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## Narrating Egyptian Women's Prison Experiences - El Saadawi and Bakr

Nour Elwi El Captan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The research attempts to discover what Egyptian women prisoners' experience was like in the 1980s and 90s through studying two major texts which fall under the genre of prison literature: *Twelve Women in a Cell* by Nawal El Saadawi and *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr. Through a thorough reading and analysis of the works, similar tropes and different attitudes can be found in the texts. Both works discussed class, comradeship, and the patriarchy but differences exist when it comes to their different portrayals of prison.

**Keywords:** Egyptian women's prison experiences; prison literature; class, camaraderie; patriarchy; sisterhood; late twentieth century Egypt; prison memoirs; autobiographical works; oppression; feminist writing; Egyptian literary canon; hierarchy of crime

Prison literature as a literary genre refers to texts which take place in and focus on the prison experience. In these texts, the authors write about "what they knew and had experienced (in prison)" (Freeman, p. 133). In a piece titled "The Rise of Prison Literature", author Thomas Freeman discusses how in England, the genre experienced a surge in popularity due to "an increase in the number of prisoners, many of them literate elites imprisoned for politics" (Freeman, p. 133). While Freeman mainly addresses the genre's popularity in England, the notion that the genre benefits from the imprisonment of intellectual political prisoners could apply to anywhere in the world, and specifically to Egypt. In 1981, a month before his assassination, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat ordered the arrest of thousands of people – many of whom were political figures (Stork). This occurrence led to the publication of several works which could fall under the genre of 'prison literature'.

Many of these texts explored women's prison experience specifically. Feminist critics and writers have asserted that women's writing differs from men's due to how "it is sincere; it keeps closely to what women feel. It is not bitter. It does not insist upon its femininity. But at the same time, a woman's book is not written as a man would write it" (Woolf, p. 76). In order to understand that specific period in Egyptian history and to understand what women activist's experiences were like, one must read and analyze the creative works which were produced by women at that time. Among those works are the two supposedly fictional pieces, *Twelve Women in a Cell* by Nawal El Saadawi published in 1999 and *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr published in 1995. This essay will attempt to develop an understanding of what Egyptian women's experiences were like in the late twentieth century through analyzing, comparing, and contrasting the two aforementioned texts as well as through briefly reviewing other works which also make mention of the prison experience in late twentieth century Egypt. This will be done by focusing on the common themes of camaraderie, patriarchy, and class.

### Egyptian Women's Prison Literature

Some research has been done on women's prison literature in Egypt. Among the most detailed works is Marilyn Booth's article, "Women's Prison Memoirs in Egypt and Elsewhere:

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Prison, Gender, Praxis” published in 1987. The text looks at several autobiographical works written by Egyptian women such as Nawal El Saadawi, Safinaz Kazim, and Farida al Naqqash about their experiences in prison. Comparisons are made between the texts with much attention given to El Saadawi’s narrating style and the content of her work (Booth, p. 35 - 41). Also on El Saadawi is a 2010 article by Jane Hiddleston titled “Imprisonment, Freedom, and Literary Opacity in the Work of Nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar”. The text discusses Nawal El Saadawi’s prison experience and specifically, how she used writing as a way of defying the patriarchal system which oppressed her and led to her imprisonment (Hiddleston, p. 171 - 187).

As for Bakr, some research exists on her work as well. Magda M. Al Nowaihi’s 1999 article “Reenvisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr’s ‘The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven’” provides a thorough analysis of *The Golden Chariot*. Al Nowaihi discusses how the text fits into the Egyptian literary canon. She looks at the novel from a class and gender perspective to determine the stances which Bakr takes on these issues (Al Nowaihi, p. 8 - 24). Nadine Sinno’s article “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’” also discusses *The Golden Chariot*. Sinno’s research was published in 2011 and it looks at the novel from a psychological perspective and analyzes the protagonist, Aziza’s mental health and sanity (Sinno).

So, there is research which analyzes prison literature in Egypt and the specific texts which will be analyzed in this essay. However, there is yet to be research done comparing *Twelve Women in a Cell* and *The Golden Chariot*. The two texts are considered fictional even though both authors were imprisoned in their lifetimes. Both works contain large casts of women characters and so, can be considered authentic representations of their different experiences in Egyptian prisons. The fact that despite differences in content, they discuss similar themes of camaraderie, patriarchy, and class also suggests that women’s prison experiences are more alike than different.

