IPRPD
International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Science
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 03; Issue no 02: February, 2022

Social Justice and Greimas's Semiotic Square: Women in Prison in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*

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Abstract

The genre of women in prison literature sheds light on a rich storehouse of an unexplored segment of society. As such, it needs to receive more attention from scholars and educators to promote its readability to a wider audience. The purpose of this often-neglected genre is to show how women prisoners are perceived by a wide majority of the supposedly good citizens as constituting a sub-human level that does not deserve to be heard. On top of that, the stories of women prisoners are often exceptionally rich in information about the various elements of their human experience, the societies they were shaped by, their value systems and the highly asymmetrical systems of domination and subordination. and can offer a valuable understanding of ways to reform such societies. A lot of the attention is given to exemplary women who are either active feminists or silent subjugated objects, and between those two ends of the spectrum, a wide range of stories are lost and voices are turned silent. More importantly, looking at women's stories in prison and their complex subjectivities becomes more illuminating when those stories are compared and contrasted in different societies. In order to make that comparison, Greimas's semiotic square comprises an effective tool in creating a visual structure to the contraries and contradictions manifested in the text. For the analysis, I chose to focus on The Golden Chariot by the Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr's and the American best seller which became a Netflix series Orange is the New Black written by Piper Kerman. The two texts challenge the abstract image of a 'typical female inmate.' The two texts communicate who those women are, their subjectivity and their sense of self, and their own understanding of and feelings about that time in their lives. The two texts share the common purpose of reintroducing the desire and dream for a communal mode of existence that is less oppressive and manipulative to all its members. The two texts also explore the layers beyond the self to depict how women re-structure power, race, and kin relations in prison, while examining the intricate connection between the personal and the social scene. I argue that the social, economic, and individual squares are the same in both societies, "The conjunctions of those relations form a fundamental network that governs human social behavior and practice." (Wang 341-342). The analysis investigates the intersectionality of women suffering, how those stories are interrelated as well as how certain cultures and individuals perceive relations between entities in the most profound and subtle sense that reveals the ugliness of moral hypocrisy.

Keywords: Feminist, Prison Writers, Social Class, Difference, Literature

Introduction

Women in Prison Literature

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the stories of incarcerated women whose lives were forever changed by a moment when they decided to revolt against prescribed societal principles. A question that I address in this paper that is originally posed by Bosworth is "Is femininity a source of oppression, or can it also enable resistance? In short, are the women able to transform or challenge power relations from their 'embodied' positions, as feminist theorists suggest?" (Bosworth). In this article, I use the semiotic tool to compare/contrast how the two texts depict the experience of women incarceration in two different parts of the world and in different time periods. The two texts investigated in this article join forces in highlighting the significantly important aspect of 'difference' in feminist thought. Salwa Bakr focuses on third world women from lower social classes. And while Piper, the main character in *Orange is the New Black* is a white woman from an upper-middle class family, her role is more of an insider's view of the less privileged women of different racial and social backgrounds. As McNay notes, "The

category of difference—or the differences within sexual difference—has, for a while, been an important topic of debate within feminism as a result of criticisms from black and Third World feminist theory, which assumes that the struggle against gender oppression is primary regardless of the economic and political conditions under which many women live. Consequently, Western feminists have been trying to break down some of the universalizing categories they have previously employed and are attempting to develop tools capable of relating gender issues to the equally fundamental categories of race and class." (McNay 6). This paper thus focuses on gender issues against the backdrop of social dynamics.

On reviewing the literature of incarceration, it becomes obvious that a distinction is made between men and women in prison. For example, according to Carlen (1990), "One of the first concerns of the new wave of writers on women and crime was to put "women" on the criminological agenda, to demonstrate that most previous explanations of crime had in fact been explanations of male crime, and to argue that when women creak the law they do so in circumstances that are often very different from those in which men become lawbreakers (see, for example, McRobbie and Garber, 1976). A constant theme in these analyses has been that women's crimes are preeminently the crimes of the powerless (see Box, 1983; Messerschmidt, 1986; and Carlen, 1988)." (Carlen 107). They are left with a forever scar, not only on the inside but on the outside as an everlasting tarnished reputation and relationships that lack trust in those women's integrity and their capacity to lead righteous and fulfilling lives. In the two texts under discussion, the two writers fight against the erosion of their identities and communicate women's feelings, their perception of the flawed notions of social propriety and their connection to their kins and to the society to which they belong. The two texts show how the postmodern rejection of metanarratives is essential for contemporary feminism. Scheffler notes that "While works by male prisoners often deal romantically or stoically with transcendence and heroism, women's works are strikingly concrete. Their purpose is communication" (Scheffler 58). The two texts reveal the vulnerabilities of women who share their stories with their inmates, stories that are sometimes filled with anger for the unfair treatment they received, as in the case of Aziza in *The Golden Chariot*, or feelings of regret for reckless teenager behavior as in the case of Piper in *Orange is the New Black*. Elissa Gelfard notes that women prison writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were concerned with two main goals and those were:

