, in one sense because it depicts a woman who is subjected to every form of physical aggression, and in another because she is poor and not able to secure the most basic needs for a decent life. Additionally, the characters are defeated by their dependency on others.[35]

For Bakr, however, the setting of the prison is also very personal for her, as she herself was imprisoned for two weeks and therefore speaks about prison differently than someone who has not seen it from the inside. Caroline Seymour-Jorn states

> *The Golden Chariot* is, in part, a response to Bakr's own imprisonment during which, as she puts it, was witness to the farce of women's prison. Bakr was arrested in 1989 and spent two weeks in Qanatir prison for women on charges of political conspiracy and pamphleteering. The charges, she says, were trumped up and probably stemmed from the fact that she is on a government list of university students who demonstrated in the late 1960s.[36]

The use of women prisoners as characters is an important feature of Bakr's novel. In her introduction to the translated novel, Fadia Faqir writes that *The Golden Chariot* appeared during

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[34] Al-Nowaihi, Magda M. "Reenvisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven*" in *Arab Studies Journal.* 7:2 (1999) pp. 8-24

[35] Yūsuf, Shaʻbān. "Al-Adība Salwa Bakr wa ʻArabatha al-Dhahabiyya wa al-Ḥāmila*." Al-Taḥrīr,* 30 December 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.tahrirnews.com/news/index.php/posts/139245

[36] Seymour-Jorn, Caroline. "A New Language: Salwa Bakr on Depicting Egyptian Women's Worlds," in *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. 11:2 (2010) pp. 151-176. 165

a time when the crime rate amongst women in Egypt was witnessing a marked increase.[37] She is not the only person to emphasize crime as one of the features marking this era. A number of local media reports also covered the increase in crime rates, giving two main reasons for this phenomenon: The first was that women had recently been given a number of extra freedoms that they did not enjoy in the past, exposing them to new areas of society that they had never operated in before. This led some women to choose a life of crime. The second was that mental health problems had also begun to increase amongst women during that time, and many had turned to crime as a result.[38]

I see that these explanations are simplistic and limited, and I prefer the justification of Nadine Sinno. As she points out, Salwa Bakr's writings then came to present a third option: that the increase in crime rates amongst women was the direct result of the oppression and poverty faced by the average Egyptian woman and that there were no social justice mechanisms available to solve these problems.[39] *The Golden Chariot* places the blame squarely on the political leadership that merely seeks to punish women for their crimes rather than finding solutions that will solve the underlying causes of their problems including the oppression of women because of their gender, economic collapse and the struggles of poor people, and the lack of a fair and equal justice system.

Throughout this novel, Salwa Bakr urges her readers to ponder the reasons that lie behind each crime committed by the characters. Why did they ultimately resort to killing, theft, selling drugs, or rebellion? Are they criminals by nature or are there other external circumstances that

[37] Faqir, Fadia. "Introduction" in Bakr, Salwa *The Golden Chariot.* Dinah Manisty trans. London: Garnet Publishing, 1995
[38] Ibid
[39] Sinno, Nadine. "From Confinement to Creativity: Women's Reconfiguration of the Prison and Mental Asylum in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* and Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*" in *Journal of Arabic Literature*. 42:1 (2011) pp. 67-94

have pushed them in this direction? What is the role that tradition, economics, politics, and society at large play in these crimes? If these circumstances were to change, for example, and Egypt was not as it was during that time, would they still have resorted to such crimes? Bakr lets her readers contemplate all of these questions as they move from story to story showing how these women encountered such unbearable conditions and what actions they took in response.

Each character in the novel comes from a different type of social background and relationship status - divorced, widowed, never married, or married but left by their husbands in a terrible state. These women struggle in order to provide basic sustenance for themselves and their families in an unforgiving society that is incapable of providing the simplest means of protection and dignity, as Caroline Seymour-Jorn points out.[40] According to Sinno "the prisoners in *The Golden Chariot* show a direct link between poverty and crime, crimes in the novel are natural repercussions of deteriorating living conditions rather than whimsical actions signifying their propagators' inherent evil or even psychotic illnesses."[41]

Nadje Al-Ali takes this even further arguing, "while all the women portrayed in Bakr's novel have different stories to tell and have committed various crimes ranging from theft and drug dealing to prostitution and murder, they are united by two factors: their lower class standing and their oppression by men. Most of the women were suffering from economic hardships before prison, but it was their conflict with men that pushed them to commit crimes."[42] Bakr here wants to express that there is no such thing as people being criminal by nature, but rather that the society itself is criminal and people become criminals. This approach becomes abundantly clear when examining the stories of women in the prison; each one of them could have lead a law-

[40] Seymour-Jorn, 176
[41] Sinno, 72
[42] Al-Ali, Nadje. *Gender writing/Writing gender: the representation of women in a selection of modern Egyptian literature* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994) 59

abiding life and contributed to society were it not for the injustice that pushed them to commit these crimes. This injustice appears in many different ways, sometimes through poverty, in other situations as oppression from men, and finally at times through traditions that can only be described as backward and enforced by a corrupt political system, incapable of providing proper healthcare, job opportunities or even an adequate system of justice.

2 - Description of Time and Place

The events of this novel take place during the second half of the 20th Century. However, Salwa Bakr chooses not to present events in a linear form. In the words of Yumnā al-ʻĪd, "Through the author's style she denies the traditional presentation of past, present and future and seems to imply another form of life history."[43] This technique is known as circular narrative, where Bakr moves between the past, present, and future without keeping strictly to a chronological order of events. Rather, she is using historical events to illuminate the material of the chapter or the story that she needs to tell. For example, in Chapter Five she discusses the free educational system introduced by Gamal Abdel Nasser that allowed a poor woman like Safiyya to dream of a brighter future for her children. In the following chapter she then jumps forward in time to the food riots of 1977, but then quickly returns to the time of Nasser, describing his propaganda machine that falsely convinced the Egyptian people that they could defeat America and strike at the heart of Tel Aviv. The truth of this system was revealed with the crushing defeat of 1967.

[43] al-ʻĪd, Yumnā. *Al-Rāwī al-Mawqʻ wa al-Shakl Baḥth fī al-Sard al-Riwāʼī* (Beirut: Muʼassassat al-Abḥāth al-ʻArabiyya, 1986) 124

With regards to setting, Bakr skillfully describes of a number of different locations throughout the novel. For example, she takes about the prison cells through the words of another prisoner Umm el-Khayr by stating

> Her heart beat furiously and the blood rushed to her head each time she thought of her fourth son and imagined that he might have been in this dreadful place instead of her, sleeping as she did now on the rotten foam rubber mattress on which so many others had been fated to sleep. She begged protection from the Devil and praised God as she imagined how her son would have been forced to eat the awful food and scraps which she was offered in prison. The horror of what he was spared was made more vivid by the sight of the black iron bars at which she was forced to gaze and which gripped her tortured soul.[44]

Bakr explains the story of Umm el-Khayr who chose to enter prison rather than incriminate her son for drug smuggling. She describes the extent of the filth of this place that is not fit for human habitation--both its wet furniture and its rotten food are described as no better than garbage. This image is so strong that Umm el-Khayr is terrified by even the thought that her son would have to endure these same conditions, showing how intense the experience is for women in such prisons.

The description of places in the novel is not limited to the prison, even though as described above it is the main location of the novel where most of the events take place. She also describes a number of locations in the rest of Cairo, for example in the following passage

> Aziza remembered an incident in her childhood when her beloved stepfather took her on a trip from Alexandria to Cairo during which they wandered round all the sights of the city. They went to the ancient part of Cairo where the conqueror Amr landed, and they went to the Hanging Church and the Synagogue which were a lasting proof of the fortress's surrender and the conquest of the city which has long been used to paying taxes to its conquerors. They visited the verdant area of Helwan, its Japanese garden with the four statues, and made a tour of all the city's gardens, now lost amongst the crowds and general neglect for everything which is green, natural and beautiful. They went to the Andalusian garden with ponds full of ornamental fish and dark, secret caves where her lover had surprised her with sweet kisses she would never forget. They visited the Azbekiyya garden and the zoo where she saw a zebra for the first time. She saw amazing peacocks and wanted one of her own, a wish that came only too true when time was to prove that for her stepfather she was nothing but a peacock herself.[45]

[44] Bakr, Arabic 99, English 74
[45] Ibid, Arabic 102, English 76

In this section, Bakr describes some of the most important tourist sites of Cairo giving the recollection a dynamic feel by moving from one city to another and from one site to another. This was done not only for the enjoyment of the reader, but also to show how happy she is in the company of this lover before he turns on her and betrays her when her mother passes away and he thinks about marrying another woman.

> Only once did Aziza nearly fall into the net of love with another man. She went one day to accompany her mother to the gold souk to buy a gold chain with a jeweled pendant. They wandered around the stalls and shops for a while without anything catching her eye until they stopped at a shop which displayed beautiful gold pieces, magnificently worked with jewels and pearls. As Aziza began to examine the displays and described every piece to her blind mother in turn so that she could help her choose something, she caught sight of a young man through the jewellery shop window. He was standing behind the special scales used for the sensitive weighing of gold and was deep in discussion with an old woman sitting opposite about a gold bracelet which had been placed on the scales. Aziza gazed at the young man for a moment, long enough for a bird of crazed love to alight on her soul and steal her heart which began to beat furiously.[46]

In the section above Bakr is describing a gold market, a setting found in every city in Egypt whether large or small, that women visit to choose the wedding gifts that the groom will present to his bride. This scene in the novel shows how Aziza, a girl who was only 16 years old, was considering a relationship with this handsome young man who was much closer to her age than her much older stepfather. This man eventually proposes to her but she continuously avoids him until her stepfather (who doesn't want anyone to discover the fact that he has had a sexual relationship with her since she was 13) officially refuses. Here Bakr is preparing her readers to understand exactly why Aziza killed her stepfather when he rejects her after the death of her mother.

3 - Primary and Secondary Characters

[46] Ibid, Arabic 22, English 14

Aziza from Alexandria is the protagonist of *The Golden Chariot* and the work's primary narrator who opens the first chapter and continues to develop her narrative until the novel's end. She also drives the work through her interviews with the other prisoners in order to choose who is suitable to ascend to heaven in the golden chariot with her. She is also the first character to not surrender to the injustice and oppression at the hands of men by taking justice into her own hands by killing her stepfather calmly and with full intent.[47]

Through the presentation of Aziza's story, Bakr wants her readers to ponder whether her punishment is deserved or whether she should be understood as a victim. When she entered into a sexual relationship with her stepfather, she was merely a child and this much older man was able to trick her, buying her gifts and taking advantage of her still under-developed emotions to get access to her body. At the same time, however, Bakr presents the mother of Aziza as not only physically but also emotionally blind to what is happening around her. Despite everything her daughter goes through it seems as though she continues to live in an alternative world, never exercising any effort to protect her daughter from her husband. Although brought in front of the court and convicted of murder under the law, Aziza is presented by Bakr as much more than a common criminal. Rather, she is a victim of two stages of abuse: that of her stepfather and that of her mother. Alongside Aziza, there are a number of other secondary characters--the women Aziza has chosen to ride the golden chariot.

One of the group is Aida, who was forced to marry a relative 20 years her senior. Her husband proved to be extremely aggressive and violent from the first day of their marriage. She was blamed for not getting pregnant even though the doctors assured her that she was in perfect health and that the problem was with her husband. One day when she was badly beaten by her husband, her brother came to see her. He was outraged when he found his sister bleeding, and in

[47] Ibid, Arabic 5-35, English 7-23

his anger he picked up a knife and killed her husband. Her mother insists that it is Aida's duty to take the blame for the murder since her brother had done it for her sake.[48] As a result of this pressure from her family, she presented herself to the court and was sentenced to 25 years in jail.

With Aida's story comes a clear critique of the traditions of Upper Egypt, particularly the idea of revenge killings (*tha'r*). Aida was willing to go to prison and take the place of her brother, the true murderer, believing her mother's story that she had saved his life because revenge can't be taken by a woman. If the family of the victim were to become aware of the family who killed their son, they would seek out a male member of Aida's family, inciting a continuous blood feud. The only way out of this situation was to pay the price herself and confess to the killing. She, like Aziza, is a victim of two different types of abuse: the first from her husband and the second from the pressure of her family that forced her to spend the rest of her life in prison for a crime that she did not commit.

Umm el-Khayr's story began when the police raided her home and found drugs hidden in rice bags stacked next to the oven. They were her son's but, in order to protect him, she quickly claimed that the drugs belonged to her and that her son knew nothing about them. She received the maximum punishment for this type of crime in Egypt, 25 years in prison.[49]

Umm el-Khayr receives a privileged position in the golden chariot right next to Aziza in the front because she acts as the spiritual mother figure not only for the other prisoners but also for the cats who make the prison their home. One prison guard trusted her so much that she would leave her infant daughter with Umm el-Khayr overnight, knowing that she would take care of her and provide a safer environment than the dangerous trip home on Cairo's public

[48] Ibid, Arabic 113-128, English 80-96
[49] Ibid, Arabic 95-100, English 71-80

transportation. Ironically it is this unbound, extreme kindness that has brought Umm el-Khayr to prison and made her vulnerable to oppression and injustice.

Azima the Tall is another character who worked as a professional eulogist for many years and then transformed into a religious singer, performing at the birthday celebrations of major Islamic figures like Hussein and Sayyeda Zaynab in Cairo and al-Sayed al-Badawi in Tanta. She developed her own musical group and fell in love with the flute player Hussein. When she asked him to marry her he refused, saying that he was not financially capable of settling down. She agreed to give him the money he needed but he continued to refuse leading to the end of their relationship. Hussein then began to speak about their love life in public, and she decided to take revenge. She drugged Hussein and had him castrated. When the police learned of this crime, they arrested Azima and jailed her.[50] Azima never imagined causing any harm to Hussein, but he forced her hand when he began ruining her reputation amongst others in a society that does not show mercy to a woman who has lost her honour (a concept not applied to men). Bakr therefore develops this character for the purpose of elaborating on this acute social problem and to show how it is unfairly skewed against women and that the opportunistic Hussein who sought to extort money from her and chase her with rumors remained untouched, despite the fact that he was the main beneficiary of the relationship.

Bahiga the physician decided from an early age to study hard to provide a better life for her family. She excelled in her university studies and reached the top of her class. However, because she was from a poor family and the sons of the professors controlled the medical school, she was unable to get a job at the university and began working for the Ministry of Health making only 120 pounds per month. Once she realized that her dream of helping her family was only a delusion she started to suffer from schizophrenia. She was respected by society because of

[50] Ibid, Arabic 74-92, English 52-67

her position but later became incapable of providing a better life for her family because of her illness and financial situation. Even her colleague with whom she had fallen in love during university left her and married another woman whose father owned a large pharmacy in Cairo. This psychological pressure made Bahiga unable to concentrate and one day she administered the wrong medicine to a child and caused his death, resulting in a 3-year prison sentence.[51]

Bakr creates Bahiga as an alternative to the other women who will board the golden chariot primarily because she is well-educated. By doing so, she is attempting to show her readers that the problems of women in Egyptian society are not only connected to ignorance and illiteracy, and that injustice makes few exceptions based on educational attainment. Bahiga is a living embodiment of this concept, because despite having a good education, she is incapable of realizing her dreams because corruption and a lack of social justice prevented her from getting a position in the university that would have helped better the status of her family.

