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Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Salwa Bakr's The Golden Chariot

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Postcolonial criticism is yet to approach contemporary Arab literatures seriously. A number of critics have grappled with the general representation of Arabs in Western media, which in turn construct the dominant discourses on Arabs and Arab nations. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, argues that continuing Oriental tendencies from the West towards the Arab nations have led to the constitution of the Arab as the Other of present times (26-28). This Orientalist approach subtly conceals the role of the European colonial enterprise in the history of the Arab nations and their neo-colonizing presence, which solidifies their power and dominance over the latter to this day. It is thus no wonder that the literatures from these nations are not studied under the auspices of Postcolonial literature. The other reason for this ignorance is that much of these literatures are written in Arabic, unlike India or Africa, where English language literary works are written aplenty. Translations further slacken the processes of interpretation and criticism.

Particularly, Arab women writers have gathered the least scholarly attention and few criticisms move beyond appreciating their works for their very existence. The same holds true for well-known writers. For example, the literary techniques, style, significance, social or political commentary in Nawal el Saadawi's works are rarely touched upon. This refusal to go further than appreciative criticism furthers the image of the

'Arab woman' as a poor creature kept under the supposedly grand Islamic patriarchy. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarships and Colonial Discourses*, questions the inherent racism in majority of the feminist works from the West. Two of her major propositions are applicable to the study of Arab women writers. She opines that many Western feminist works stereotype the average Third World Woman as uneducated, abused and oppressed mother-of-many. She also points out the persisting links between the First world and Third world economies, alongside such stereotyping and the resultant consequences of these connections.

These acts of de-historicization and decontextualization are much more evident in the case of Arab women. Arab women writers of fiction such as Nawal el Saadawi, Latifa al Zayyat (Egypt), Sahar Khalifeh (Palestine) and Hoda Barakat (Lebanon), to name a few prominent ones, break the stereotypes surrounding Arab women and portray the women of their respective nations as distinctive personalities, affected by their particular circumstances. They also deal with the corruption and inequalities in their societies and the permeating Western influence in them. Postcolonial feminism argues demands particularity in women's stories and study the historical, social and cultural contexts of the literary work. This paper analyzes the novel The Golden Chariot by Salwa Bakr, as translated by Dinah Manisty, within Mohanty's framework of Postcolonial feminism, in an attempt to bring out the above said concerns in it.

Salwa Bakr is an established Egyptian writer of novels and short stories. Two of her novels and several of her short stories have been translated into English. *The Golden Chariot* is representative of the writer's witty, personal and colloquial style of writing. The novel brings together the stories of many women, who are the inmates of a women's prison in Egypt. The novel is situated in the Egypt of the 1980's where women's crimes were reported to be on the rise and the perpetuators were branded as evil and un-womanly. The book is an ironic reply to these accusations, as the author looks into why and how these crimes actually happened. Fadia Faqir, in her introduction to the book, says that the form of the narrative is similar to that of *Arabian Nights*, where the character Scheherazade brings structural unity through her narration. Aziza, the Alexandrian woman of questionable sanity, serves the role of the narrator bringing in her opinions and judgments on each of the prisoner and their connection to the world outside the prison walls. The omniscient

narrator weaves in the social commentary between Aziza's version of events and the actual reality. Aziza's upper class status also brings to light the differences in consciousness and reality of the lower, middle and upper class women.

Images offer clarity into the ambiguousness of justice and the situations of the characters. The first image is that of the prison. The prison stands for the oppressive lives that the women inside are put in and yet it signifies freedom from the social norms and household activities that these women are used to in daily life. Anastasia Valassapoulos in her book *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* is skeptical of the view that the prison narrative gives a voice to the voiceless and enables the text to express gender issues that are avoided by the law (103). She states that the women's place in the prison prevents the politicization of the very issues they seek to represent. The narrative takes the view that these crimes are unavoidable and they do seem to be. The acts that these women commit to handle situations speak out their rebellion against their dictated roles, yet these acts land them in prison, effectively silencing them. These acts seem to stem from desperation and while it frees the minds of some, it binds many to shame or passive acceptance of justice.