### **Camaraderie and Sisterhood in Saadawi’s *Twelve Women in a Cell* and Bakr’s *The Golden Chariot***

Among the most prominent themes which are present in the texts is the idea that in prison, comradery exists between the inmates. In her play, *Twelve Women in a Cell*, Nawal El Saadawi represents this theme. She prefaces the text by writing about her own experience in prison and how she and the other inmates “had become ... (friends)” and were able to reach “an understanding of each other” (El Saadawi, p. 261). Scenes in the play are evidence of this comradery. For example, when Alia first arrives in prison and is telling her story about her sudden arrest, the audience sees Azza tear her towel in half so that Alia could have a piece. Her generosity towards a stranger who does not share her same life experiences or political ideologies is evident when she says, “I’ve two of these with me. You have one.” (El Saadawi, p. 288). This theme of comradery also makes itself evident in the scene in which Alia stands up for Salma when the other prisoners insist that she is a spy. She acts as a voice of reason, using logic to support her fellow prisoner by telling Samira that she “has no right to accuse Salma of being a spy” (El Saadawi, p. 304). When the prisoners are released at the end of the play, they all celebrate together by chanting that they are “free ... free!” (El Saadawi, p. 308). El Saadawi also published her memoirs of her time in prison in a book titled *Memoirs From the Women’s Prison*. In the book’s final lines, she writes about what her interactions with her old cellmates were like after they had all left prison. She writes, “we embrace and remember the days of prison – as if there is something about prison which one misses, or as if the comradeship of prison cannot be forgotten and cannot die” (Saadawi, p. 197). In a multitude of her works, El Saadawi portrays comradery between prisoners.

Similar notions of sisterhood between the prisoners is present in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*. Throughout the novel, readers get to see how the protagonist, Aziza sympathizes with the other prisoners and is able to understand the reasons behind their imprisonment. Aziza's main objective in the book is to take a golden chariot to heaven with the inmates whom she views as being the most deserving of that honor. The fact that she wishes to take the other prisoners with her to a better place is also proof of a special bond between the women. Bakr also explicitly writes about this idea when writing about Aziza and Jamal's friendship, she states that prison is a place in which "friendship between one prisoner and another was so vital" (Bakr, p. 134) and that "the ordeal of isolation and imprisonment behind bars created a bond between them" (Bakr, p. 134). Both texts show how when women are alone together for extended periods of time and under taxing circumstances, the feeling that prevails between them is sisterhood. With the brutal prison system as a common oppressor, they unite as a way of fighting it.

Both texts also show how this comradeship does not exist solely between the prisoners, but also the female warden often stands in solidarity with the convicts. In *Twelve Women in a Cell*, the warden explicitly tells the prisoners that she is "on (their) side, but in front of the (prison authorities she) can't be" (El Saadawi, p. 292). The warden, Mahrousa, in *The Golden Chariot* also appears to express allegiance to the prisoners. In regards to the prisoners, she is described as being "sympathetic to their plight...she was honest with the prisoners and didn't oppress or exploit them" (Bakr, p. 156). In her article, Marilyn Booth discusses a likely reason as to why the warden is repeatedly represented as being on the women prisoners' side. She theorizes that the reason the warden sides with the prisoners is because they are all women under a system led by men. The wardens "follow the male authority structure of the prison, yet they are sympathetic to the women prisoners and cognizant of the particular problems women face inside and outside of prison." (Booth, p. 39). Booth also uses excerpts from political activist Farida al-Naqqash's own recollections of her time in prison in the eighties and she paraphrases the author as having said that the warden's "own situation, their own appearance, hardly differs from that of their charges" (Booth, p. 39). This is due to how essentially, despite differences in their status and living situations, all women are the same when it comes to living under a system which is run by men and which oppresses women. So, Nawal El Saadawi's *Twelve Women in a Cell* and Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* are similar due to how both texts discuss sisterhood between all of the women in prison.