Zaynab Manusr is another character who Aziza adds to the passengers of the golden chariot. She differs from the others because she is from a wealthy family, was married to a pilot and had two children. She lived a luxurious life until her husband suddenly passed away in a plane crash, and her life then collapsed. She became incredibly depressed and stayed at home, engaging in spiritual ceremonies to help her forget the pain of her loss. This behavior caused many of her family members to believe that she had gone mad. Her brother-in-law took advantage of her situation, proposing that she invest her inheritance with him. When she refused he asked for her hand in marriage, a proposal she also refused. He then sued her in court, claiming that she was not responsible for her money and bribed the judge to rule in his favor. Custody of her children was transferred to her brother-in-law along with their shares of the inheritance, and as revenge Zaynab shot and killed him. Because of her higher social status she

[51] Ibid, Arabic 181-196, English 139-150

was able to get sentenced to only seven years in prison, and finds herself alongside Aziza and the others.[52]

Bakr here wishes to echo the message presented with Bahiga, and acts as a call to upper-class women in Egypt who falsely believe that their status or money can protect them from oppression. Rather, they should become part of the solution and help all women of the society demand their rights and stand shoulder to shoulder with the impoverished for the betterment of all.

Finally there is Mahrousa, a prison guard, who was not beautiful. Her husband constantly reminded her of that, calling her the ugliest woman on earth. He made these statements despite the fact that he was ill and couldn't work and Mahrousa worked as a servant to provide for herself, her husband, and their six children. Her husband was addicted to gambling with his friends at a café, and when she returned home from work one day she found that he had sold the television and washing machine to get more money for gambling. A fight broke out between them, and her husband eventually left home. Afterwards, Mahrousa joined an acrobatic team and then became a bricklayer, with the hard work causing her back pain and eventually making her unable to work. She and her children began to go hungry, and eventually she was visited by a relative of her husband who helped her to get a job as a guard in the women's prison.[53]

Mahrousa's position in the novel is a bridge between the internal prison encountered by Aziza and her companions and the outside world. Mahrousa, despite the fact that she is free and merely an employee in the prison, finds herself in the same predicament as all other women in the novel, and therefore deserves a place on the golden chariot to escape from an unjust system.

[52] Ibid, Arabic 201-209, English 150-159
[53] Ibid, Arabic 149-161, English 113-122

Each of these characters, with the exception of Aziza and Zaynab, represent lower economic and social groups of Egyptian society. This is not unusual in Arabic literature, as Sabry Hafez has indicated in his critical works. According to him, an older style of novel writing used to focus on one primary hero, inspired from history. "This concept is discarded by the new novel," he says, "which selects many of its protagonists from amongst the marginalized and the downtrodden."[54] In this novel, Bakr shows that poverty is one of the main factors that connect the different individual characters in the story. Perhaps, had they not been so poor, society would have treated them differently and they would not have found themselves in the predicaments that they are in.

Another concept that brings each of these individuals together, other than the location of the prison, is the injustice of men. In some situations this is demonstrated through a tough stepfather or an opportunistic husband who doesn't respect a woman's feelings or humanity. In others, it is a lover who takes what he wants from her and then leaves her to fend for herself. Finally, in other situations it is a relative who tries to rob or extort her. Most of these situations are also linked to poverty, showing that we cannot understand this as a novel only about women's rights and women's oppression or only about poverty but that Bakr insists on showing how the two are always closely linked.

4– Linguistic Styles and Dialogue

Beyond the realm of characters, Salwa Bakr also challenges conventional norms with regards to her linguistic styles and presentation of dialogue. In an interview, she stated "the creative writer suffers from the repression of three restrictive regimes: religion, sex and politics.

[54] Hafez, Sabry. "The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies.* 57:1 (1994) pp. 93-112. 108

As far as the woman writer is concerned language is an added oppressor – the language which contains in its coffin inherited male terms and expressions and only allows a narrow margin to enable the writer to express her inner world as a female."[55] She therefore attempts in her novels to develop a new form of language, as men have handed down formal Arabic through the centuries. Additionally, the use of a language that invokes spoken Arabic allows her to express the characters of her novel and their mostly simple backgrounds – a goal that formal Arabic alone cannot achieve.

In addition to her experimentation with the Arabic language, Bakr also employs a number of other literary techniques. For example, polyphonic writing is a style that creates a number of characters inside the novel who tell their stories individually from diverging points of view. This is clearly expressed through the stories of the female characters that Bakr allows to speak, the aim of which is to break the boundaries of silence against the oppression that they face. According to Seymour-Jorn, "Aziza's screening of the inmates for inclusion in the chariot reflects an act of women's agency…the women's narrating of their own stories affords them a certain amount of self-expression and self-realization."[56]

Likewise, she uses digression to describe the condition of the marginalized women in her novel. In *The Golden Chariot,* the story of Umm Ragab, who desperately wanted to have a son that she could rely on, is a good example of how she uses this technique. Bakr uses this in the following passage

> The nub of Umm Ragab's story – and this was the name by which she liked to be called by all the prisoners – was the dream she nurtured of mothering another child – a male – whom she would call Ragab. This was one of the small wishes she had cherished in her former life outside prison and which she had tried unsuccessfully to realize by attaching herself to any man who would agree to marry her, whatever his circumstances and no matter how

[55] Zeidan, Joseph T. *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 314
[56] Seymour-Jorn, 171

> poor. She once even lured an old beggar, whom she saw roaming the streets, crawling along the ground because he had lost both legs. She offered to shelter him in the little room where she lived with her daughter and the man agreed because he had no fixed dwelling. He used to spend his nights in some mosque or other or with some of his prosperous beggar friends who owned houses and provided shelter for a fee.[57]

According to Caroline Seymour-Jorn, Bakr uses another technique in *The Golden Chariot* as well, "This is the Arabesque or story within a story technique, which Bakr uses to construct a present for the female inmates by drawing upon their past experiences. This style is found in the *Thousand and One Nights* and in many popular tales in the Arabic tradition, is a style of narration in which one story leads to the next, resulting in a narrative that seems to have no clear beginning, center or end."[58] This helps Bakr to illustrate different characters and allows her to tell the story of each in a way that they complete one another, clarifying for readers the past and present moments in the life of each character.

In addition to this, Bakr also makes use of humor, as Nadine Sinno points out, "Bakr's fictional world is full of humor. While the subject matter of novel is undeniably serious and sad, Bakr uses laughter as a tool for discussing alarming issues within modern Egyptian society."[59] There are numerous examples of this in the novel, and can be seen when Hinna's husband asks her not to remove her false teeth before coming to bed because he doesn't like to kiss a mouth without teeth

> Moreover he refused absolutely to let her remove her false teeth, which had replaced her natural ones because of tooth decay and constant inflammation of the gums from which she had suffered since her childhood. Because this discerning husband declined to kiss a mouth without teeth, should the desire come upon him at any moment in the night, Ḥanna's nights were interrupted by the fear that she would swallow one of her dentures while fast asleep.[60]

Another example of the humor in the novel is when she describes Azima stating

[57] Bakr, Arabic 37-38, English 25
[58] Seymour-Jorn, 167
[59] Sinno, 76
[60] Bakr, Arabic 61, English 43

> However not long after this signs of Azima's problem appeared. She began to shoot up with startling speed, made more obvious by her remarkable thinness and the lack of proportion in her physique: her lower half was extended in contrast with the short upper half and her long neck ended in a small head with big, rather bulging eyes so that when you looked at her you thought she might be a giraffe in a human form.[61]

Magda al-Nowaihi finds Bakr's use of humor significant, "Bakr is avoiding and satirizing through her comic dislocations. She refuses to allow us to wallow in tears that might momentarily purge us but ultimately leave us just as defeated and powerless. She insists on violating representational mods that perpetuate our victimization."[62] The multiple linguistic styles of Salwa Bakr's work demonstrate that she is an innovative writer. This can be seen both in her use of a new, creative form of language capable of expressing the feelings of the novel's characters as well as developing an approach to dialogue that gives each character the opportunity to speak for herself. In addition, her careful use of language is designed to mix what is a serious, painful story with elements of humor to bring the reader away from boredom and depression in the face of what are truly horrifying events.

5 – Symbolism and Imagery

The use of a creative and innovative linguistic style is complemented by Bakr's use of symbolism in *The Golden Chariot*. Critic Fāṭima al-Zahrā' Sa'īd states that writers use symbolism to mask their commentary on political and societal circumstances. Political oppression from the state as well as artistic censorship often drives writers to use symbols to avoid punishment.[63] Gender also plays an important role in the use of symbolism. For example, writer and critic I'tidāl 'Uthmān states, "Women's writing in Egypt is distinguished not by a

[61] Ibid, Arabic 75, English 53
[62] Al-Nowaihi, 21
[63] Sa'īd, Fāṭima al-Zahrā'. *Al-Ramziyya fī Adab Najīb Maḥfūz.* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Arabiyya li al-Dirāssāt wa al-Nashr, 1981)

different use of literary technique, or alteration of grammar, but by a different vision and attitude toward society, and also by a more indirect way of describing experience, which involves a more complex use of symbolism."[64]

Perhaps the most important symbol used by Bakr in *The Golden Chariot* is that of insanity as a desire to rebel. Translator and scholar Dinah Manisty notes that this is not a new concept in literature and appeared in Britain in the 19th Century. Her study shows how in the Arab world, the use of insanity as a literary concept and conceit was made popular through the works of female writers such as Radwa Ashour, Sakīna Fu'ād, and Salwa Bakr. She sees that Aziza's insanity is not to be understood by the reader as a medical condition stating, "the madwoman is a symbolic representation of anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition that hinders women's creativity and self-expression."[65] At the same time, Bakr uses insanity to challenge the stereotypical weak and emotional image of women as presented by other Arab authors such as Naguib Mahfouz. "Angels of the home," as Dinah Manisty says, indicated a woman who surrenders to her fate quietly. Aziza, on the other hand, is rebellious, loud, and a "monstrous hero."[66] What confirms for readers that Aziza is not sick but rather rebelling appears in the first chapter

> Finally, after all possible methods of punishment in the prison had failed to restrain her the prison authorities decided to bring her before the prison psychiatrists. She appeared before two young doctors who came to assess her case. In their report they described her as calm and gentle – as someone who conversed with the confidence of one of the princesses of the deposed Alawite family and whose civilized manners and aristocratic appearance were proof of her high social standing. This earned her their respect and they decided, in the end, and after long discussions with her, that she was not mad at all.[67]

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[64] See Seymour-Jorn, Caroline. "View from the margin: writer Ni'mat al-Bihiri on gender issues in Egypt." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 13:1 (2004) pp. 77-95. 80-81

[65] Manisty, Dinah. "Madness as Textual Strategy in the Narratives of Three Egyptian Women Writers" in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. 14:1 (1994) pp. 152-174. 154

[66] Ibid, 154

[67] Bakr, Arabic 35, English 23

In addition to being the main setting of the novel and the symbol of insanity, the prison is also a symbol of the restraints placed upon Egyptian women by tradition, habits, and culture that restrict their movement and make them incapable of defending themselves. Najde Al-Ali says "looking at the prison itself, it is a hierarchy and the different inhabitants; it becomes obvious that it can be seen as a symbol for Egyptian society at large. This is particularly remarkable in respect to the question of authority. The way the women prisoners treat each other on the one hand and the way they treat the director of the prison on the other exemplifies the obedience in front of any authority that appears to characterize much of Egypt since Pharaonic times."[68] The message that Bakr is attempting to present here with the dual symbols of the prison and insanity is that escape and rebellion against common practices and tradition is understood by many to be a form of madness, but in reality the insanity of society is worse than that of these women. In addition, she shows that women need to listen to one another in order to unite and face these dark conditions together, and that the prison has provided them with opportunity to achieve their goals.

Bakr also uses the titles of chapters as organizational symbols. For example Chapter Three is titled "The Cow-Goddess Hathor" to represent Umm el-Khayr, the peasant woman described earlier. Hathor was one of the most famous goddesses in Ancient Egypt, and was depicted on the walls of temples as a cow with two large horns surrounding a solar disc. She was the source of abundance, happiness, and all that is good.[69] Likewise, the character Umm el-Khayr, who would always work to make the other prisoners happy. Even the names of the characters carry symbolism. Umm el-Khayr, for example, means the "Mother of Goodness." Aziza, the main character of the novel, means strength, or a person who has an important societal

[68] Al-Ali, 62
[69] Wilkinson, Richard. *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003)

position, appreciation, or love. Each of these meanings indicates personality traits found in Aziza and are presented in the novel. She has a strong personality, does not accept injustice, and is the object of love and appreciation from others whether her mother or her stepfather.

Similarly, the character Shafiqa's name is derived from the word that means kindness, mercy, and tenderness. These features are all to be found within the character herself; she is a kind person who intensely loves her older sister and cannot bear the fact that her brother and father had hired an assassin to kill her after learning about her illegitimate affair. As a result, she went into shock and left home.

Bakr uses images to underline some of her main ideas in a number of locations. For example, in the following passage she writes

> Anyone visiting the house noticed the strange discrepancy between the care she took over her grooming and personal cleanliness and the dirt which accumulated on the Belgian mirror with its beautiful, golden frame where the details of the fine engraving were masked by the layer of dust which had settled on it. Dust covered everything in the room, even the five peacock feathers in the Chinese vase which stood on the marble-topped table with golden inlay and golden cabriole legs. The kitchen had spiders on the ceiling and cockroaches lived in the cracks of the wooden cupboards, confident that they would not be disturbed by the invasion of some super rotating cleaner or deadly insecticides.[70]

This description of Hinna's kitchen, gives us the opportunity to see a place that is so completely filthy it houses every type of insect. Perhaps this image sends a message to the reader that Hinna had reached such a state of depression and disgust with her husband that her ability to manage her home had been sucked out of her because all her energy went to satisfying the sexual desires of her husband.

> The thought of this tragedy drove Umm Ragab to strike her face in lamentation and to scream for hours with an amazing amount of energy. Her cheeks, puffed out and swelled up engulfing her narrow, fox-like eyes. Finally, when she was capable of expending no more feelings of grief or misfortune she fell in a swoon.[71]

[70] Bakr, Arabic 57, English 41
[71] Ibid, Arabic 41, English 28

In this passage, Bakr illustrates the level of sadness and pain suffered by Umm Ragab when she learned while in prison that her daughter had been burned alive by a gas explosion next to the stove while cooking for her children

> As they shoveled bits of macaroni into their mouths with spoons and nibbled a green onion which she had washed, Jamalat stood in a corner of the room waiting for the water to boil. She had poured this into a small clay jug on the cheap electric cooking element with spiral wires so that she could make some of the strong sweet Kushary tea which Aziza preferred and which was the only thing that helped her morning headaches.[72]

In this passage we see three women--Aziza, Hinna, and Jamalat--having a good time together despite all of the discomforts of being in prison. Each of the food items described below is standard for the majority of Egypt's poor, for example, green onions, macaroni and tea

> Not a solitary star looked down on Aziza as she lost consciousness for the last time and began the final struggle with death. She saw her chosen women rushing to get down from the chariot, jostling with those trying to seize and board it. Once the women had succeeded in repelling them, hurling them beneath the horses' hooves, Aziza struggled to raise her hand for take-off and the horses began to flap their wings in readiness for the ascent.[73]

This description in the final scene of the last chapter of the novel shows the final battle between good and evil. The evil director of the prison with his guards and who want to stop the chariot from ascending to the sky, while Aziza and her companions who are the powers of good fight against them to rise to a better place where they can find justice and mercy. The message that Bakr wants to present here is that, throughout all ages and civilizations, freedom requires sacrifice. The death of Aziza in the final section of the novel is the catalyst that allowed the others to achieve their dreams and ascend to the heavens.

After analyzing the setting, characters, and symbols presented in the novel, it is now important to move to a description of how Salwa Bakr chooses to use these aspects of literary form as tools to discuss political and gender conflicts.