Madness is another image that runs through the text frequently and it provides the fantastic element in the text. Aziza has been imprisoned for murdering her stepfather, who was her lover too. Her blind aristocratic mother was able to remarry, because she was a woman of beauty and fortune. The much-younger husband had a well-paying government job and was a secret philanderer. He seduced the child at young age, telling beauteous phrases, taking her on trips and showering her with gifts. The young Aziza was charmed by his claims of love and kept in tow by his taking a father/lover position, preventing her from an equal-age love or marriage. Her mother never saw the passions between the child and the stepfather and eventually died, leaving the two lovers alone. Aziza saw her world collapse only when the stepfather decided to remarry and she murdered him. She sits in her lonely cell ruminating over her past every night, sipping imaginary wine and talks to the spiders in her company. Her guilt on not telling her mother the truth pursues her and she longs for her former life. She feels that she killed the destroyer that her step-father was and still loves his other self, i.e. of the passionate lover. Her imagination aids her in her madness and is reflected in the creative ways that she wanted to kill him. It also aides her to imagine that a great golden chariot would carry her and others chosen by her to heaven. Ironically, she imagines the takeoff to happen exactly in the moments before her death.

Aida, a girl from the one of the villages, is found in a bad state one day by Umm-Khayr, a peaceful and motherly woman, who came to the prison to save her son from this fate. "…found Aida sitting in front of a basin staring vacantly and making the noise of a bitch wailing. She was gnawing a piece of dark prison soap with a degree of violence that expressed the pain felt by a bitch expelling a litter of seven puppies from her womb"(65). Umm-Khayr pulls the soap of Aida's mouth and makes her tell out her story. Aida was from a poor family and she was married off to a middle-class man by her greedy mother. The husband was dominative and abusive and Aida could not break away from him. Aida's only companion was her brother and his opinion was discarded by their parents while accepting this marriage proposal. One day, when the family arrived at Aida's home, her brother found that she was beaten and a fight broke out between him and Aida's husband. The brother mistakenly murdered the husband in self-defense, when the latter tried to kill him. The cunning mother made Aida take the blame, stating that the husband's family would kill the brother in revenge if the truth came out. Aida came to prison freed from the husband and hoped to hear from her brother. The news of his untimely death pushed her to swallow the soap and scream. Although Aida's helplessness is understandable, the powerlessness of both the sister and the brother stands out. The dominative mother, educated husband and laws of justice and marriage wield power and the siblings are rendered incapacitated. The brother's brave step does not bring him happiness.

The educational policies of the Egyptian government and the unfathomable divide between the rich and the poor is much commented upon through the character's situations and choices. Azima, named as the giant of the prison owing to her extraordinary height, failed to her primary examinations like many of her fellow classmates. Though free education was provided for by the Egyptian leader Abdal Nasser, the quality of it was abysmally low. Azima used her imagination and flair for language to become a professional mourner and later became a singer of religious verses on the radio. Inspite of her lack of education and extraordinary height that made her a non-prospect for marriage, she was able to attain prosperity. Another inmate was Bahiga Abdel Haqq, a poor and hardworking doctor who was imprisoned for administering the wrong dose of anesthetic that lead to the death of a child. The dry humor of the writer is exemplified in a passage, where it is said that the death of infants was a common occurrence and that the Egyptians could keep reproducing to stay

alive as a people. Bahiga, the daughter of a watchman, worked hard to get to medical college but she had to compete with the children of wealthy parents there. Her fragile self-identity is shattered by a lover who deserts her for a rich girl. The 1980's was the time when many of the men from all Arab states looked towards the oil states for sources of income. This gave rise to a predominantly rich class of people, who could afford the best brands and give their children a wealthy lifestyle. Students like Bahiga could not attain what is given as the three c's of the medical profession: a car, a clinic and a country house.

> The real cause of Bahiga's schizophrenia was the desire to find her place in the small pyramid she carried inside her, just like everyone else, which acts as the gauge by which the individual defines his identity, seeking the esteem and respect of all those above him in the pyramid and scorning all those beneath him (113).