### **Prison Literature and the Critique of Patriarchy**

The texts are also similar due to how they both critique patriarchy. A large number of the women in El Saadawi's text are in prison due to the actions of the men in their lives. Whether it is the prostitutes who are in prison due to the men who made use of their bodies or women like Zeinab who killed her husband after she saw him raping their daughter, the women committed crimes due to the oppression imposed upon them from the men in their lives. "The portrait of a man" (El Saadawi, p. 262), which is hanging in the backdrop of all the play's scenes, is also an example of how El Saadawi appears to be making a statement about how the patriarchy is the reason why women are imprisoned. While the man in the portrait is never specified, the context of when the play was written and how he gets "shot" at the end could lead readers to assume that it is Anwar Sadat. He is the man behind the political prisoners' arrest. It is only when he is supposedly killed that "lights (go) out on the portrait" (El Saadawi, p. 308) and the women are free. El Saadawi uses this motif of the larger-than-life portrait as a way of physicalizing the patriarchy as an imposing, gargantuan institution that is imposing both within the women's homes and in the country as a whole. The fact that the play does not end

with the portrait's removal but rather with its replacement with a new picture can be her way of making a statement about the patriarchy's power over women's lives.

El Saadawi's history of political activism is also what makes it safe to assume that she is likely protesting against oppression through the use of the motif of the portrait. For example, this can be seen in "Imprisonment, freedom, and literary opacity in the work of Nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar", Jane Hiddleston discusses El Saadawi's insistence upon protest in the face of oppression. Her writing is listed as one of the main ways with which she protests against injustice (Hiddleston, p. 175).

Salwa Bakr also discusses how the patriarchy oppresses women to such an extent that they end up having to resort to crime. Almost all of the prisoners chosen to ride the golden chariot are in prison because of the men in their lives. For example, there is Jamal at who killed her sister's boyfriend in a moment of rage due to the harm he was causing her family and there is also Hinna who killed her abusive husband. Aziza is also in prison because of the harms inflicted upon her by her stepfather who began raping her at an early age. The mental anguish of seeing him with another woman led to her murdering him and thus, she was imprisoned. While Bakr includes many examples of the women who were imprisoned because of the men in their lives, she does not make an explicit statement regarding the patriarchy. When Aziza hears Jamal at's story, she laments "an undefined and supreme force which she considered responsible for all that had happened and would happen in the future to this decent, lovely girl with her pure heart and childlike innocence" (Bakr, p. 142 – 143). It is unclear whether Aziza views this force as being the patriarchy or something else but she feebly protests against it anyway. Magda M. Al Nowaihi writes in detail about the idea that Bakr is able to get readers to sympathize with the prisoners in the novel. She writes that the readers "ultimately sympathize with these women, and perceive their violence as a reaction to the injustice they have suffered" (Al Nowaihi, p. 10). Inciting sympathy for women who have been oppressed by the patriarchy is one of the main ways with which Bakr gets the reader to begin opposing the patriarchy. So, the texts both include large casts of women characters who are imprisoned because of the toxic men in their lives. El Saadawi makes explicit comments about the patriarchy while Bakr does not comment on the fact that most of the women who Aziza takes on her chariot are imprisoned because of men. Rather, her writing style is the main way with which she expresses her dissatisfaction with the patriarchy.

### **Representations of Class Politics in Prison**

Both works comment on how the class structure which discriminates against the lower class outside of prison also exists within its confines. *Twelve Women in a Cell* shows how there appears to be a hierarchy of crime. Some crimes are respected while others are frowned upon. An excerpt from the play reveals the women discussing prostitution in a negative light, saying that it is "impossible" (El Saadawi, p. 266) that a prostitute be considered clean or pure. It is also stated in the play by one of the other prisoners that "anything's better than a whore" (El Saadawi, p. 276). For the most part, the political prisoners are the ones who are the most respected. The warden refers to the political prisoners' cell as being "the best cell in the prison" (El Saadawi, p. 270) and they are also regarded as being "educated" (El Saadawi, p. 270). This idea that the political prisoners are superior to the rest of the people stems from the fact that they tended to be from a rich background and thus, well educated. The warden calls them "ladies, not peasants" (El Saadawi, p. 396), further indicating the idea that the class structure which dictates who is respected outside of prison is still very much existent within its walls too. This is an indication of how ingrained people's assumptions of class are as they are held onto despite hardship and in different environments. Moreover, the fact that the political prisoners were considered upper class and so, were treated differently is important when

considering the reliability of El Saadawi's narration which paints prison as a positive experience.