[72] Ibid, Arabic 51-52, English 37
[73] Ibid, Arabic 249, English 193

6 – The Depiction of Conflict: Political and gender dimensions

In the *Golden Chariot*, conflict in its different forms is a way for Bakr to approach political, social and gender dimensions of a critique of Egyptian society. In the story of each woman there is a gendered conflict in the fact that they all entered prison because of a struggle with a man. Conflict is not just limited to interpersonal struggles, as each woman was also fighting against wider Egyptian society and some of its traditions. In Chapter Two, when Bakr describes the story of Hinna, she indicates this by saying

> However, she was never prepared to discuss this matter with any man, however close he was to her, even with one of her sons. The same had applied to her own lawyer or the judge himself, even if he should have decided to pass sentence to have her cut into tiny pieces and thrown to the dogs in the street, because it was impossible for someone like her, blessed with a correct and refined upbringing, to talk about personal matters concerning what goes on between men and women in the bedroom.[74]

This paragraph clarifies the extent of the conflict between a main character, Hinna, and societal norms and traditions that prohibit her from speaking about any details of her sexual relationship with her husband. This conflict, if she refuses to speak to the judge and provide a legitimate excuse for her crime, could lead to her being executed. However, because of tradition, she chooses to remain silent in the end and not speak about the daily rape she withstood from her husband. Likewise we also find internal conflict within the first chapter of the novel when Bakr states

> However, Aziza did not use any of the inventive plans she had hatched for a beautiful and truly original murder. She dreaded the scandal that would follow if her secret were found out and her newly created death plan failed, either through lack of precision in its execution or the untimely discovery of her intentions. So she decided to use the knife since it was the quickest and surest way of achieving what she wanted, and gave her the element of surprise which she herself had experienced that day in the distant past when she was still a little girl with pigtails, a little girl whose childhood fate had snatched from her.[75]

[74] Ibid, Arabic 53, English 38
[75] Ibid, Arabic 15, English 9

Here the hero of the story is in the midst of an internal conflict, trying to figure out the best way to kill her stepfather and former lover. Despite her overwhelming desire for revenge, she takes the time to carefully contemplate different ways of murdering him, for example, drugging him and wrapping him in a bouquet of flowers before choking him with gas. Another idea she has is to drug him and then pour boiling liquid chocolate over him turning him into a big chocolate confection that she could cut into pieces and feed to the neighbours. The depth of this conflict is so intense is causes many readers to wonder whether she wants to kill him at all--if her intention is to see him dead what difference does it make whether the killing is so elaborate or not? Once again this is connected to insanity. For Aziza, madness was a way to escape an outside world that is far more "insane," allowing her to explore the depths of her desires and ponder what it might be like to be outside of the boundaries of her family, society, and relationship, and even the norms of morality to give her stepfather and lover what he really deserves.

The Golden Chariot also contains a number of situations that treat political conflicts and criticize the Egyptian government, particularly during the reigns of Nasser and Sadat. For example, in the first chapter Bakr says

> Despite her skinny body and weak heart – which according to the prison doctors threatened to stop at any minute – Umm Ragab never stopped arguing and picking fights with everyone around her. However, since Aziza had learned about her tragedy, she had softened her manner towards her and no longer thought that she was just a wicked old woman. She needed an operation to change two valves in her heart which would, of course, never happen because there was no way Umm Ragab could afford the huge amount needed for a specialist operation of this kind; as for the government hospitals, the queues of those waiting for such operations overflowed into the street.[76]

This paragraph is a veiled political criticism of the Egyptian government and its failure to provide a medical system that guarantees service to the poorest members of society without

[76] Ibid, Arabic 9-10, English 6

waiting for months. Bakr uses the phrase "will never" to indicate to the reader that in the current failed system there is absolutely no hope at all that the situation will change any time soon.

In addition, Bakr also criticizes the Egyptian educational system in the second chapter of the novel when she says

> When Azima failed to obtain her primary certificate – quite usual for most pupils at this stage, given the state of the schools – she became free to complete her education in domestic affairs considered a priority in grooming girls for marriage.[77]

At that time, Bakr relates, the dropout rate from elementary schools in Egypt was high due to large class sizes and a lack of materials, teachers, or a curriculum suited to its the students. Rather than speaking to students and encouraging them to stay in school, the system encourages them to drop out, especially when you take into consideration that in order to pass most students must attend private lessons that poorer people cannot afford. She continues her criticism of the Egyptian regime in Chapter Five where she says

> At first Mahrousa took up cooking kushari made from rice, noodles, lentils, fried onions and spicy sauce which she sold on the pavement. But as soon as she managed to get back on her feet and save a little money she was pursued by municipal officials, demanding protection money and fees which she was forced to pay in order to get the necessary license to ply her trade in peace. The pavements were the property of the Government who doled out licenses to traders on a purely arbitrary basis. Mahrousa decided she had had enough of selling kushari after she discovered that the financial return was negligible; the taxes and bribes she was forced to pay exceeded her earnings and after she had paid off the wholesaler for the noodles, lentils and rice, which she bought on credit, at the end of the day she made no profit at all.[78]

Here there is a reference to the extent to which corruption controls local government officials who extort protection money from poor shop owners. After Mahrousa's husband had left her alone with her small children without any form of income and all of the effort she had made to implement her own small project, the government continued to chase her down and extract money from her until they caused her project to fail. And rather than offering some kind of social

[77] Ibid, Arabic 74, English 53
[78] Ibid, Arabic 157, English 118

protections, the government chose to do the opposite, which was to leave her to these rabid dogs to tear her and her project apart, forcing Mahrousa and her family to face hunger once again.

In the novel Bakr also tackles the ways that many poor, uneducated women suffer, identifying this is as a gendered problem. In Chapter Three she describes the oppression faced by an unlucky woman who, because of inherited cultures and traditions, consistently blames women for their inability to have children even if they are entirely healthy. Bakr states

> She also went with her sister to a reputable woman doctor who told her that her ovulation might be a little weak, advising her to have some tests, while at the same time suggesting that her husband should also be examined. But when she returned home and repeated what the doctor had told her, he waited until her sister had left then slapped her very hard on the face, accusing her of insolence and disrespect which degraded his manliness.[79]

Despite the fact that the doctors confirmed to her that she was capable of having children, her husband refused to believe that he could be the problem and resorted to physical violence against her.

Bakr also draws the reader's attention to the problem of child marriage in Egypt. In the fourth chapter she describes how a girl is deprived of her childhood and the opportunity to receive an education she is placed in the hands of a man, as old as her father, who desires only to rape and take advantage of her

> Two months later the staff sergeant married the girl who was not yet thirteen years old. He managed to get round the legal age required for a girl to marry by purchasing a birth certificate for two pounds from a private doctor who also specialized in illegal medical activities like abortion and repairing the ruptured hymen of girls about to get married.[80]

From this quotation, I can only imagine that once such a young girl has been married off there is only one likely result: she will become pregnant and have children that her husband is not prepared to take care of, and she will be thrown out on the street as he heads off to look for another victim. The specific example given in this chapter also shows the corruption of the police

[79] Ibid, Arabic 120, English 89
[80] Ibid, Arabic 143, English 108

force, where a person charged with upholding the law is himself prepared to forge a certificate in order to marry a young girl and rape her under the guise of marriage.

Bakr also tackles the concept of cultural invasion, or the idea that Western and American ideas have infiltrated Egyptian society and made fundamental changes to it. For example, Bakr describes one situation where "Her financial circumstances improved substantially so that she was able to buy a shop for her husband and two sons. This became an outlet for selling trashy American videos full of violence and karate, as well as Egyptian films which were useless."[81] Bakr clearly views American cinema and its presence in Egypt as damaging, describing it as trash that encourages violence and hatred, empty of any message that could develop the minds of the youth or guide them towards a different moral path.

Likewise, Bakr also criticizes the levels of consumerism and materialism that have penetrated Egyptian society and that many Egyptians, despite the fact that they are poor, purchase Western products as a result of Sadat's *Infitāḥ* economic policy that encouraged the importation of foreign brands to the country. "They would meet at the zoo or aquarium, along the banks of the Nile or anywhere else where they could snatch a few moments of love, which involved no more than the cost of a bus or train fare and the price of imported drinks like Coca Cola or Pepsi…"[82] Rather than purchase a product produced in Egypt that would benefit the country, Bakr chastises the character for siding with the colonizers whose products are only going to benefit some foreign country on the other side of the world. In another instance, Bakr continues this criticism by describing the condition of Safiyya by stating

> For this reason Safiyya worked ceaselessly to provide her boys with the same material advantages enjoyed by more privileged families; she was keen that their clothes should be smart and their house clean and full of all the modern equipment which reflected breeding and refinement so that her two boys could compete on equal terms with their

[81] Ibid, Arabic 172, English 130
[82] Ibid, Arabic 187, English 143

> friends. She bought everything regardless of cost or whether it was practical or necessary, such as a gas igniter, insect repellents and air fresheners in aerosol cans. She bought various different kinds of shampoo, an electric hair-dryer, as well as major electrical appliances like a washing machine, refrigerator, cooker, television and a video.[83]

This rampant consumerism eventually forced Safiyya to turn to selling drugs in order to always have enough money to buy the latest products.

In Chapter Four where she describes how Lula the hairdresser used to love Jamalat to the point that she would hit on her in the prison bathroom, without success. Eventually she became one of the lovers of the drug dealer Saniya Matar. Perhaps here Bakr is indicating that long prison sentences push women into these kinds of relationships, particularly because they have been forbidden from expressing their own natural sexual desires.

And finally, Bakr also discusses the role of Islamist groups in Egypt. In Chapter Two when relating the story of Azimah who used to sing in religious ceremonies, she states that she participated in these events not caring about the fact that most Islamist groups in the country had forbidden them. This was a time when Islamist activities were reaching a peak, cutting back on freedom of expression and thought and even attempting to assassinate presidents such as Abdel Naser and eventually succeeding with Sadat.

In conclusion, through this novel Bakr presents a powerful critique of the status of Egyptian women during the second half of the 20th Century. These women suffer at the hands of both a government that is incapable of providing for their basic needs as well as men who control women in every area of their life from birth to death through patriarchy. She uses primary and secondary characters to demonstrate that these problems are shared across social and cultural backgrounds and not unique to the poor or marginalized. It is in prison, the place that is supposed to protect society from dangerous criminals, where these women find their solace from society.

[83] Ibid, Arabic 171,172, English 129

The work of Salwa Bakr stands as evidence against the ideas of critics as discussed in the introduction to this section who believed that women writers were incapable of delving into what they viewed as the more complex topics of economics and politics. On the contrary, Bakr's novel engages a number of political and gender elements rarely found in other works. Finally, despite its pessimism and often dark imagery, the *Golden Chariot* concludes with hope. When oppressed women come together and when they are led by someone such as Aziza, they can escape from prison and begin to find their way towards changing society for the better. This hope is not without a price, however, and as the chariot begins to ascend, Aziza falls as a sacrifice and gives the chariot the signal to continue on, showing that it is the responsibility of others to complete this project.

Chapter Three: Sonallah Ibrahim – *Sharaf*

The first chapter of this thesis analyzed the claim that women write differently from men based upon their fundamentally different social, economic, cultural, and personal experiences in society, and in the second chapter the work of Salwa Bakr was taken as an example of this form of literary expression. Using the analysis of Bakr's work as a starting point, this third chapter will discuss Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Sharaf* ("Honour,"), which is to date, untranslated, as another work that is set in a prison and presents an analysis of politics and Egyptian society which can be compared and contrasted with *The Golden Chariot*. Ibrahim is one of the most influential Egyptian novelists in the latter half of the 20th Century and critics immediately recognized the more than 543 pages of *Sharaf* as a powerful work of political satire. Its very title echoes the name of the protagonist, which carries deep connotations within the Arabic language and Egyptian society-- that honour is the most important thing that a person, particularly a man, can possess, and that he must go to any length to ensure that it is preserved when under threat. Similar to the analysis of *The Golden Chariot* in the previous chapter, this chapter will examine characters, symbolism, and themes in *Sharaf*, as well as discussions of politics and gender contained within it.

Sharaf is divided into three sections. The first section introduces us to the main character, Ashraf ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz Sulaymān, nicknamed Sharaf, who was born in 1974 and spends his life hanging around in the streets of Cairo, looking in the windows of international clothing chains and watching the movements of women's bodies as they pass by. He meets an English tourist in front of one of the old downtown cinemas who invites Sharaf to accompany him home. Once there, the tourist attempts to rape Sharaf, and in the subsequent struggle Sharaf strikes him over the head with a wine bottle and kills him. When the police arrive, he is arrested for murder.

Although he is guilty only of self-defense, he admits to killing the tourist during a robbery after days of torture and a threat from the police that they will rape his sister. He is then put in prison where he discovers a whole new world of corruption, bribery, and all manner of human rights violations.

The second section of the book departs from Ashraf and introduces Ramzī Buṭrus Naṣīf, an employee at a Swiss pharmaceutical conglomerate. Through a collection of short anecdotes, Ramzī shows how this company takes advantage of less developed markets by paying bribes and testing medicines on unwilling citizens. After attempting to expose this conglomerate's corruption when it attempts to open a branch in Egypt, Ramzī finds himself falsely accused of bribery and thrown in prison as well. While there, Ramzī pens a puppet show that he puts on for the other prisoners during the 6th of October celebrations. The show explains to the readers, as well as the prisoners, how Egypt has reached its current economic stagnation as a result of aligning itself with the West and Israel while promoting a culture of injustice, repression, and corruption at home.

The third and final section of the novel shows Ramzī's descent into madness and how he is thrown into solitary confinement as a result. This does not calm him down, and instead he continues to yell at the other prisoners from behind its padded walls, calling on them to rebel against the system. Sharaf, on the other hand, slowly surrenders to his predicament, symbolically shaving his body hair in preparation to give his body, which here is his "honour," to his cellmate.

1 – Setting: The Prison

Like *The Golden Chariot*, the primary setting for the novel is a prison. Ibrahim himself spent a number of years in prison because of his activities as a Marxist opposed to the policies of

then President Gamal Abdel Nasser. As Abdulla Hussein describes, "between 1959-1964 he served five years of a seven-year sentence handed down by a military tribunal. When he got out, he had a burning desire to convey what he had witnessed there – in particular, how imprisonment drives inmates to create private fantasy worlds to combat isolation and sexual longing. Those experiences formed the basis of his first novel, *Tilka al-Rā'iḥa* (*The Smell of It*).[84] And although both Ibrahim and Bakr spent time in prison, their experiences impacted their works in different ways. For Bakr, who only spent a few weeks in prison, the prison acts as a gathering point for different elements of the society. For Ibrahim, on the other hand, the interior of the prison is the only true reflection of society and his time there acted as the primary driving force for his writing.