> "asserting their normal femininity and denying that they were "sick" or "unnatural monsters," as well as to "emphasize their individuality and proclaim that they do not fit the stereotype" (Scheffler 58). Despite the verdicts those women received and the judgements they get for their incarceration, they seek to assert their identities and fight for showing their human nature of the good and the bad, narrating their experiences in the hopes that the society would gain a better understanding of the complexities of their situations.

While the surface level in both texts is the sum of women stories that tragically ended with incarceration, the deep level of the two texts is similar in the purpose of taking a free of judgement approach to creating a perception of the lives of those 'criminals,' while exposing the socio-economic injustices in both societies as well as to highlight the gap between the euphoric dreams and the dysphoric reality. "The prison is used in this text to denote both a specific site or institution, and a representation of the state's power to punish. The prison is considered both as a material structure and as a symbolic institution" (Bosworth). The prison is a symbol of the government's power in enforcing its prescribed rules regardless of how ruthless or unjust those rules might be, a manifestation of gender inequalities, particularly when the victim is the one who eventually is incarcerated, while the aggressor is perceived as the victim. Those women commit crimes due to a severe sense of injustice. In *The Golden Chariot*, "The frame-story is that of 'Aziza, the upper-class woman who becomes mentally unstable and murders her stepfather who had seduced her into an incestuous relationship and then abandoned her. Within 'Aziza's story there are those of her fellow riders in the golden chariot, the women to be raised gloriously to heaven in recognition of their suffering at the hands of men and society" (El-Enany 388-389). Those women grieve the loss of the utopian sense of justice they had envisioned for this world, and as such create an alternative of their own, yet the trauma led that creation to be violent and against the law that was supposedly set to protect their rights as well as the rights of others. Both texts call for a society that is both civil and ethical. Al-Nowaihi highlights the impact of the economic and political aspects on the lives of people living in the Sadat era, noting that "these economic policies promote an atmosphere of rampant consumerism and lack of meaningful productivity which makes this the era of the middleman, or so-called businessman. The possession of nonessential consumer goods becomes a sign not only of power, but also of "modernity" and "civilization", and since the unfair education system and hiring practices dash any hopes of upward mobility for most people, and simply allow an elite minority to maintain its position in society, then any aspirations to become a "modern civilized" individual are doomed to failure" (Al-Nowaihi 16).

For the purposes of the comparison between the Middle East and the West, I choose to focus on *Orange is the New Black*, which depicts the stories of incarcerated women in America. With the factor of incarcerated women in common in the two texts, the question becomes whether that makes it merely a comparison between Egypt and

the United States. To avoid an oversimplification of the answer, it is important to consider how the contrast/comparison involves societal, cultural, economic similarities/differences, injustices, and most importantly, how all of those aspects combine forces to shape a woman's choices or lack thereof in life. The analysis using Greimas's semiotic squares shows that despite the differences in time, societies, culture, incarceration system, the two texts's main concern is the same. Those differences amounted only to the level of complementary details, whereas the portrait that the reader finds oneself looking at is essentially the same in the two texts. The portrait of injustice in the two texts is painted of shades of prescribed and forbidden aspirations, submission and resistance rules, privileged and prejudiced positions, adorned with the broken lines of gender inequalities and question marks about who is the victim and who is the villain.