Similar themes are present in *The Golden Chariot*, yet it is not as explicitly political as *Twelve Women in a Cell*. Political prisoners do not make up a large portion of the cast of characters. In fact, only one political prisoner is mentioned in the novel and her appearance is brief. Aziza observes this prisoner and like in El Saadawi's text, she also makes the comment that the political prisoner is "educated and respectable...(she) lived in more pleasant circumstances than most" (Bakr, p. 130). The difference in class between the political prisoner and the rest of the women is commented upon by Bakr in a way which is different to El Saadawi's own commentary. As Aziza observes the political prisoner, she comes to the realization that "these politically-minded people lived in another world and knew absolutely nothing about the poor they were always talking about" (Bakr, p. 130). This criticism of political prisoners' distance from the lower class is not mentioned at all by Saadawi whose characters all simply sing praises for them. This could be due to how El Saadawi's text's main focus is political oppression and so, it would weaken her argument if she criticizes the political prisoner's position in the class system. So, both *Twelve Women in a Cell* and *The Golden Chariot* make mention of the way class structure exists within prison. Like in the outside world, women of the higher class are regarded as being more respectable than those who come from a poorer background. However, Bakr criticizes the logic of this way of thinking in her novel while El Saadawi makes no such comments.

### **Emotions Towards the Prison Experience**

The texts differ when it comes to how they paint prison. El Saadawi seems to be romanticizing prison. This becomes especially apparent when Alia first enters prison and she talks about how she left her infant son in her neighbor's care. She states that she "left (her) son to come (to prison)...(she'd) rather go to prison – that's worth passing on" (El Saadawi, p. 302). There appears to be an idea that prison to her is a wondrous adventure about which she will eventually teach her son. This overly optimistic view of prison does not seem true to what the average woman inmate experiences. Even other characters in the play are not of that mindset with most of them experiencing a great deal of shame for having been imprisoned. For example, the character of Bassima states that her uncle "couldn't bear" (El Saadawi, p. 278) the fact that she is in prison, directly contradicting the view that prison is an honorable ordeal which the family will be proud of. It seems as though wealthy political activists are those who are most likely to have the mindset of looking at prison as being an agreeable experience. A similar notion was expressed in Tahani Rached's 1997 documentary film *Four Women of Egypt*. When recounting her time in prison in 1981, Amina Rachid who came from an upper-class, aristocratic family said that prison was something she had "wanted to try" (Rached), providing further evidence that political prisoners hold a privileged, romanticized view of prison which the average Egyptian woman inmate cannot afford to have.

Salwa Bakr does not discuss such a viewpoint about prison in *The Golden Chariot*. Instead, she spends pages mapping out the struggles that the prisoners go through and the way their life was severely affected by their imprisonment. The fact that the novel's entire premise rests on the protagonist's fantastical plan to get a golden chariot out of prison is evidence of how tough living conditions are for the average prisoner as the chariot represents an almost mythical escape that the prisoners could only dream of getting.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, prison literature is a genre which dictates that the author writes fictional or non-fictional accounts of a character's time in prison. Prison literature in Egypt is different

from prison literature elsewhere in the world due to the country's unique political atmosphere and history. Women's writing is different from men's writing due to how "it is sincere; it keeps closely to what women feel. It is not bitter. It does not insist upon its femininity" (Woolf, p. 76). So, Egyptian women's prison literature is an important genre when it comes to studying issues such as freedom of expression and conditions in Egyptian women's prisons in the 1980s and 90s.

Through analyzing two major works of the genre, *Twelve Women in a Cell* by Nawal El Saadawi and *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr, one could garner an understanding about some common tropes. The texts were similar due to how they both portrayed sisterhood between women inmates, class structure, and women's struggles against the patriarchy. However, they differed in their tones regarding prison and the extent to which they were explicit about their political and societal views with El Saadawi painting prison as a positive experience and Bakr doing the opposite. All in all, the texts are proof of the way women's writing differs from men's and it is interesting to note how such a niche genre could still have similar tropes which defined the works and so, define the prison experience for women.

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