However, *Sharaf* is not the first of Ibrahim's works that reflected his experience in prison. He began his career as a novelist with *Tilka al-Rā'iḥa* (*That Smell*), published in 1966 and first translated into English in 1971 as *The Smell of It*.[85] This novel, although not speaking about prison culture directly, follows a protagonist who has recently been let out of prison to find that the outside world is no better than the one inside the prison. The dictatorship that runs the country has made everything ugly, sick, and violent and every part of the country carries with it a terrible stench that only the protagonist can smell.[86]

The fact that Sonallah Ibrahim himself spent such a long time in prison gives authority to his observations and analysis of the world inside the prison. He used his time in prison to record many observations that eventually allowed him to evolve into more than simply a

[84] Hassan, Abdulla. *Changing News Changing Realities: Media Censorship's evolution in Egypt* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2013) 39
[85] Ibrahim, Sonallah. *The Smell of It and Other Stories* (Denys Johnson-Davies trans. London: Heinemann, 1971) and Ibrahim, Sonallah. *That Smell and Notes from the Prison* (Robyn Creswell trans. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2013)
[86] Ibid, 131-137

political prisoner, but also a successful creative writer. According to Samia Mehrez, Ibrahim says, "Prison is a good school for a writer, time there is long, long which allows him to think, doubt, come nearer to human fragility and become himself-more human. He explains that it is in prison that he was transformed from being a political activist to becoming a creative writer."[87]

Like Bakr does in *The Golden Chariot,* in *Sharaf*, Ibrahim uses the setting of the prison to present a cross-section of Egyptian society to his readers. The way in which the prison administration--warden, officers, and soldiers -- cooperate with the older prisoners is an example of the cronyism of the Egyptian state. The other prisoners--a collection of corrupt officials, drug dealers, professional killers, members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and communist political prisoners--represent ordinary people. Ibrahim uses the prison community to offer his readers a view of different sectors of Egyptian society all confined in one location. He places them under a magnifying glass in order to analyze them and to present his hypothesis that each prisoner represents an ailment of Egyptian society. Mehrez confirms this analysis when she says, "Sharaf's prison world is a mirror image of the outside world, a world divided into haves and have-nots, with bribes and tips to pay for every meal, and every move he and others make in jail."[88]

Inside this world, as Hoda Elsadda explains, there are two starkly divided camps, "The prison is depicted as a microcosm of society with all its ills and contradictions, with prisoners convicted for all sorts of crimes and coming from various walks of life. The prison is divided into two main wards: the military ward for the poor and the civilian ward for the rich."[89] In the

[87] Mehrez, 75
[88] Mehrez, 35
[89] Elsadda, Hoda. *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt* 1892-2008 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012) 131

military wing, the prisoners cannot afford to purchase food from the prison cafeteria and have to eat from the standard rations that can only be described as inhuman. Additionally, they also become the slaves of not only the administration but the other wings of the prison as well, cleaning the cells of the other blocks and carrying out their overnight urine buckets to be emptied in the bathrooms, cleaned and returned.

On the opposite side of the prison world lies the civilian wing or the wing for the wealthy. It occupied by thieves, drug dealers, corrupt government officials, and well-off members of opposition political groups and Islamists who have been able to use their money and purchase a better life while incarcerated. They have also been able to purchase influence from the guards and officers, making their lives not significantly different from that of the outside world. They live in their relatively plush surroundings while the poorer prisoners have no way to survive except to become servants of the others.

In setting up the novel in this way, Ibrahim asks his readers to ponder why the prisoners so quickly and naturally fall into such class divisions. Prison should be a great equalizer, putting a variety of people into different locations and forcing them to interact and work together. The opposite is true, however, and the internal society of the prison works almost exactly as it does on the outside. The setting also asks readers to analyze the actions of a number of important groups, for example the Islamists' relationships with Christians as well as educated inmates' role in spreading knowledge about and awareness of their situation amongst the others.

The prison is not the only place where the events of *Sharaf* take place. Other settings are also used in the novel, including a number of urban neighbourhoods in Cairo and rural districts of Egypt. Due to his discussion of historical events, Ibrahim also travels beyond the borders of Egypt and includes brief descriptions of Latin American, African, Western European and North

American countries. As Richard Jacquemond has noted, "Sonallah Ibrahim is distinguished by a special style in the Egyptian literary field, because he takes his reader to the capitals of the world and lets them live the lifestyle and culture there. Six out of thirteen of his novels are set outside of Egypt and have their events in London, America, France, Oman, Russia, and Germany."[90] An example from *Sharaf* where these locations outside of the prison are invoked occurs right at the beginning of the novel

> So despite the rising heat and humidity or because of it the residents of Cairo emptied out into the streets, streaming into the alleyways of Downtown, specifically Ṭal'at Ḥarb Square in fixed points in front of the clothing, shoe, sandwich, and ice cream shops as well as the cinemas and theatres. Sharaf was coming from Taḥrīr Square and passed through Ṭal'at Ḥarb Square with his back to his statue.[91]

Here, the writer presents a number of different important locations in Cairo, including some of the most famous streets Downtown, the shopping district of the middle classes. It is also important to note that he mentions the statue of Ṭal'at Ḥarb—and that Sharaf turns his back to it. Ṭal'at Ḥarb is one of the founders of the modern Egyptian economic system. He established the first bank based entirely on Egyptian capital, Banque Misr, and called for the liberation of the country from foreign economic influence. When Sharaf turns his back to this statue, he is sending the message that the Egyptian economy is no longer independent and that the state's banks are longer serve the interests of the nation because they have embraced the West.

In *Sharaf*, Ibrahim does not limit the setting to Egypt and also invokes foreign locations in the second section of the novel. For example, Ramzī says

> I saw Israel providing the serial murderer Somoza of Nicaragua with weapons and technical expertise, the bloody rulers of Ecuador with Kfir aircraft, and trained the forces of El Salvador that were responsible for the killing of over 40 thousand civilians. They were also responsible for the training of Unit 316 in Honduras and providing the personal

[90] Jaquemond, Richard. "A'jiz 'an Kitābat al-Ḥāḍir fī Riwāyāti." *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 13348, 2015.
[91] Ibrahim, 8

> guard of Noriega with illegal drugs and then cooperated with Saudi Arabia to fund the Contras against the legitimate government of Nicaragua.[92]

In this paragraph, Ibrahim is not only interested in the internal affairs of Egypt but also with oppression and injustice in other areas of the developing world, particularly their relationships with imperial powers such as Israel. Here, he highlights the connection between Israel and Saudi Arabia in fighting democracy and legitimately elected governments, clearly indicating that the Saudi government supported dictatorships and did not allow democratic experiments to succeed because that would have meant a direct embarrassment for their own regime. In another passage mentioning places outside Egypt, Ramzī notes

> We were living in a large five-room apartment in a well-known building built in the 30s and 40s in Shubra, a working-class neighborhood. We also had an apartment in Alexandria where we would spend the summer months. Sometimes, we would go to my grandfather's house in Port Said…I was the big brother in a family with two sisters, one who is now In Canada and the other in Australia.[93]

The paragraph above presents a collection of different regions of Cairo, particularly the Christian-dominated, working class neighbourhood of Shubra. It also comments on the shifts in architecture, comparing the buildings of the Khedival period with that of Mubarak. Ibrahim describes the older buildings as *matīn*, or strong and well built, with welcoming entrances that are not found in modern construction. He then moves to Alexandria, a popular summer destination for Egyptians seeking an escape from the heat of Cairo to enjoy the milder climates along the coast. He also mentions immigration, Egypt now being a place that casts out its own citizens and creates an environment that allows successful people to find solace only in the West, Canada and Australia being the examples provided here.

This desire to use different settings shows two important elements of Ibrahim's writing. The first reflects the research behind Ibrahim's novels and that he treats not only Egypt but also

[92] Ibrahim, 280
[93] Ibrahim, 268

various global settings. The second is that Ibrahim's criticisms of the system in Egypt are not limited only to within the country's borders. Even though his work contains a scathing criticism of the policies of the Egyptian government, these are also relevant to other locations. Ibrahim spent time in prison for being a Marxist and he attempts to communicate a larger global view of oppression—particularly class oppression—to his readers. This becomes particularly clear with the story of Ramzī's opposition to the Swiss pharmaceutical company that wants to open a branch in Egypt.

2 – Description of Time

Ibrahim does not follow a chronological timeline in *Sharaf*, rather he chooses to present time as a mosaic of related events presented at one time. For example, in the first section of the book we are introduced to the protagonist, Sharaf, who is described as being born in 1974, under the rule of Anwar Sadat. During the second section of the book, and the story of Ramzī, we are transported into the past all the way to the time of Saad Zaghloul and the Revolution of 1919 through his puppet show.

This shift in timeline conveys specific ideas to readers. Through the 1919 Revolution, Ramzī highlights the unity of Christians and Muslims against the injustice of the British occupation, with the slogan, "Long live the crescent with the cross." This era is seen as a golden age of intercommunal peace compared to the time of Mubarak when religious extremism had spread and Christians were openly persecuted and called "non-believers." This is shown in the novel through the way the bearded, Islamist religious prisoners treat the Christian prisoners. The same section of the novel also moves fluidly through other events such as the victory in the

October War of 1973, the defeat of the Six Day War in 1967, and then the Palestinian War of 1948.

The third section of the novel returns to the late 1970s and 1980s. This fluid movement of time is often referred to as "circular narrative" and is common in modern Arabic literary works, as Yumnā al-'Īd notes

> We can see a number of tools being used in modern [Arabic] literature with regards to the construction of time including jumping from one time to another and returning back to previously abandoned eras in the same novel. This is a uniquely modern approach and is similar to that which is relied upon in the construction of cinema and differs greatly from the idea of the classical novel that typically followed a progressive timeline.[94]

This comparison to the cinema holds true in *Sharaf*, as readers are presented with a collection of independent scenes from Egyptian, as well as world, history particularly those of other developing countries.

3- Primary and Secondary Characters

The novel's protagonist Sharaf, is first introduced to the reader when he is roaming the streets of Cairo. The novel concludes with him symbolically "handing over his honour" on the last page. Throughout the events of the book, we find Sharaf's name, "honour," contradicting the situations he finds himself in. When he attempts to defend his honour by killing the English tourist, he goes to prison for the opposite reason, and he is in fact accused of murder during a burglary. Ibrahim here is attempting to use the individual character of Sharaf to show a larger picture of what Egypt has become both economically and politically. The changes in Sharaf's character in prison demonstrate every imaginable type of corruption, beginning with the division of prisoners into two camps, as was discussed above.

[94] al-'Īd, Yumnā. *Al-Rāwī al-Mawq' wa al-Shakl Baḥth fī al-Sard al-Riwā'ī* (Beirut: Mu'assassat al-Abḥāth al-'Arabiyya, 1986) 124

Through each stage of the novel, Sharaf slowly relinquishes his own honour, first accepting the role of being a servant to other prisoners and second agreeing to be a spy for the prison administration. He later acts as a smuggler, hiding illegal drugs in his anus to avoid the anger of a more powerful prisoner. Finally, he gives all that remains of his honour away to Sālim, who rapes him. The second most important character in the novel is Ramzī Buṭrus Naṣīf, the pharmacist who works for the Swiss pharmaceutical company Koch. He is in prison because he did not cooperate with other corrupt officials of the Egyptian state. In many ways Ramzī can be read as a second protagonist, as he occupies a large portion of both the second and third sections of the novel. Ibrahim presents Ramzī as equally important to Sharaf, with the same level of character development, backstory and details. Mehrez describes this situation in the following way

> Ibrahim uses two first-person narrators: Sharaf (too small for his name) and Ramzi (too big for the world); two selves that see, narrate, and occupy the world of the prison quite differently. Indeed, the novel pits the two first-person accounts (Dr. Ramzi's and Sharaf's) against each other rendering them simultaneously opposite and complementary; two sides of the same coin.[95]

Ramzī is a different character than Sharaf in that he is significantly better educated and more cultured. ʻAbd al-Salām al-Shādhlī highlights this type of character as one of the most interesting characteristics of the modern Arabic novel, stating: "Having a 'cultured' person in the midst of a novel based on real events, in addition to his ambitions and desire to move from the world of dreams and hopes to that of reality, acts for us as readers of this creative trend as though he is a dissector of the diseases of his society, and also an explainer as to how these diseases are to be treated."[96] Ramzī perfectly fits into this trend, as throughout the novel he plays the role of to raise the reader's awareness by either presenting documents that he brought with him to prison

[95] Mehrez, 40
[96] al-Shādhlī, Muḥammad ʻAbd al-Salām. *Shakhṣiyya al-Muthaqqaf fī al-Riwāya al-ʻArabiyya al-Ḥadītha 1882-1952* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadātha li al-Ṭibāʻa wa al-Nashr, 1985) 17

that uncover the levels of corruption that states commit in cooperation with multinational corporations, or through his puppet show which is the denouement of the second section of the novel.

Alongside these two primary characters there are a number of others who interact with Sharaf while in prison such as Ḥassan Bakāburt, also known as ʻAmm Ḥassan, who Ibrahim describes as a sewage cleaner who earns only ninety-two Egyptian pounds per month, despite having worked for twenty-four years in this profession. This poor man, who has seven children on the outside, has been put in prison because a child fell into an open sewage drain under his supervision and died. There was no way that he could have prevented this tragedy as the state did not provide him with any of the proper tools to do his job, but they decided to blame him anyway.[97] ʻAmm Ḥassan reflects a regular occurrence in Egyptian society, where a lower level employee is sacrificed when a crisis occurs while those who are truly responsible--the higher administration of the company--go unpunished.

Another important secondary character discussed in the novel is Maḥmūd Saʻd, a peasant farmer from Kafr al-Shaykh. He had brought one of his sons to a government hospital for treatment but the doctors there encouraged him to go to a private hospital because it could better treat his son. When he arrived at the new hospital, the administration demanded that he pay one thousand Egyptian pounds before they would even begin treatment and since he had no money to pay, Mahmoud was turned away. He then returned to his village, mortgaged his home, and returned to pay the amount required by the hospital but it was too late and his son had already died. Mahmoud exploded in anger and attacked the doctors, causing him to be arrested and thrown in prison for assault and damaging hospital property.[98]

[97] Ibrahim, 103
[98] Ibrahim, 78

Following Maḥmūd there is Sālim Muḥammad Sālim, known as the murderer (*al-saffāḥ*). His story begins in childhood, when he was unable to enroll in primary school because his father was a poor peasant and unable to purchase the required school uniform. He therefore had to work, first as a sheepherder and then in a marble workshop. Their economic situation worsened a few years later, when the landowner who had been renting to his father for years evicted them from his farm. The landowner was found dead some time later, and the police blamed Sālim for the crime even though they had no evidence to prove these claims. After serving a three-year prison sentence for this crime he was released, only to be thrown in prison again because the police felt that he was a danger to society. After being released, he was thrown in prison again for avoiding his mandatory military service.

As a result of this long chain of injustice, Sālim decided to live a life of crime and began posing as a police officer, threatening innocent people in the street for not having their national ID cards in their possession. Pretending to be taking them to the police station, Sālim would instead lead his victims into a quiet alley where he would kill them and take whatever money and other possessions they had. In total, Sālim murdered twelve people in this way, until he was caught by the police while robbing the thirteenth victim. He was then in prison for 15 years. He received such a short sentence because the police were unaware of the other murders.[99]

The story of Sālim confronts readers with a shocking story of how a serial killer is created. It was only through the constant failures and abuses of the Egyptian police that Sālim became who he was, and his situation begs the question of whether providing him with a free and accessible education would have solved his problems in childhood and thereby saved the lives of many people.

[99] Ibrahim, 507-510

Another minor character in the novel is Mujāhid Salīm, who was found sleeping in the street by a wealthy housewife. She brought him home and decided that he should work for her, taking care of her 9-year-old son. One day the woman witnessed Mujāhid stabbing her son and escaping. When she informed the police he was arrested within twenty-four hours. When asked why he stabbed the child, Mujāhid responded that he was jealous of the housewife's dog, as it was receiving enough food to feed an entire poor family. The bicycle that her son rode cost enough to purchase five acres of farmland.[100]

Here the writer highlights the deep class divisions present in Egyptian society, an important element of the societal criticism present throughout *Sharaf*. In Ibrahim's novel, these wealthy citizens are not safe in their residential compounds separate from the rest of society. He also uses this character's backstory as a way to critique the consumerism of modern Egyptian society, where we find a housewife purchasing a simple bicycle for her son that costs more than five acres of agricultural land does. In contrast, Sālim, the previous character, is thrown in prison because his father was kicked off of a piece of land that measured far less than even one acre.

A further secondary character presented in *Sharaf* is ʻAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Ṣaʻīdi, whose uncle used to lead the prayers in a small village in Upper Egypt. One day, a young man from the village returned from his studies in Cairo a changed man. He had grown a long beard and wore a shortened white robe and pants that only reached halfway down his legs—symbols of the Salafi movement. This young and charismatic figure slowly occupies the position of ʻAbd al-Fattāḥ's uncle in the mosque, pushing him out and encouraging the full application of Islamic Law and the establishment of the Caliphate.