Semiotics and Greimas's Square

Semiotics as an aspect of language study deals with a signaling system. According to John Duvall (1982), Semiotics is "the study of sign systems; like Freudianism and Marxism, it analyzes social and cultural phenomena by isolating units of signification and examining their structural interrelationship" (Duvall 192). On the level of narratives, semiotics seeks to unravel the "semantic and ideological content of texts" (Duvall 192). Greimas introduced the diagram of the semiotic square in 1966 essay *"Les Jeux des contraintes semiotiques,"* reprinted in English in Yale French Studies two years later as *"The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints"* (Greimas and Rastier 86). The fundamental (and narrative) semantics is characterized by a certain type of structure or relational network: the semiotic square. It involves three types of relations: the relations of contrariety (A/B) and of sub-contrariety (non-B/non-A); the relations of contradiction (A/non-A; B/non-B); the relations of implications (on the deixes, i.e., the vertical axes, non-B-A; non-A-B). Hendricks (1989) explains that Greimas (1966:19) views single terms as meaning lacking and that meaning arises only through differences. Thus 'masculine' is a meaningful unit because of its differentiation from 'feminine' (Hendricks 108).

Greimas's square is a fascinating tool in its semiotic capacity to reveal the depths of ideas in the text by looking at semantic units and their contraries and contradictions, thus seeing the interplay of those meanings in the lives depicted in the text. In other words, the square reduces the narrative to its structural bones. Greimas's square reveals the underlying structure of the text, the foundation upon which it stands. The square acts like an icon that when you click on, you see the picture zoomed in, clearer, with intricate detail, and in some cases, more shocking. Perron (1989) rightly notes that "The strength of the theory lies in the fact that it distinguishes between two levels of representation and analysis: a manifest level and an immanent level of narrative that forms a common structural source where narrativity is situated prior to its manifestation" (Perron 530). As such, the semiotic square as a tool of analysis helps the reader identify the interplay of the wo levels, while uncovering hidden meanings.

The visual of Greimas's square represent the complex interrelations between meanings, as played out in the lives of women depicted in the text. In fact, A woman's life can go through a cycle of changes that places her at different corners of the square over the span of her lifetime. The squares with four words represent a lens through which we look at the women's lives and contemplate a closer shot of what defines and governs the development of their story. More interestingly, that close reflection allows for a more concrete comparison among characters in the text as well as across other texts. As Corso (2014) notes, "The semiotic square has instigated an expansive range of critical responses that use the device to consider paradigmatic analyses of characters (actants), narrative and thematic structures, discursive boundaries, and a variety of objects that depend on oppositional relationships" (Corso 70).

As Greimas explains in his article "Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Art," an object can only be understood through its decomposition into smaller units and then recomposing those units to grasp the bigger picture. Greimas et al add that "Whereas the reading of a written text is linear and unidimensional (from left to right or vice versa) and allows us to interpret spatialized speech as smooth or flat syntagmatic, the painted or drawn surface offers no obvious artifice which might reveal the semiotic process that is supposedly inscribed upon it. The frame appears to be the only sure point of departure" (Greimas , Collins and Perron 638). According to Paul Perron (1989), semiotics gives readers a deeper insight to literary texts particularly by examining the interplay between the figurative and the deep structure of narrativity. (Perron 528)

The Golden Chariot

The 1970s writers have achieved what Ferial Ghazoul, the noted Iraqi scholar, critic, and translator, refers to as 'Magical Dualism' in reference to "the successful fusion of politically or socially committed literature with artistically innovative literary techniques." (Seymour-Jorn xvii). The 1970s marked the economic deterioration experienced by Egyptians as a result of Nasser's policies and the corruption of his entourage, with the rapid dismantling of the ideals advocated for by the 1952 revolution. Further, the open-door policy enacted by Sadat in the early 70s enforced a significant economic pressure on the middle and working classes, which allowed the rich to become exceptionally richer and the poor were left to squirm in a mire of poverty. As such, the gap between

social classes significantly widened in Egypt, dragging the society back to the severe injustices of feudalism in the pre-1952 era. The rich and the powerful had an iron grip on the country's resources, and the poor received minimal pay from government jobs and suffered the deterioration of public services in all sects of life that range from education, to health and housing, to transportation systems. As Seymour-Jorn notes, the 1970s writers were unique as:

> "Their stories and novels respond to the multiple ramifications of the troubled economy along with a host of other issues, the increasing influence of Islamic conservatism, the challenge to women's authority posed by work outside the home, the struggle of working-class people to find appropriate housing, and the economic and public policy-driven dislocation of people from one part of the city or country to another" (Seymour-Jorn xix).