The open-door economic policy of the early Nasser era also allowed for luxurious hospitals to come up and private clinics mushroomed all over Egypt, while the government hospitals saw no improvement and the poor were left to die on the doorstep of these huge hospitals. Another jibe at the economic policy of the state comes from the story of Umm-Ragab and Jamalat, the pickpockets. Aziza sees the former's head as a rotten melon with decayed skin and a putrid smell. The uneducated Umm-Ragab was pushed to thieving because her husband divorced her with a little one to feed. It is a typical story of a victim, but she is not a woman of less spirit. She once kicked out a beggar with whom she hoped to give birth to a son, when he took in another child. She serves as a spy at the prison by flattering the wardens, scares away most people and had married her daughter off with her earnings. Only when she hears of her daughter's death in a gas explosion and her newly-orphaned grand-children she gets a heart attack. Jamalat came from a family of pickpockets, and yet ironically she was imprisoned for accidentally murdering a lusty suitor of her sister. The existence of endless pickpocket gangs, procurers for prostitution and open drug trade point to the failure of the government's economic policies. Foreign players were freely allowed in trade and they invested in factories for import and export. These factories manufactured products for Egyptian consumption and gave much profit for the capitalists and temporary jobs for the poor, but drained the country's economy. These factories later had to shut down when Nasser nationalized them. The consumerist economy created by these factories

drove poor and middle-class families to buy more than what they needed, an example for which is Safiyya, who sold drugs inorder meet the increasing demands of her family.

The discovery of the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun in 1922 by British archeologist Howard Carter opened a new chapter in Egypt's history. Egyptian history was being rewritten by the Britishers and they were discovered to have been an ancient civilization, as more tombs of ancient royal personas were unearthed. In *The Golden Chariot*, the writer portrays a dramatic increase in the class of middlemen, who catered to the rising tourism industry, assumedly fuelled by the interest in the Orient's ancient history and developing modes of transport. With a lack of job opportunities inside the country, a number of men took to opening tourist agencies, small businesses and other such related jobs. One such man in the story, who became middle-aged by the time he was rich, attempted to court Shafiqa's sister. Shafiqa is another mad inmate of the prison. Such a man was held as eligible marriageable material by the surrounding middle-class families as young men of the time were either jobless, did menial jobs, dead in the war or gone to the oil states. This middle-aged man's pride was offended by the widow's rejection of him over another lover, and he reported it to the conservative father. The father and brother killed the young woman to salvage their pride, as it was a crime to consort with a man of another religion. This had propelled the kind-hearted Shafiqa to madness, begging and imprisonment for the same.

To conclude, *The Golden Chariot* is a string of stories that tells of the lives of women of all classes of the late 20th century Egypt, with humor, pathos, pun and irony. While many of the characters are exploited by men and they end up living miserable lives, the rich young woman is somewhat better than her poorer counterpart, though she would face problems of her own. The political prisoner who hailed from a wealthy family gets out of prison sooner and her fate is contrasted with that of the rest. The young men of middle-class and poor families fare no better. They scrape through life to somehow find a means of living. Various references to the lack of young marriageable men points to the lack of opportunities at the time for educated young men; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its attraction for young men with no opportunities is not spoken of in this book; other Egyptian writers such as Alaa al Aswani and Naguib Mahfouz have greatly expanded on the subject. Crimes compound in a society that provides almost no jobs and women are the worst

affected in such a state. The poor such as Umm-Ragab, Jamalat and Huda, the prostitute, are left to fend for themselves without the support of men. Thus, the novel expounds the lives of Egyptian women in the 1980's, especially those from the poor and the middle-class, as affected by traditions, marriage practices, the failing economy, corruption, failed governmental policies and Western capitalist interventions. The stereotype of the average Third World Woman or the veiled Arab woman has no place in the novel as it refuses it categorically; each woman is seen as a product of her circumstances and each one rebels against them in her own way. These feminist, social and Postcolonial concerns of the writer are reflective of Arab women writers in general, who handle oppression in both private and public spaces in equal measure. Postcolonial feminist criticism opens up new avenues to study these writers and fill the knowledge gap that exists in contemporary criticism on Arab literature.

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