He additionally encouraged the Muslims of the village not to cooperate with Christians, to avoid sending their daughters to school, and forbade special celebrations for events such as

[100] Ibrahim, 83

weddings, funerals and visiting graveyards. Most strangely, he forbade the villagers from eating cucumbers and eggplants, arguing that they led to sexual temptation. Over time, a number of unemployed youth became followers of this preacher and began seeing him as the head of their group. One day, this group of religious extremists called for the murder of ʻAbd al-Fattāḥ's uncle, accusing him of being a servant of the "infidel" government and rejecting the religious duty of holy war. ʻAbd al-Fattāḥ and a number of his friends fought back, killing one of the members of the group and sending him to prison.[101]

Through this character, Ibrahim depicts the ongoing problem of religious extremism in modern Egypt, particularly during the reigns of Sadat and Mubarak. This is in stark contrast to the situation at the beginning of the century—as Ibrahim shows in the puppet show--where in 1919 Muslims and Christians together held hands in protest, calling out "Long lives the crescent with the cross!" In *Sharaf*, Ibrahim connects this phenomenon directly to unemployment and the failure of the state to provide economic opportunities to ordinary Egyptians.

Each of the secondary characters in *Sharaf* come from simple backgrounds and were driven to commit their respective crimes first and foremost because of poverty, similar to what happens to the characters in Bakr's *Golden Chariot*. For example, had Sharaf found proper employment he would not have fallen prey to the tourist's offer of a free cinema ticket. Another factor that binds these characters is the widespread corruption in the society and the prevalence of bribery amongst state officials. Despite the fact that Ramzī was not himself poor he was put into prison because he refused to accept his reality. The characters therefore are a direct reflection of the failure of the Egyptian state, both on the economic and societal levels.

4 – Linguistic Styles and Dialogue

[101] Ibrahim, 154-155

Printed on the back of the cover of Ibrahim's first novel *Tilka al-rā'iḥa,* a statement by a group of young writers highlights the crucial features of Sonallah Ibrahim's use of language in his novels

> If this novel does not please you, it is not your fault, but rather that of the cultural and artistic atmosphere in which we live, which through the years has been controlled by traditional works and superficial naïve phenomena. To break the prevailing artistic environment that has solidified and hardened, we have chosen this form of sincere and sometimes painful writing. These means, which you are not familiar with, will present you with an art that also is unfamiliar. It is an art concerned overwhelmingly with the attempt to express the spirit of an age and the experience of a generation.[102]

These writers claim that Ibrahim is speaking in a non-traditional fashion, one completely opposed to the standard norms of writing at the time, that emphasized employing the full stylistic range of the Arabic language and present the story of one legendary hero. Ibrahim writes about the lower classes of Egyptian society. To do this, he uses a direct style and language closer to what is spoken in the streets--with all of its roughness and lack of restraint. The political and societal subjects that he engages with are also those faced by the youth and include unemployment, the connection to the West, and dictatorship.

Samia Mehrez elaborates on Ibrahim's unique style of writing, "his major enterprise was how to create or invent a language that would depict a horrid, sordid reality that was not being reflected or expressed through the dominant modes of discourse."[103] She confirms that Ibrahim is rebelling against the standard of Arabic writing and searching for a new form of expression able to shed light on the unfortunate reality faced by Egyptians and other Arabs alike.

His language is crude and therefore at times shocking to Arab readers accustomed to a more refined literary language. This meant that he frequently faced opposition from other members of the Egyptian literary community.

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[102] Mehrez, Samia. *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994) 14

[103] Cited in Hassan, 40

For example, well-known novelist Yahya Haqqi attacked Ibrahim's first novel *Tilka al-rā'iḥa*, saying

> I am still pained by this short novel whose reputation has been spreading through literary circles recently. It would have been worthy of being considered among the best out of our literature had its author not slipped into error, out of foolishness and decadent sense of taste. He did not find it sufficient to present us with the hero as he is masturbating (had it been limited to this then it would have been relatively easy to bear.) No, he went beyond that to describe the hero's return home one day later to see the traces of semen spilled on the ground. I found this physiological description truly disgusting and it had such an ill effect on me that I could not appreciate the story in the slightest, despite the outstanding skill evident in it. I am not attacking it in terms of moral aspects, but rather on the basis of its flawed sensibility and vulgarity. This is a shameful repulsiveness which must be checked and which the reader must be spared from having to swallow.[104]

This harsh criticism of Ibrahim's style, although directed specifically at *Tilka al-rā'iḥa*, also applies to *Sharaf* in a number of different situations. For example, in the first section of the book the protagonist describes a scene of masturbation

> I pictured the woman in the golf cart and imagined that she was wearing a loose blouse that exposed her cleavage. I would chase her in the two-seated Chevrolet and race behind her and make her stop. At that point she would open her car door and turn around, exposing her legs. I masturbated to that image through my clothes, always keeping a cautious eye for onlookers. Then I rolled over on my side, closed my eyes, and drifted into a deep sleep.[105]

Speaking openly about masturbation is one reason why authors such as Haqqi criticized Ibrahim's writing. But this subject also allows Ibrahim to address the sexual repression and frustration of the country's youth. Young Egyptians are not allowed to express their emotions and/or sexual desires, as this is seen as culturally inappropriate. Moreover, the depressed economic situation makes it difficult for young couples to marry because of the social expectation placed on men to make significant up-front payments for housing before a wedding can be concluded. This means many people postpone getting married until much later in life.

[104] Mehrez, 43-44
[105] Ibrahim, 34

Another example of Ibrahim's use of tactics to shock his readership can be found in the first section of the novel where he recalls, "the smell of jasmine that he remembers whenever he spoke about his home. That was the ever-present smell of their shit that was collected in a well outside the front door of the house and taken away by a truck once a week."[106] Here Ibrahim is lying to the English tourist, attempting to convince him that he lived on one of the tree-lined avenues of Ma'adi, where in reality the only smell that he knew was that of his family's own excrement.

Another important aspect of presentation in *Sharaf* is the use of archival documents. The author went to great lengths to bring together a large collection of economic and political reports from various newspapers and magazines, placing them randomly throughout the novel. These documents support various claims made by the characters and connect its events to reality throughout the novel. This allows the work to go beyond telling a story by connecting the story itself to political and economic research and analysis. This in turn raises the awareness of readers about the state of Egyptian society. Mehrez comments on this stating, "He relies heavily on the use of external documents, predominantly newspaper clippings. The persistent integration of such external discourse within his fictional works becomes a means of engaging the reader."[107]

For example, when Ibrahim speaks of the negligence of the Egyptian state in dealing with children living on the street, he supports this discussion by providing a number of documents discussing the condition of these children in both Egypt and other countries around the world

> In Guatemala the police murdered more than forty children of beggars whose only crime was sifting in garbage bins for food. Their bodies were found disfigured, with some missing eyes and ears and buried amongst the garbage. And when the issue of street children became prevalent in Brazil execution squads were formed from the ranks of former police officers and drug smugglers, who would chase the children like stray dogs

[106] Ibrahim, 19
[107] Mehrez, 141

> and killed approximately 475 children in 1989 alone. This number would only increase in 1993 to reach an average of four children per day.[108]

The presentation of these dark but realistic images is not the only style that Ibrahim employs in *Sharaf.* In many instances he also introduces humour and is known in Egyptian literary circles for his joking and light-hearted nature. Gamal al-Ghitani once remarked

> During my travels with him I have learned to appreciate his simplicity in everything and his contentment with what is on hand, and what is possible, be that with regard to food or accommodation; I have learned to appreciate his humor and sarcasm despite his visible depression and his ridden grief due to the general state of the country, the region, and the world at large.[109]

One example of such humor and sarcasm is found in the second section of the book

> Everyone knows the story of Jūḥa and the Pot and it doesn't seem like a problem that I tell it all again here, as repetition doesn't have much of an impact upon the ass. One day, Jūḥa borrowed a pot from a neighbor and after a few days brought it back to her along with a small cup. The neighbor asked 'What is this, Jūḥa?" and Jūḥa replied 'The pot gave birth while it was with me and because you are the original owner then you have the most right to the child.' The neighbor took the cup but was adamant that Jūḥa keep the pot. She then told the story to her neighbors and word of the miracle of Jūḥa spread leading the other neighbors to offer their pots to him, begging him to take them for a while because some blessing might occur and it would give birth like the first. After giving them to him they waited for a few days until they became curious to know what had happened. One of the neighbors went to Jūḥa and found his pot missing and when he asked Jūḥa what had happened he responded that it had died. The neighbor was not so stupid as to believe this nonsense and asked Jūḥa 'Is it logical that pots can die?' to which Jūḥa quickly responded 'And is it logical that they give birth?'[110]

In this excerpt Ibrahim criticizes the Egyptian government and people for their failure to understand the true inner workings of the country's economy. People want to provide their families with better lives without taking on the extra work necessary to make that change.

The context and details of the rest of this particular section recall and mirror the actual events surrounding a businessman who first appeared on the Egyptian economic scene in 1989

[108] Ibrahim, 310
[109] Mehrez, 30
[110] Ibrahim, 411-12

named Aḥmad Tawfīq al-Rayyān. He entered the Egyptian business world as a pious man who donned Pakistani traditional dress and grew his beard long. His capital investment company, the al-Rayyān Corporation, announced that it would give large returns on small individual investments, sometimes reaching as high as twenty-four percent. Through deception and in cooperation with a number of religious and media figures who encouraged regular people to avoid the "anti-religious" government-run banks and invest with the Islamically compliant al-Rayyān, he was able to collect approximately three billion Egyptian pounds in investments. Most of that money was never invested and routed to offshore accounts either in Switzerland or the United States.[111]

Ibrahim also criticizes the mindset of contemporary Arab rulers, sarcastically describing them

> At the discussion session about the National Strategy Paper, Dr. 'Umar Aḥmad Faḍl Allāh spoke about his belief in the possibility of using believing Sudanese jinn in every area of development and the coming renaissance. General 'Umar al-Bashīr then asked him to prepare a complete workup on the idea of jinn."[112]

In this imaginary dialogue between an Arab leader and one of his high-ranking officials, we can see that Ibrahim believes these rulers are mentally bankrupt and out of ideas to solve the problems of their nations. The president and dictator of Sudan, who exercises complete control over his people and their daily lives, is unable to provide the necessary means to improve the economic development of the country even with the help of every imaginable expert. They therefore propose solutions so ridiculous that they could even be supernatural, relying upon spirits and demons (described here using the Islamic term *jinn*) to provide a renaissance for the country and preserve the ruler's political position.

[111] http://www.youm7.com/story/0000/0/0/-/267215#.Vsxi7sLSnIU
[112] Ibrahim, 264

Sharaf also integrates the additional genre of the stage play, characterized by Huda Elsadda in the following way, "In *Sharaf* the historical analysis is presented through a play, which allows for a multiplicity of voices, but only to confirm one narrative, that we are all inevitably and irrevocably screwed."[113] Elsadda shows how Ibrahim uses the concept of multiple voices within a single novel. At the outset of the work we are first introduced to one voice, that of the omniscient narrator. But here, others are given the opportunity to speak and participate in the discussion by participating in the play.

Throughout the text, Ibrahim also introduces a number of English terms. This method is popular in modern Arabic literature, and can be found "with significant strength in the 1960s generation, including Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal al-Ghitani."[114] These words are brought in for a number of reasons and are particularly found in cases where Arabic has not developed its own term for the word, for example, in relation to new ideas in technology or in slang. This is not always the case, however, and sometimes authors can employ foreign words for other purposes.

We find foreign words employed in *Sharaf*'s first section when the novel displays Sharaf's conflict between going to the cinema and purchasing a packet of cigarettes.

"كانت الأوبشنز أمامه كالأتي : دخول السينما وبالتحديد فيلم تسيل فيه دماء كافية ..... ، أو شراء علبة سجاير مارلبورو"

"The *options* before him were the following: go to the cinema and catch a bloody action flick…or purchase a packet of Marlboro cigarettes."[115] Elsewhere, the income of Sharaf's father is described

" إستبعاد بعض الأيتمز في آخر مرة تم شطب بند الجريدة اليومية"

"…to exclude some *items.* The last time the purchasing of a daily newspaper was crossed out."[116]

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[113] Elsadda, 133
[114] Barrāda, Muḥammad. "Al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya wa Rahn al-Tajdīd" in *Majallat Dubai*. Issue 1, 2011
[115] Ibrahim, 8
[116] Ibrahim, 9

In both of these cases (options, items) Ibrahim chooses to use a foreign word to describe an idea that already exists in Arabic (*khiyārrāt* and *bunūd* respectively). Perhaps this was done to highlight Ibrahim's cynicism about the moment, reflecting how these depressed economic conditions were a direct result of Sadat's open-door policy with the West, particularly the United States.

Sonallah Ibrahim's style in *Sharaf* seeks new modes of description. Differing from the standard rules of Arabic novelistic writing that was prevalent amongst writers of the time, he branches out and attempts to show how life really is for his characters that see society from the bottom of the social hierarchy. His imagery, which is usually vulgar and shocking but also sprinkled with cynical humour, combined with the power of real-world documents, allows gives him a strong and identifiable style that has a lasting impact and effect on readers.

5 – Symbolism and Imagery

In *Sharaf,* Ibrahim often uses symbolism as a replacement for more direct expressions of politics. Like many of his contemporaries in the literary world, the lack of democracy and freedom of expression in Egypt means that authors must use symbols to avoid the attention of the authorities, as they would then risk potential arrest or professional harm. Muḥammad Barrāda describes this situation by saying, "The Arab writer today writes from inside a society whose descent into regression and seclusion never ceases, surrounded by non-democratic regimes. Therefore, writers must seek refuge in the power of symbolism."[117] Although written in 2011 at the outset of a series of uprisings characterized as the Arab Spring, this statement still rings true in the Arab world today. Five years on, little has changed regarding freedom of expression in the

[117] Barrāda, 41

Arab World and many governments still continue to repress writers and limit their ability to write freely.

Perhaps the most important symbol is the notion of "sharaf" reflected in the title of the work and protagonist's name. Hoda Elsadda argues

> The title of Ibrahim's novel, and the name of the protagonist means honor. Sharaf is originally called Ashraf, meaning the most honorable. The title is extremely symbolic not only of the main conflict in the novel as Sharaf struggles to protect his honor, but also of Ibrahim's perception of himself, as well as his perception by others as an honorable writer in pursuit of the truth in a world governed by lies and deception.[118]

Additionally, the character of Sharaf is mean to represent the nation of Egypt as it slowly relinquishes its honour as mentioned above. The parallel stories of Sharaf and Egypt are strikingly similar: they both have been victims of attempted rape—literal or symbolic-- by foreigners – for Egypt by the colonial economic power and Sharaf by an English tourist --and they both are ultimately forced to give accept this fate, though not at the hands of foreigners but rather their own compatriots– corrupt officials in the case of Egypt, and Sālim in the case of Sharaf.

Attached to the concept of sharaf and the preservation of male honour comes its opposite, or what Sharaf refers to in two ways, as "*sakhmaṭa*" or "*honga*." The first is a classical Arabic verb that describes one's face turning black, while the other is a term invented by Ibrahim to refer to rape. It first appears in the following passage

> I recall a story of two men from Egypt, one of whom was from the North and the other from the South. In searching for a better life they headed into the jungles of Africa and were kidnapped by a savage tribe whose leader was remarkably welcoming. He gave them two choices, either *honga* **(**هونجا**)** or death, and from the movements he made with his hands they both understood what the word *honga* (هونجا) meant, and immediately the man from the South announced that he valued honor more than his own life and that he wanted death. The man from the North had a different approach, and after thinking about the matter for a while said *honga* (هونجا**).** The head of the tribe contemplated their

[118] Elsadda, 130-31

> answers for some time before ordering that they would both get *honga* **(**هونجا**)** until death.[119]

Both of these terms are related to the idea of the loss of honour through rape, and according to Massad symbolize how international capitalism and imperialism are turning a once civilized Egypt into a primitive jungle and savage place where people await a fate of paying tribute to the powers that be through rape, whether they choose life or death. There is also a direct reference to racism, as Ibrahim's use of the word "sakhmaṭa" refers not only to being screwed but also to the idea of becoming black as well.[120] Here, Ibrahim is employing standard models of racism, common in Egyptian society, in order to further his point. According to Massad Egyptian society, particularly since the middle of the 19th Century, has often seen itself as closer to Europe than to the other nations of the African continent. Therefore, racist tropes about "savage" Africans abound in Egyptian literature and societal discourse, and Ibrahim is deploying these images in his novel in order to further strengthen his political message.