Salwa Bakr (1949) is a novelist and playwright who took upon her shoulders the responsibility of critiquing the moral fabric of the Egyptian society. As Rasheed El-Enany (2006) notes: "The politics of the two eras are never far from the surface in her work, and are inextricably interwoven with her main concern—the politics of gender and the status of women in society" (El-Enany 376). Bakr's works in English translation include *My Grandmother's Cactus: Stories by Egyptian Women* (1991), translated by Marilyn Book; *Such a Beautiful Voice* (1992), translated by Hoda El Sadda; and *The Golden Chariot* (1995) translated by Dina Manisty. El-Enany notes that "as the author's first novel after several collections of short stories, *The Golden Chariot*, appears to be a compromise between two genres, those of the short story and the novel; a gradual transition for a writer, as it were, from the first to the second. This is so because in many ways the novel can be seen as a collection of thirteen short stories welded together by means of a frame story and minor interactions among the protagonists of each story" (El-Enany 387-388). This allows the reader an introspection into more than just the story of the protagonist.

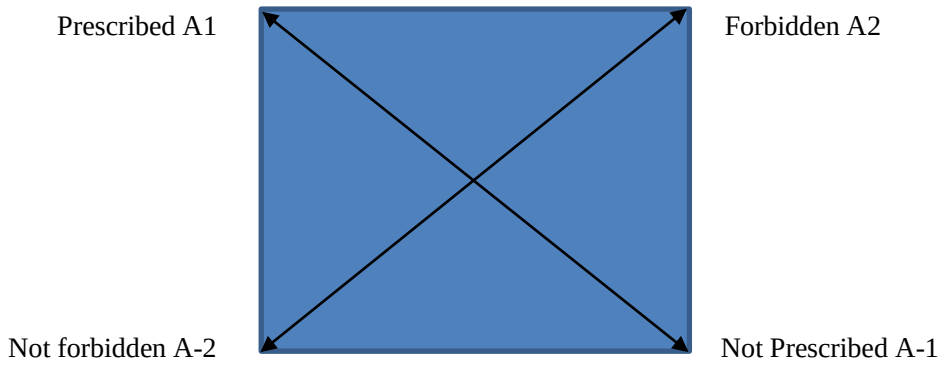
The Golden Chariot offers a bold and blatantly honest depiction of women's lives and stories of oppression enacted by the patriarchal values that shape and govern their lives as well as by the rapid deterioration of the political and economic conditions in the 70s. The social and political aspects of the society are an inextricable aspect of the stories depicted for as John (2011) notes, "a standpoint is an understanding of one's individual location in the social order as part of and shaped by that order's social and political contexts" (John 96). While the stories of the incarcerated women are not categorized under 'heroic,' the stories raise questions in regards to the complexities of the villain/victim roles amidst significant changes in the moral system of society. El-Enany rightly explains that "it may well be that the seeds of degeneration in the quality of life that was to happen in the Sadat era and to continue ever since had already been sown in the late 1950s and 1960s, but that their bitter fruit was to be reaped only later, encouraged by a complete shift of political and social ideology under Sadat" (El-Enany 378). In fact, it would be an oversimplification of such life stories to lay the blame on the socio-economic circumstances and the patriarchal values engraved in men and women. The multi-dimensional depiction of the characters in *The Golden Chariot*, the depth of the situations narrated, and the honesty with which the characters speak their minds raise the reader's curiosity to reach the deep layers of meanings depicted and find answers to the questions raised. As Al-Nowaihi notes, "The humor resulting from these often-clashing perspectives on the women allows us to sympathize without suspending our critical faculties, to understand without necessarily accepting, and to evaluate without harshly judging" (Al-Nowaihi 12). The name of the 'mad' character 'Aziza' is ironic as the meaning of the name is Arabic is 'honorable,' 'precious,' 'valuable,' 'dear,', all those attributes she is deprived of in the real world. This drives her to seek an alternative world which matches the Uptoipa she had imagined before the disillusionment. She seeks to escape in a chariot that ascends to heaven as she is denied the basic human needs on this earth.