In addition to the symbolism of the names of the main characters, we also see the use of the symbol of insanity similar to the way it is used in the work of Salwa Bakr. When placed in solitary confinement, Ramzī continues to shout out his views and tell the other prisoners that they should stand up to the corruption in their societies. Despite his efforts, however, none of the prisoners pay attention what he has to say and consider him "crazy."[121] The reaction of the prisoners can be seen in this following short selection from the third section of the book

> Tawkal commented as he lit a cigarette: The man has lost it. Fasting has made him hallucinate. What does he want, to change the universe? And what business it of his what the government and traders do? Does he think that he is as good as they are? He thinks he's so amazing. So what happens when they decide to give him a proper sentencing? Will his philosophy benefit him then?[122]

[119] Ibrahim, 440-441
[120] Massad, 378-80
[121] Elsadda, 132
[122] Ibrahim, 499

Clearly Tawkal, one of the other prisoners, believes that Ramzī has gone completely mad and that his calls for action are to go unheeded because it no longer matters to him whether Ramzī's statements are true or not. The concept of insanity is therefore used by Ibrahim not as a means of describing someone who has a mental illness, but rather someone who has done the opposite of what is required of them by society: to surrender themselves to their fate and attempt to fight back against impossible odds. This concept is strikingly similar to the way insanity is used in the work of Bakr, and a full comparison of her approach to Ibrahim will be discussed in the following chapter.

Further symbolism can be found in the final dialogue of the book between Sālim and Sharaf. Sālim begins the conversation by saying "All the people that you see here are small fish. The big fish don't come here."[123] The fish in this conversation refer to the kind of criminals, and the small ones are those who have been caught up in government efforts to show that they are cracking down on crime and corruption. Many of them stole because they were on the brink of starvation and were forced into crime to provide food for their families. The larger fish, those high-ranking government officials and businessmen who are responsible for the greater crimes of creating such an unjust system, rarely if ever enter prison because their political connections allow them to escape punishment and because they can ensure the laws of the country do not apply to them.

Ibrahim uses the words of Sharaf as he rides in a prisoner transfer truck to introduce further symbolism

> I began to notice things that I had never paid attention to before: the movement of people and cars, the shapes of women and their nervous and confused steps. I noticed that people

[123] Ibrahim, 512

> walked as if they were put to sleep, and that our truck didn't seem to attract anybody's attention.[124]

Sharaf's understanding of sleep here is symbolic and refers to a state of people being "put to sleep," and that Egyptians have reached a point where they are no longer aware of the corruption and disasters happening all around them that they are unable to resist. Grammatically, the word in Arabic is also used in the passive voice (**كالمُنَوَّمَة**), meaning that this "sleep" was not entered into willingly and that there are external forces that have put Egyptians in this slumber.

Ibrahim's descriptive style is detailed, and intended to allow readers to reconstruct exact images and situations. For example, Ibrahim describes the English tourist in front of the cinema

> He turned around to find a foreign man standing in front of him, with a tall stature and a wide chest. His hair, eyebrows, and mustache were all blonde, and he wore a black short-sleeved undershirt, with a golden chain hanging from his neck.[125]

This imagery is also reflected in his descriptions of settings, for example when Ibrahim describes the streets of Cairo

> He wanted to describe the place for him so he began with the entrance to the subway station, where the garbage is gathered, the constant smell of sewage permeates the air, and flies cover everything. Then there are the alleyways filled with holes and speed bumps, with flocks of flies and mosquitoes flying above. The small homes that stick out of the ground whose entrances seem to melt into the dirt, and their small rooms where five to ten people live with water that constantly cuts out. The radios and tape recorders in the windows, the cafes, the loudspeakers of the mosques and the weddings...[126]

Here the writer is questioning what he should tell the tourist about where he lives. Should he tell him the awful truth or lie and say that he is from a wealthy neighbourhood? Ultimately he chooses the lie and says that he lives in a beautiful place. In this paragraph, Ibrahim draws a complex and evocative picture of poverty in Cairo's neglected neighbourhoods.

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[124] Ibrahim, 39

[126] Ibrahim, 14

Later in the first section of the novel, there is another example of this kind of descriptive style

> The large doorway had another smaller door within it that was about the size of a human being. In order to pass through it you had to jump over a wooden block about a foot high. At that point you find yourself in a square yard, the middle of which holds an odd statue surrounded by a circle of coloured stones, palm trees, and flowers (placed to mislead newcomers). After that you are led to a large hall crowded with new arrivals and armies of flies that seem to coordinate their takeoffs and landings over the toilet in the corner whose opening is covered with urine and feces.[127]

In this section, Ibrahim presents us with a picture of Sharaf's new home--the prison--where he is to serve his sentence after being convicted of killing the English tourist. He presents two parallel images of the prison. The first is an illusion of order and cleanliness of the external courtyard, an illusion presented to people in the higher ranks of the government and human rights groups. In stark contrast to this illusion is the reality of the big hall filled with insects, the blood of mosquitos, and the dirtiness of the bathrooms.

Later in the work he then expands on this description to add images of the prisoners themselves

> I exited to the yard and felt as if I had exited onto a main street. It was crowded with those coming and going in clothes of various shapes and colors, from robes to well-ironed shirts and trousers with shiningly polished shoes – both tennis shoes and more formal dress shoes – and sunglasses. There were also those clearly worse-off, wearing undershirts that had changed color from going months without being washed, leather sandals or plastic flip-flops. The people who wore these clothes kept their heads down and pondered the dirt as if they were looking for something they had lost. There were also other prisoners who wore distinctive green outfits, as well as others who were bearded and wore a long white shirt that stretched to the knees above their pants. These prisoners noticeably didn't interact with anybody else.[128]

In this section, Ibrahim presents a detailed description of three distinct groups of prisoners. First, wealthy prisoners are well taken care of and are allowed to wear nice clothes, shoes, and sunglasses. The second group, the poorer prisoners, is forced to live in the military wing and

[127] Ibrahim, 44
[128] Ibrahim, 146

wear cheap, dirty clothes and lower quality sandals. The third and final group is not an economic division, but rather that of the radical Islamists who wear Pakistani-style robes and choose not to interact with the rest of the prisoners because they feel that they are not sufficiently religious enough as Muslims. He also highlights the psychological state of the poorer prisoners, describing them as keeping their heads lowered and having no hope, a level of description that he does not provide for the others.

One final example of Ibrahim's descriptive style that should be highlighted is taken from the second section, it treats the uprising in the village of Idku in Upper Egypt. After a police officer had been accused of arresting and torturing a member of the community to death, the people of the village began staging protests and attacked the main police station, prompting a harsh response from the central government

> The Idku uprising didn't last long, as the giant trucks from State Security that carry hundreds of flimsy soldiers and fat officers with their shotguns and automatic weapons quickly arrived on the scene. The city turned into a military base, the skies covered with tear gas bombs that fell between the houses and on the roofs, filling the air with burning gas that quickly infects the lungs. Then came the riot police who began to block off the alleyways that led to the heart of the city, grabbing whomever got in their way and beating them senselessly until they had to be carried to the trucks to be arrested.[129]

This section highlights the class differences between the members of state security. The lower ranking soldiers, chosen by the government from the poorest and least educated Egyptians and given the lowest salaries and food so that they will be the most vicious in repressing the citizens, are compared to the more prominent officers who receive every imaginable government benefit.

These examples of Ibrahim's descriptive style are not placed in the text simply for enjoyment; rather they are the author's attempt to bring readers into his narration so that they feel they experience the novel's setting and events. This plays an important role in highlighting the

[129] Ibrahim 214

stark differences that Ibrahim exposes in his social criticism of Egypt, with its clean and wonderful neighbourhoods on one hand and its abject poverty and unhygienic conditions on the other. This acts as a background to the more direct messages about politics and gender to which we now turn.

6 – Political and Gender Dimensions

Sonallah Ibrahim presents a striking criticism of the politics of his time in his novels. His focus is always on the ordinary Egyptian citizen whose political, economic, health, and social interests are at the centre. This approach often resulted in a direct conflict with the government, the most striking of which was on October 22, 2003 when the country's Higher Council for Culture chose him to receive the Arabic Literature Prize. Valued at 100,000 Egyptian pounds, this is one of the most prestigious awards given in the country, and as soon as his name was announced Ibrahim made his way to the stage, thanked the selection committee, and then said

> At this very moment Israeli forces continue to occupy what remains of Palestinian land executing with concise precision and method, a genocide against the Palestinian people…but Arab capitals continue to receive Israeli leaders with open arms…In the cultural field we have no cinema, no research, no education. We only have festivals and conferences and boxes full (referring to government television) of lies…I publicly decline the prize because it was awarded by a government that in my opinion lacks the credibility of bestowing it.[130]

Sonallah Ibrahim took a powerful stance in this rejection speech against what he perceived to be the corrupt practices of the Egyptian government in all its forms, particularly the country's relationship with Israel. He also strongly attacks the country's systematic use of torture and violations of basic human rights. For example, in the first section of *Sharaf* we find the following passage

[130] Cited in Mehrez, 74-75

> He looked angry and said: Strip him. They pulled my pants down while another placed me in handcuffs. The officer spoke to me sarcastically, 'Do you know what we are going to do to you?' I felt terrified and pulled at my hands making the handcuffs even tighter around my wrists. One of them placed a woman's headscarf over my head and blindfolded me with it, and finally they hung me from the window so that I could barely touch the ground with the tips of my toes. They then lashed into me with whips and cursed me. I called out for them to have mercy on me and that I was prepared to say anything if they would just stop. I was exhausted and heard someone question my manhood. I lost control of myself and yelled 'I am more of a man than you are!' At that point I heard the officer say to one of them 'Bring in the machine.' The informant tied me to a cable and began to do something underneath my leg. I heard his voice say 'The plug is broken.' The officer responded in a harsh voice 'Be patient, and put it in the second one you idiot.' A few moments had passed when suddenly a fire rose up my leg and I screamed out. After the first leg they continued with the other. I began to whimper and suddenly felt that I was jumping from my place and flying in the air…then I passed out. I awoke to find myself lying on the ground surrounded with water and completely naked.[131]

In this section Ibrahim presents a vivid image of the extremity of human rights violations inside the prison. Despite the fact that Sharaf had not yet been convicted of any crime nor appeared before any court, the police wanted him to confess that he had killed the tourist who had broken into his home to steal from him. Although he repeatedly claimed that he was merely defending himself and that he only wanted to protect his honour, the police were interested in a much easier path--a direct confession so that they could be rid of the case and receive their government accolades and bonuses. Ibrahim is here directly criticizing the use of torture as a method of interrogation, and showing that the police derived extreme pleasure in torturing others. There is also a brief reference to the inner workings of the police department. When one of the assistants can't find the proper plug for the machine, the other yells at him and calls him an idiot, showing that police officers interact even with each other with disrespect.

Ibrahim also criticizes the culture of consumerism that controls developing countries, including Egypt, which causes entire societies to become dependent on imported consumer

[131] Ibrahim, 32

products from the West, draining countries of their capital. Walter Armbrust discusses this issue in relation to Ibrahim as follows

> Ibrahim's message is direct and angry. We the third world – but in this case particularly Egypt – are being screwed by metropolitan nations in the name of global economy…the novel argues for the defense of national institutions, scathingly criticizing the privatization policies of the post-Nasser era that facilitate the penetration of global capital…Ibrahim's invocation of the Nasser period as a comparatively healthy counter point to the current rush to liquidate state supported institutions in favor of global capitalist enterprises finds a receptive audience.[132]

The writer clearly expresses this analysis in the second section of the novel, during the play

> One of us wakes up in the morning on a Japanese mattress, and washes his face with French soap, then shaves with a Chinese brush and an English razor. He brushes his teeth with American toothpaste, and then eats his breakfast of Egyptian Damietta cheese [actually] manufactured in Denmark and drinks Indian or Sri Lankan tea after adding sweetener from France or Switzerland. He then puts on simple clothes, a shirt and trousers, made copying the fashions from France or Italy, and when he arrives at the office he rides a Belgian elevator and drinks a Brazilian cup of coffee. During the day he drinks a 7-Up or Coca Cola with a Marlboro or Rothman cigarette after turning on his Taiwanese or Japanese air conditioning unit. He makes business calls on his Swedish telephone and begins his work using a French or Japanese pen and Finnish paper. At noon he heads to the supermarket to purchase Cuban sugar, Thai tuna, Spanish sardines and Dutch fish, and on the way home he buys bread made with American wheat, home cleaning products with a foreign brand, a Belgian or Polish lamp, Australian shoe polish, Greek sauce, and Swiss or Italian medicines. All of this occurs while his head is being thrashed around and his ears punctured by calls to buy or pray from Japanese loudspeakers and riding a German bus or a Japanese or American microbus whose nails were hammered in an industrial complex in Egypt. He then purchases Swiss chocolate for his son and when he gets home he watches a French or American film on his Korean television screen, whose chips were assembled in another local industrial complex. Before he goes to bed he listens to the news broadcast, filled with calls from government officials to encourage local production and buy Egyptian products.[133]

This paragraph, with all its complex details, highlights the ways in which the policies of the Egyptian government have led to a lifestyle entirely dependent on foreign products. We are given a taste of the average daily life of an Egyptian citizen, who begins and ends his day on a

[132] Armbrust, Walter. *Mass Meditations: New approaches to popular culture in the Middle East and beyond* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000) 13
[133] Ibrahim, 437-38

foreign-made bed, and that everything he eats, drinks, buys, wears, and even hears is something brought into the country from outside his country. There is not a single product "Made in Egypt."

However, Ibrahim's criticism of the government it not limited to its economic policy and the novel also includes a discussion of the country's education system

> Three million children are out of school. We see them slaving away in workshops with sunken eyes and broken bodies covered in soot and unable to understand anything or be aware of where they are. They speak a new language, filled with half-constructed words and the result of an army of fifteen million illiterate citizens with which Egypt will greet the new century.[134]

This paragraph criticizes the Egyptian school system by highlighting the number of child labourers and the illiterate in the country. Because these individuals have been ignored by the state, they represent the biggest threat to the country's future development as it enters the 21st Century. Most of these children either have been forced to leave school in order to help provide for their families or they have been actively purged from an educational system that does not encourage learning, leading children to abandon their hope for a genuine education. This disastrous childhood then leads them into a life of crime and eventually to prison. Ibrahim completes his criticism by comparing this to life in developed countries. One of the prisoners says of life in Australia, "Children there are born with a salary. The healthcare system is complete, precise, safe, and free."[135] He hints that the reason for this shortcoming is rapid population increase, as is constantly presented by the government, but rather the corruption that makes the rich richer and the poor poorer.

The preferential treatment given to foreigners and how much better their lives are compared to Egyptians is a recurring theme throughout the novel. This can be seen for example in a passage describing the treatment of a captured Israeli spy

[134] Ibrahim, 401
[135] Ibrahim, 543

> Joseph Levi, he is the only Israeli amongst the spies in prison (and the only bearded one as well), and therefore he enjoys visits from his embassy representative who provides him all the heroin he needs and assures him that he will soon be released.[136]

Ibrahim also criticizes the healthcare policies of the government through the speeches given by Ramzī who visited his old friend, Labīb, at his clinic in an Upper Egyptian city when he returned from abroad. He was shocked to discover that antibiotics had become the main way of treating patients, without even diagnosing them. Upon questioning his friend, Ramzī discovers that Labīb passes out antibiotics with impunity because he wants to receive gifts and favors from the pharmaceutical companies that promote these medicines. When Ramzī points out that overuse of such antibiotics could have a negative impact on patients, Dr. Labīb responds

> You are speaking like a stupid foreigner. Ninety-nine percent of the diseases in Egypt are a result of unhygienic practices in the street and with food. When the sun comes up every morning you find Egyptians sleeping in front of the hospitals. We drink human and animal excrement and dead fish floating on the surface of the water. But nobody does anything to improve this. So what am I supposed to do other than just continue to play along?[137]

This paragraph emphasizes the idea that there is no communication between doctors and patients. Many doctors take advantage of the ignorance of their patients and prescribe them medicines that could potentially cause further diseases, simply in order to improve their standing with pharmaceutical companies.

Beyond the borders of Egypt, the writer also criticizes the United States, particularly its policies in the Middle East and its relationship with regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait. In the second section of the book, the puppet show's American character says

> The true hit of the century was what happened in the Gulf. Really, the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War had ripped the two countries to pieces. The geniuses of Iraq had started the war at a time when the country had a $35 Billion budget surplus, and eight years later it had an external debt burden of $42 Billion after a war that cost $200 Billion.**....** We had brought forth a devilish war machine. The waters of the Gulf and the Red Sea were

[136] Ibrahim, 505
[137] Ibrahim, 319-20

> covered with the naval vessels, and the airports of the Gulf were crowded with jets, rocket systems, and transports, including Sky hawks, Tornados, Mirages, Pumas and Super Pumas. Above these planes floated Aurora and Owaksi spy satellites. To take advantage of the wonders of modern warfare we spent billions upon billions for machines that would record every word that Saddam might say day or night…The greatest land armada in world history pushed forward, headed by a few thousand Saudis, Egyptians, and Syrians placed there to distract the enemy army, and after only two hours on the night of the 15th of January, Operation Desert Storm began. Within the following month, we had destroyed Iraq entirely and sent it back to the Stone Age.[138]

America, according to Ibrahim, understood the idiocy of Arab regimes and used this to its advantage, destroying the infrastructure of Iraq and forcing it into large amounts of debt that could be only be repaid by following American reform policies, which of course would give preference to foreign companies. Ibrahim sees this as a critical part of American foreign policy, weakening and dividing the Arab states in order to help its most important ally in the Middle East: Israel.

With regards to the gender dimensions of *Sharaf*, Ibrahim first discusses the place that emasculation holds in the Egyptian police structure. For example, when the police were torturing a socialist for refusing to sing a nationalist song by Umm Kulthūm he says

> He continued to beat one of them (a textile factory worker) with a thick staff over his head to the point that he would say that he was a woman, but he refused. And when the officer's hand began to get tired and the head of the prisoner was about to crack, the officer stopped and asked the prisoner why he was so stubborn. He responded that there was nothing wrong with being called a woman because he believes in the complete equality of the sexes, however he would never say that he was unless it was of his own free will.[139]

According to the police the act of being called a woman, or being forced to call oneself a woman, was considered a critical tool of torture and emasculation. However, during this particular case the prisoner turns the tables on the officer, claiming that women and men are equal. This shows

[138] Ibrahim, 371-74
[139] Ibrahim, 462

that a simple cultural shift to believing that the genders are equal renders the psychological torture of the police ineffective.

This criticism of the status of women in Egyptian society reaches its peak with the following statement, found near the end of the text. Sālim, when justifying his request to have sex with Sharaf, states that "Women are deficient in their mind and religion, and there is no possible way that they may be friends with men because [true] friendship can only be had between men."[140] This statement, whose first section is originally attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, represents a long-standing misogynistic idea in Egyptian society, and the wider Muslim world, regarding the status of women. This idea that women are fundamentally deficient exists not only amongst the uneducated classes but also extends to the cultural and religious elite. It is at the heart of most discussions in the country regarding women's rights, and is an idea often used by conservatives to foreclose debates about the place of women in Egyptian society. Interestingly the statement is not being used by Ibrahim to provoke a conversation about its validity, but rather by Sālim who is attempting to convince Sharaf to have sex with him and surrender the last remaining piece of his male honour. According to him women, because of their inferior nature, can never be true companions of men. They can't understand what they desire, both sexually and emotionally. Therefore, he is left with only one other option: to seek sexual gratification through having sex with other men. He employs this allegedly prophetic statement entirely outside of its religious context, and uses it not to discuss the inferior position of women in their participation in Egyptian society, but rather to justify his own homosexuality and indicate that it is, at least in some way, religiously sanctioned.

In another situation, he further elaborates on the inferior place of women in Egyptian society by highlighting the issue of female genital mutilation, stating

[140] Ibrahim, 512

> The doctor performed the 'circumcision' for a six year old girl in order for her to retain her purity…the girl began bleeding uncontrollably causing her death and relieving her from the pain of the future struggle of her life.[141]

Ibrahim here uses his typical and unique brand of sarcasm to demonstrate the attention honour is given by society and that some individuals who believe that they are "protecting" their daughter's honour, will subject them to unnecessary and painful - perhaps even dangerous – medical procedures.

Each of these political and gender criticisms are focused around the central theme of honour, and at the end of the book the main character is faced with the dilemma of losing his own honour. Sharaf represents therefore all that is good in the country, the last remaining bits of civilization and honour. Ramzī attempts in vain to change the situation in the prison and revive the honour of other prisoners, including Sharaf, but ultimately he fails because of the political situation in the country. This leads to the ultimate surrender of honour to the forces of evil as explained by Hoda Elsadda

> At the end of the novel, Sharaf submits to what he considers the worst fate, when he begins to shave the hair of his body in preparation for having a sexual relationship with his cell mate, Sharaf is defeated and willingly participates in his humiliation.[142]

In conclusion, *Sharaf* in many ways speaks to the same elements as the work of Salwa Bakr. For example, they both are a striking criticism of Egyptian society as well as the political system. They both use the prison as their primary setting. However, Ibrahim uses these elements to create a very different picture than that of Bakr. It in his sexual imagery and the way he manipulates the concepts of rape and the protection of male honour, his construction of gender differs the most from Bakr. Women are at the centre of Bakr's discussion. They are the subjects of rape and sexual oppression, and she therefore seeks to challenge the understanding of

[141] Ibrahim 507
[142] Elsadda, 131

Egyptians by placing women at the centre her work and giving them a voice. Ibrahim's approach does not challenge existing social norms about race and gender and keeps men as the focal point of his novel, though he does strike a chord for ordinary Egyptians because of the high degree of shock value in the topics he broaches and the way he approaches them. Ultimately, it is at the end of the novel where we see the result of attachment to such ideas: a surrender of honour and an acceptance that there is no hope for change, and it is his use of symbols and other similarities and differences with Salwa Bakr that will be discussed in more detail in the final concluding chapter.

Chapter Four – Comparing Salwa Bakr and Sonallah Ibrahim

The similarities between *The Golden Chariot* and *Sharaf* are striking: both novels use the prison as their main setting, develop characters that represent wider Egyptian society and invent symbolism to make gender and political criticisms of a political environment that often punishes and suppresses dissent. Beyond these similarities, however, the works of Ibrahim and Bakr stand out from one another in both the use of language and stereotypes. For Ibrahim it is the dirt and grime of realism that leads is readers to question the society in which they live and become more aware of the political oppression that surrounds them. He uses a vivid and shocking linguistic style that employs existing stereotypes about race, the position of Egypt in the world, and the status of women in the society to get his point across and reach a larger audience.

For Bakr, however, it is the continued use of these stereotypes that must be broken. While using equally dark and realistic imagery reflecting the conditions of the women's prison, she argues that the current paradigm is not working in favor of women, and therefore a "golden chariot" should be constructed to bring these women out of their current predicament and off to a better place, or away from the current understandings of gender to a new way of talking about women from their unique points of view. Each author in her or his own way presents scathing criticisms of Egyptian society and calls for change in both the political and social realms. This chapter offers a comparison and analysis of three elements found in both novels: the prison as a center of interaction, the "illness" of insanity and the symbolism employed by the authors in order to present issues of gender, racism, and politics.

1 - The Prison as a Center of Interaction

The prison as a place is where state power is enacted upon the bodies of its citizens. As Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish,* the prison is designed not merely to provide a location for the reform of criminals, but it is a unique location where discipline, power, and punishment come together.[143] Therefore, the fact that both authors chose the prison as the setting for their novels can be further analyzed in this light.

Firstly, for each author the prison represents an isolated space where members of only one gender interact, Bakr dealing exclusively with women and Ibrahim only with men. This setting is intended to act as a method of control, isolating the sexes in order to turn traditional gender constructs upside down, and challenging readers to look beyond the simple stereotypes of woman and man. Ibrahim's depiction of homosexual rape and the preservation of honour is one of the clearest examples of this, as typically honour is seen as the domain of women. In her work on women in 19th Century Egypt, Beth Baron showed how the construction of a national image was built on viewing Egypt as a woman being violated by imperial powers.[144] In the case of Ibrahim, however, this is now done exclusively through the eyes of the primary male character, Sharaf.

For Bakr, the goal of using the prison as the sole setting of the work is to construct a microcosm of society where every type of woman, regardless of her social or economic background, can be presented to the readers and have her voice and story heard. This results in the creation of "ideal types" or stereotypes of Egyptian women, where the various nuances of individual cases are reduced for the sake of enhancing the discussion. Bakr's depiction of the

[143] See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. Alan Sheridan trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)
[144] Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, gender, and politics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005)

prison is not intended to be an exact replica of the prison as it exists in the real world, but rather a place where characters are forced together despite their different backgrounds and situations and facilitate interaction between them. It is a zone where, for at least a limited period of time, the exterior societal oppression of particular prisoners has been suspended allowing for the presentation of their situations. Bakr refers to this through the solidarity expressed between the women in the prison. In Umm el-Khayr's care of Aida, we see the importance Bakr places in creating an environment of cooperation between the women that allows them to tell their stories, and once 'Aida found a willing voice she spoke in a way that she never could outside of the prison. As a result, the prison is part of Bakr's larger project to discuss the issue of women's rights.[145]

This stands in stark contrast to the ideas of Foucault, who argues that prison is a place where a person's voice is lost in a system of discipline and the implementation of power. Also in opposition to the ideas of Foucault, the prison for Bakr is a center for cooperation, not only between the prisoners themselves, but also with employees. Umm el-Khayr again makes for a fitting example, where she takes care of the daughter of Halima, the prison warder.[146] The closer the women of the prison become physically, the more they each become aware of their own troubles and the more willing they are to help one another. And despite its rough and unforgiving physical appearance, the prison is successful in encouraging these women to come together in a way that they never could on the outside, thereby enhancing their humanity and their interpersonal connections. For Foucault, the prison is where pressure from the power structure causes an inherent increase in conflict, and differences between prisoners are accentuated and criminal tendencies enhanced rather than solved.

[145] Bakr, Arabic 113, English 84
[146] Bakr, Arabic 98, English 73-74

These connections are strengthened through the characters' collective discovery of themselves, showing that most of them have reached prison because of some manner of injustice. For example the main character of the novel, Aziza, is in prison because of her drive to take revenge and murder her stepfather who has sexually abused her since she was thirteen years old in order to satisfy his own sexual desires at the expense of her dignity.[147] Here and in the discussion of the other characters, Bakr seems to indicate that women do not kill because it is in their nature, but rather because it is one of the only ways that they can obtain their rights in society and fight back against the injustice that they have experienced.

On the other hand, Ibrahim's prison is a much darker place. Divisions between the prisoners are highlighted much more, and open conflict between prisoners is frequent. Homosexual encounters, gut-wrenching descriptions of bathrooms with armies of flies, and a rampant system of corruption complete this image. Ibrahim develops these images for two main reasons. The first is that for him, like Bakr, the prison is also a microcosm of society and its characters representative of those found outside of the prison. The second reason is that he is attempting to speak about social issues and highlight the current status of developing nations to show how they have been attacked by the global capitalist system.

This understanding of the global economic and political machine makes showing the details of the system important for Ibrahim, a point clarified when Sharaf discovers the prison on the first day inside and witnesses what he describes as a center for corruption and insanity.[148] Bakr, however, is not speaking to the status of developing nations around the world. Rather, her enemy is the constructed notion of tradition, or the beliefs within Egypt that have constricted women to conform to certain norms. These norms, whether they are a product of religion,

[147] Bakr, Arabic 34, English 23
[148] Ibrahim, 107

folklore, or the global geopolitical system must all be challenged. Tradition is what has led society to its current predicament, and it is only through challenging it through solidarity that the women will be able to break out.

In this world where only the strongest survive, the prison for Ibrahim is also a place of constant conflict, both between the prisoners who are starkly divided between classes and between the prisoners and the administration. Every character is out to attack the other or take something from him, and the last scene of the novel shows the ultimate result of such conflict between Sharaf and Sālim.[149] Sharaf it so terrified as to what Sālim might do if he doesn't surrender, that he is willing to allow himself to be raped taking all of the necessary, and symbolic, aesthetic preparations. The prison, therefore, is far from a place of coming together and solidarity as it is with Bakr. Rather, it is a place that is a direct reflection of the ugly reality faced by regular Egyptians on a daily basis.

Bakr's work is not devoid of conflict, but her examples of violence in prison are much smaller in scale and intensity, such as Umm Ragab's theft of Aziza's simple breakfast from her cell.[150] This, as well as most other conflicts in the work, is quickly resolved through the development of mutual understanding, cooperation, and a realization that the true reason behind such conflicts is not personal, but rather a symptom of the society's larger and more pervasive problems of poverty, corruption, and repression of women.

In conclusion, this comparison shows that for both authors the prison is a center of control and a place where Egyptians, and by extension Egyptian society as a whole, can be put under detailed observation and presented to readers. It is the ideal location where the outer appearances of each character can be stripped away through the outcome of their conflicts and

[149] Ibrahim, 543
[150] Bakr, Arabic 40, English 27

the true problems of the country can be understood. Ibrahim, with his conflict between the prisoners and the inability of the prison to provide a solution for the problems, follows closely the understanding of Foucault. The prison for him is not a place where problems can be understood and criminals reformed, but where those who are too naïve are caught and allowed to establish their own empires of power and control. For Bakr, on the other hand, the ultimate result of the prison is reform and escape. Each of her characters understands the circumstances that have brought her to prison, and is prepared to do whatever it takes to find a way out of her predicament and move on to a better place.

2- The "Illness" of Insanity

The concept of insanity also is an important element of comparison between both novels. In general, when speaking about the employment of insanity in writing, author Muḥammad Baqūḥ states

> The formulation of insanity [in writing] is distinguished by its content, critical approach, and ability to actively fight against all that is traditional in a society, whether these are societal values, systems, or ideas. The person afflicted with this form of insanity, which is not accepted by Michel Foucault as ill, places himself against imitation and authoritarianism in the society and fights for change, evolution, and creativity.[151]

Applying this understanding, both authors use insanity to create a method through which they can break away from the chains of traditional discussions and invite their readers to speak about issues indirectly and develop alternative ways of understanding their societies.

Bakr, for example, uses the concept of insanity as a method for women to escape. The world around Aziza and her friends is filled with contradictions, violence, and oppression at the hands of men and social injustice. This world sees the women of the golden chariot as

[151] Baqūḥ, Muḥammad. "Tawdhīf al-Junūn fī al-Kitāba al-Riwā'iyya." *Al-Ḥiwār*. 22 November 2008. Retrieved from: http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=153931

abominations and mad, seeking to punish them and lock them away for merely attempting to seek a better form of existence. Insanity, therefore, is used as a way of correcting this point of view and showing that in reality it is the outside world that has gone mad. Those women who seek freedom, representation, and a betterment of their own lives are the only ones left who have maintained their sanity.