Salwa Bakr chooses to focus on ordinary women whose struggles in life shape them into real feminists. The strength they demonstrate surpasses that of the feminist speakers who lead a privileged life and yet are so skilled in makes prolonged speeches about challenges they know nothing about. Of those women Bakr writes:

Upholders of the women's movement are in my view not those who climb onto podiums in conferences to demand changing personal statute laws, nor those who look for a women's society to go to in the evening as an aid to good digestion. Rather, they are the millions of women who go out to work every day to save their families from poverty and hunger … Those are the upholders of the women's movement who contribute to the advancement of society, and confronting life, not shying away from its difficulties, and the inherited values that put a brake on their female creative energies" (as cited in El-Enany 380).

Analysis

The Social Model



The contrariety and contradiction that Greimas's square delineates allows for an in-depth discussion of the interplay between the abstract and the practical, or what is preached versus what is practiced, as well as if /how those align. The social model is used to outline and discuss what is prescribed by the society for an individual versus what is forbidden, as well as the shades in between primarily categorized as the not prescribed and not forbidden. Research shows that the conceptual aspect of gender roles has a huge impact on society. In other words, gender "is communicated by parents first at home, then the society at large. So, children become aware of their gender at a tender age, and they are repeatedly reminded of the roles they ought to play in a society that they form" (Ottoh-Agede and Essien-Eyo 15). In the Egyptian society, what is prescribed for a woman is that at a young age her life centers around the preparation for the role of a good wife she is expected to play in the near future. She is taught how to cook and the education she gets is primarily for the purposes of her becoming an educated wife and mother rather than for her aspiration to build a career for herself. It is prescribed that she obeys the husband and follows the path of life he outlines for the family. What is forbidden is for her to engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage or to decide that she does not want the role of a wife or mother or both. It is also forbidden that she prioritizes her career over her husband and children. while the man is not expected to contribute much to the family duties other than provide for it financially. While those were the expectations in the 70s, to a large extent they are still the same in the modern Arab world. While society is now more accepting of the women's right to excel at work and build a successful career for themselves, the biggest responsibility for holding the family together and raising the children lies upon her shoulders. With the current harsh economic circumstances, society excuses the man for not being able to fulfill all the financial obligations of the family and hence the woman is expected to help, while the man is not expected to help in her house management obligations and duties toward the mental health of the children. What is not prescribed is that she looks after herself and discusses her needs or wants.

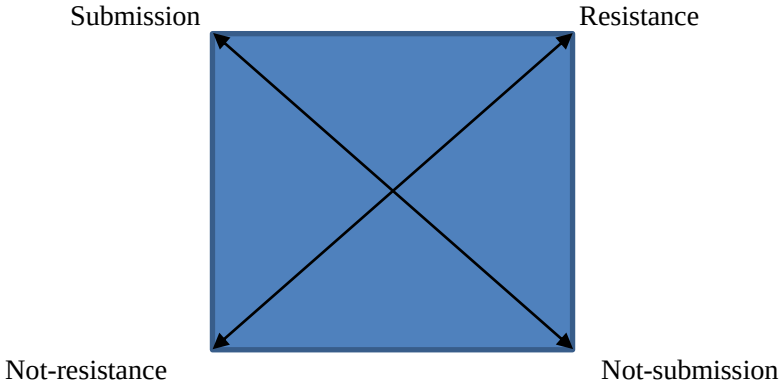
The women in *The Golden Chariot* experience a heightened consciousness about the oppression they face. As Foucault explains, power relations shape the society at large and how such relations "operate principally through the human body, provides a way for feminists to show how the construction of gender inequality from anatomical difference is central to the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies" (McNay 46). As such, they take a non-complying to a violent standpoint in a revolt against what is prescribed by the societal norms. While the expectation is that the oppressed are helpless, this is true for only a limited period of time, regardless of how long or short that period is. As Caresse John (2011) points out, "The possibility for marginalized individuals to achieve standpoints has not often been explicitly discussed by theorists. The usual, though implicit message is that those who are in a position to achieve a standpoint are those who are the nonmarginalized. This suggestion arises from the foundational argument of standpoint theory: Namely, that we must begin our research and thinking from the lives of the marginalized or oppressed" (John 97).