On the other hand, Ibrahim uses insanity as a way the main characters may attempt to fight back against the oppression of the system. Dr. Ramzī, who refuses to take part in this system of rape and attempts to make his fellow citizens aware of the madness that they suffer from and how they can save themselves from international domination through the construction of a puppet show and constantly arguing with his fellow inmates and the prison staff. He believes that the entire country has gone mad and that only through his education can they become aware of the situation that they are in and awake from their slumber. Ultimately, however, Dr. Ramzī is himself deemed insane by the administration and locked in a padded cell with only the darkness to hear his screams.

As a result, insanity for both Bakr and Ibrahim is important way that their characters can fight back against the oppression that they face and make sense of the society around them. The primary difference between them, however, is that the outcome of Bakr's insanity is positive while for Ibrahim it is negative. For Bakr, Aziza and her friends are able, through their insanity, to truly understand what is going on around them and allow a solution to present itself: cooperation and solidarity in order to find a way out to a better place. It is therefore a call to action for Egyptian society and Egyptian women in particular. Society will not become better on its own, and it is only through collective action that challenges the chains of tradition will circumstances begin to change. This call is echoed by Ibrahim, however in a much different way.

His characters are locked away and forgotten while society continues sleepwalking on its path towards destruction. It is a frustrating predicament, one that is meant to encourage a uprising of emotion and desire for change.

Therefore, for both Bakr and Ibrahim, insanity is not meant to act as a disease that the characters suffer from but rather it is an advantage that they possess, allowing them to speak truth in the face of insurmountable odds and break beyond the boundaries of their societies and call for change. It is a necessary occurrence, and throughout history Foucault and others have pointed out that some of the world's greatest thinkers and shapers were considered insane during their own times, locked away in prisons and forgotten until years after their deaths.[152] This, according to authors like Syrian Mamdūḥ 'Adwān, doesn't happen enough in the Arab world and that more "insane" figures are needed to challenge established norms. He argues

> We are in need of insanity to uncover the artificiality of our prudence, cowardice, and nonchalance. Everyone is part of it as they celebrate, mourn, laugh, cry, and get angry within established parameters, and as a result are defeated by those very parameters and will never see victory.[153]

3 - The Symbolism of Politics, Race, and Gender

As stated in the previous two chapters, both authors use symbolism to articulate their political criticism in order to avoid government censorship, confiscation and banning of their novels. However, their use of symbols goes far beyond that of simply attempting to avoid the wrath of the Egyptian government and its security apparatus. Rather they use symbolism to present a detailed critique of the Egyptian state and question conceptions of gender. Ibrahim uses existing notions of racism, homosexuality, and gender in order to reinforce his main message, while Bakr uses these same symbols to break away from tradition.

[152] Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965)
[153] 'Adwān, Mamdūḥ. *Difā'an 'an al-junūn: muqaddimāt* (Damascus: Dār Mamdūḥ Adwān, 2009) 19

Ibrahim's most striking example of symbolism is in his presentation of tropes in the story of the African tribe, the word and concept "honga," and the verb "sakhmata" This imagery in itself is clearly racist and comes directly from Egyptian historiography. During the middle to late 19th Century, when Egypt was forming its national image, it viewed itself as less connected to Africa and closer to Europe. For example the Khedive Isma'il, right before being removed from power from the British in 1879, stated "My country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe. It is therefore natural for us to abandon our former ways and to adopt a new system adapted to our social conditions."[154] Writers, academics, and eventually popular segments of Egypt saw themselves in this way. Other countries of the continent, particularly the Sudan, were seen in an increasingly negative fashion. According to Eve Troutt-Powell, this is Egypt's own "civilizing mission" where nationalists constructed a world where a "civilized" Egypt was responsible for the more "uncivilized," "black" societies of Sudan. This colonial construction was directly connected to race, and many of the great Egyptian nationalists of the 19th and early 20th Centuries discouraged connections to Africa and emphasized more Mediterranean and European origins to the Egyptian nation.[155]

This continues into the 20th Century after the separation of Egypt and the Sudan, and racist images continued to be applied to the Nubians of Southern Egypt. In the film industry, for example, Nubians and Egyptians with darker skin were often marginalized and placed in minimal roles (doormen, servants, and butlers) and rarely given leading positions. They are depicted as simple-minded and ignorant, and often the butt of jokes.[156] As recently as April of

[154] Found in Ayyūbī, Ilyās. *Tārīkh Miṣr fī 'Ahd al-Khīdiw Ismā'īl Bāsha: min Sanat 1863 ilā 1879* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1923)
[155] Troutt-Powell, Eve. *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)
[156] "'Uthmān, Idrīs, or Bakkār…The Nubian in Cinema between a Doorman and a Butler." *Waṭanī*. 15 December 2011

2016, the film *Nawwāra* was hailed by critics as ground-breaking because of its casting of a Nubian, Amīr Ṣalāḥ, as the love interest of the main character.[157]

Bakr employs the same ideas of racism and class discrimination, but what separates her presentation from that of Ibrahim's is that rather than deploy and rely on them, she clearly makes an attempt to challenge them and encourage readers to see beyond stereotypes. For example, in Aziza's interaction with Umm el-Khayr she states how she is able to overcome her negative and discriminatory ideas about poorer peasants. But Aziza, who was perpetually peevish in prison, did not find Umm el-Khayr irritating and found no cause to despise her. Nor did her origins – which were inescapably those of a peasant – arouse Aziza's scorn despite the fact that she herself came from an old city family who looked upon peasants as boorish, coarse and dirty with an unbearable smell like that of Sabiha who used to come from the country to sell butter and cheese to Aziza's family.[158] Bakr here elevates Umm el-Khayr beyond the stereotypes of her village upbringing and challenges the main character, Aziza, to see her in a new light. This evolution of Umm el-Khayr ventures even further when Bakr compares her to the Ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor, the archetypal symbol of womanhood and the all-providing mother.

At the level of gender analysis, Ibrahim stands out again as sticking closely to traditional understandings of women and gender with the bulk of his focus directly related to the idea of male honour. For example, those who have submitted to the political oppression of the West or the corruption of local officials are stripped of their "manhood," and during torture sessions prisoners were forced to call themselves women, which is meant to be an insult because it draws upon the notion that women are emotionally weak or incomplete beings.[159] Additionally, when

[157] Khālid, Sa'īd. "Mukhrija Nawwāra: al-Film Rafaḍathu Fanānāt wa Akthar min Muntij bi Sabab al-Thawra." *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm.* 15 April 2016
[158] Bakr, Arabic 97, English 72
[159] Ibrahim, 462

discussing female genital mutilation Ibrahim criticizes the widespread practice because it is not a sufficient method of guaranteeing the preservation of her honour, which is of course the responsibility of her male relatives.[160] He does not critique it from a woman-centered point of view of being destructive to a woman's sexual pleasure for example.

Therefore, the objects of Ibrahim's presentation and analysis of gender are men and it is their point of view that remains the most prominent throughout his work. This does not mean, of course, that he accepts the reality that he is presenting in *Sharaf.* According to Najde al-Ali

> His overall outlook on the position of women in Egyptian society is extremely optimistic…in portraying the situation of women; Ibrahim stresses all those factors that account for women's active involvement in public life. He concentrates on women's participation in the labor force, their engagements in bureaucratic processes, and so forth. The world described by Ibrahim seems to be almost dominated by women, and appears to be a depiction of a visionary society rather than Egypt.[161]

Perhaps, therefore, Ibrahim chooses to focus primarily on the impact of gender upon the men and the preservation of their honour because he feels that is the primary reason why women find themselves in a lower position in Egyptian society. Because men are incapable of maintaining a just society safe from the invasion of foreign powers and capital, they have turned to the preservation of the most basic thing that they possess: their honour. In this process, women become objectified and items that men need to possess, protect, and ultimately control.

Bakr, on the other hand, has dedicated the majority of her book to the discussion of the place of women, with a particular aim to change the discussion. As stated by Sha'bān Yūsuf, who I refer to above in Chapter Two, Bakr's work represents a collection of memoirs in defense of the Egyptian woman, who is constantly subjected to injustice at the hands of her society.[162]

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[160] Ibrahim 507
[161] Al-Ali, 96
[162] See Yūsuf, Sha'bān. "al-Adība Salwa Bakr wa 'Arbatha al-Dhahabiyya wa al-Ḥāmila*." Al-Taḥrīr,* 30 December 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.tahrirnews.com/news/index.php/posts/139245

Through her project of giving women a voice, she attempts to change the discussion away from the male-focused discussion of the preservation of honour and look more closely at the suffering of Egyptian women.

Through this method, Bakr attempts to break the stereotypes of women as incapable of understanding their own problems and changing them. The true fault, in Bakr's eyes, lies with the Egyptian political and societal system as a whole and how it treats women, linking politics directly with women's issues. This can be most clearly seen through the stories of Zaynab Mansour[163] and Bahiga.[164] In conclusion, it is clear that both Bakr and Ibrahim delve into the complex worlds of political and gender analysis. In their own unique ways, Ibrahim with his realistic imagery and Bakr's direct challenge to overcome existing stereotypes, they challenge their readers to question the existing system and wonder whether something better can come in its place.

[163] Bakr, Arabic 201-209, English 150-159
[164] Bakr, Arabic 181-196, English 139-150

Conclusion

This thesis presents and compares two important works of Egyptian prison literature: Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* and Sonallah Ibrahim's *Sharaf.* Each was carefully analyzed to not only explore the main styles of each, but also to show the different ways that each author has chosen to approach the complex problems of gender and political criticism in Egyptian society. *Sharaf* speaks of Sonallah Ibrahim's long years of languishing in Egyptian prisons, while Bakr's novel offers insights into the suffering of her fellow women at all levels of the society. In terms of style, Ibrahim employs existing societal tropes and perceptions of male honour with strong and shocking imagery. Bakr, on the other hand, uses the harsh realities of the suffering of Egyptian women to give each of her characters a unique voice in the darkness, showing that she deserves to speak and have her story heard and known by all.

These styles and experiences speak directly to the reasons behind the creation of each of the two works. *Sharaf,* for example, is a wake-up call to Egyptians and an attempt to shock them into realizing the fact that they are being exploited – metaphorically raped – by the Western capitalist system and the local corrupt rulers who facilitate its exploitation of Egyptians. If they do not to listen to the cries of Dr. Ramzī, they will ultimately have no choice but to surrender to the criminals around them and be thrown aside without any honour or hope and lose what civilization they have been able to achieve. *The Golden Chariot*, on the other hand, is Bakr's call to action for all Egyptian women. For too long have they been shackled by tradition and silenced by a society dominated by men. In order for them to change that situation, they must first understand that they can only succeed together. There is always hope, represented by the golden chariot, that if they band together women can bring themselves collectively to a new and better place where they can live more complete lives. Her message, however, does not end with the

liberation of women. Once this critical change occurs, the rest of Egyptian society will then follow suit, as a society that values women properly will see positive change.

As the comparison of these two works I offered in Chapter Four above demonstrates, the elements of control and coercion figures prominently in both *The Golden Chariot* and *Sharaf*, echoing Foucault's interpretation. The prison is seen by both authors to be the ultimate centre of state control, while insanity – a state of opposition to the status quo– is the only way to speak out against oppression and call on other members of society to stand up call for something new.

As a result of these messages, both books have been met with wide popular support. As was stated earlier, Bakr's work has been translated twice into English as well as into Dutch and German, and also inspired the 1994 Egyptian film *Kārt Aḥmar*. Ibrahim's work, on the other hand, while remaining available only in Arabic and without adaptations to other forms of media, shocked the literary community upon its release and remains one of the most powerful expressions of prison literature in 20th Century Egypt.

In the post-2011 Revolution political environment, the treatment of prisoners and the role that the prison plays in Egyptian society has become one of the country's most pressing issues. For example, a number of political prisoners currently being held by the regime at the al-'Aqrab (Scorpion) Prison have gone on hunger strike, decrying what human rights organizations have declared as one of the worst prison experiences in the world.[165] Located in the southern suburbs of Cairo, this prison has often been described as rife with negligence, torture, and even subject to shortages of food and heating during the winter months. The works of both Ibrahim and Bakr helped to keep the discussion about conditions inside Egypt's prisons alive in its darkest years,

[165] "Mass Hunger Strike at Egypt's Infamous Scorpion Prison." *Al-Jazeera.* 5 March 2016. Retrieved from: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/mass-hunger-strike-egypt-infamous-scorpion-prison-160303175227631.html

and can continue to inspire today's activists to push for better treatment in prisons and an end to the systematic use of torture in the Egyptian criminal justice system.

It is perhaps ironic therefore that Sonallah Ibrahim recently announced his support of the current regime of President Sisi, a statement that shocked the Egyptian literary world. In a 2013 press interview, he expressed his endorsement of the police's breakup of Muslim Brotherhood protests in Rab'a Square, arguing that any violence at the hands of the police was merely a response to Brotherhood protestors attacking the police and military. He also stated that the removal of the Brotherhood's favoured leader, President Morsi, was the will of the people, that the Brotherhood led Egypt with financial support from the US and President Obama, and that his initial success in the presidential elections was a plot to bring down the Egyptian state.[166] These statements can be explained largely because of his strong views against foreign intervention. Once he believed that the government was under threat from what he perceived to be an imperial power, the United States, he immediately began to support even the most violent means to curtail this intervention from abroad.

Salwa Bakr spoke in similar terms in a 2012 interview with the pan-Arab newspaper *Ra'ī*. In her view, the 2011 uprising in Egypt lacked what she called "big ideas," like a strong position against colonialism and a program of development or serious economic change.[167] Therefore the leftist powers that appeared after Mubarak was removed had no clear leadership or platform and were easily defeated by the Muslim Brotherhood – which has historically been an enemy of the political left - and was able to ride the wave of discontent with the government and rise to power. In the conclusion of the article, she refused to compare the 2011 uprising with the

[166] Lindsey, Ursula. "A Voice of Dissent Joins the Nationalist Chorus." *Mada Masr.* 6 October 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/voice-dissent-joins-nationalist-chorus
[167] "Salwa Bakr: Faqdān Thawra 25 Yanāyir li al-Afkār al-Kabīra Sahl al-Ittifāq 'Alayha*." Al-Ra'ī.* 21 June 2012. Retrieved from: http://www.alrai.com/article/521923.html

1952 revolution that brought the Free Officers to power, stating that Nasser and his colleagues held strong anti-colonial positions and dreamed of moving Egypt away from the influence of world powers through economic development.

At the core of both of their arguments, in these statements and in their novels, is a discussion about the continued role of colonialism in Egypt. Even though both novels were composed more than 25 years ago, they continue to remain relevant with the continued economic and political domination of the United States and Israel, its perceived agent in the region. This is explicitly expressed by Ibrahim, and forms the core of Sharaf's experience. For Bakr, colonialism is only one part of a much larger system of tradition where rural understandings of life and religious interpretations of gender roles work with colonial oppression to restrict the roles of women and prohibit them from freely and openly in society.

This study has shown that the works of two of Egypt's most important authors successfully analyzed the issues of gender and political criticism through their symbolic use of the prison. Through this mechanism, they were able to successfully harness their craft to construct messages to reach their Egyptian readers and, in the case of Bakr, create an echo for women's liberation far beyond the borders of her homeland. This genre of prison literature continues to remain relevant today because many of the issues raised by both authors remain unresolved today. The dark reminder given to us by Ibrahim shows what can happen when all hope is lost, and calls for Egyptians to do something before it is too late and they have surrendered the only remaining honour that they have left. To meet those challenges, however, Egyptians require the solidarity and cooperation that is presented by Bakr. We must be insane enough to realize the striking imperfections of the world around us and strive for something better.

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