The discussion of the social model raises the question of whether it contributes in a direct or indirect way to the incarceration of the women depicted in the text. While the author does not explicitly state that fact, the reader cannot overlook the socio-cultural and political aspects that constitute the backdrop against which those crimes take place. As Anastasia Valassopoulos notes, "there are crimes of the conscience which human laws fail to rectify" (Valassopoulos 102). The semiotic square of the social model signifies those corners that Aziza and women like herself found themselves imprisoned in, long before their actual imprisonment. All girls start their lives by following the prescribed guidelines laid out by parents or the guardian figure. Some manage to stay in that corner and lead successful lives according to the standards they had set for themselves. That, however, is inextricable from the social circumstances they were raised in and the challenges that life placed in their way. Others might jump their way from the prescribed to the forbidden or could pass by the not prescribed and the not forbidden on the way. The text focuses on the cases of extreme dissidence, while softening the impact of the shocking behavior by

looking at their stories through the sympathetic eyes of Aziza. The author Salwa Bakr raises an outcry for help in an attempt to save more lives from being lost and sanity from being blown away.

In fact, one cannot escape the observation that a lot of women are doomed to misery, at either side of the social model. If they do what is prescribed, they are taken advantage of, their rights are taken away from them, and the stories of misery abound in that side of the square. Meanwhile, if they choose the not prescribed side, they have a chance of finding their own way and creating their happiness, and yet their endeavors will not be appreciated by a large segment of the society. The forbidden ensures a lifetime of misery caused by the outpouring of judgments that make one's ability or willingness to correct mistakes almost impossible. As such, the 'not forbidden'/ 'not prescribed' axes represent the relatively safe space that can lead to a 'normal' life. The same dilemmas can hold true about men, except that they do not have to follow what is prescribed and their transgressions are better accepted in society, while always offered a second chance to making right what they got wrong in the first place, a chance that is rarely granted to women in the same position. While the definition of what is prescribed and what is forbidden may differ from one society to the other, the underlying structure of being trapped in what is prescribed drives women to transgress to the forbidden. Both texts show the gravity of damage done to the lives that could be saved by correcting the moral integrity of the societal value system in the first place.

The Submission/Resistance Square:



The submission/resistance contradictions and the implied contrarieties of non-resistance and non-submission represent another layer of the meanings governing and shaping the lives of the women whose stories are depicted in *The Golden Chariot* and *Orange is the New Black*. As the incarceration experience in the two texts focuses on women, it is inevitable to discuss the issue of gender as part and parcel of the socio-economic and political circumstances in the two societies of Egypt in the 60s and 70s as well as the United States in recent times. In this context, it is useful to examine Foucault's ideas on power and sexuality. For Foucault (1980), "there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (142). The notion of power in our context is the patriarchal power exercised over women; the power that is ascribed to one gender over the other for no reason other than the biological distinction. It is argued that such power is granted by God. If that claim is true, sadly, that power is not used for the intended purpose of providing protection or financial sustainability. Instead, it is used as a means for repression and ascribing oneself additional gains at the expense of the other. Some women have no option other than submission as they find the pain that comes with it to be more bearable than the unknown pain of resistance. In the West, people are more familiar with those stories of submission as they reinforce the stereotype that Islam oppresses women. The texts under discussion in this article show the examples of women who went to the extreme polarity of resistance.

As Foucault explored the idea of power, he explained that "the production of knowledge is always bound up with historically specific regimes of power and, therefore, every society produces its own truths which have a normalizing and regulatory function" (McNay 25). This can account for how patriarchy became the norm in some societies where men continued to be the source of all production of knowledge for long years throughout different historical periods of time. It is when the level of power abuse ruined the lives of women, who in the meantime started to gain awareness of their rights that the revolt happened. In *The Golden Chariot*, Salwa Bakr not only portrays the extreme challenge to men's power, but also she presents a challenge to the stereotypes of submission of the Muslim women propagated in Western societies. The danger of such stereotypes lies in ensuing isolation of and hate crimes against a population of over 3 billion people around the world for following a religion that allegedly degrades women and preaches their submission to the unjust. McNay rightly notes that "whereas feminists have recognized the need to show that women are more than passive victims of domination through the rediscovery and revaluation of their experiences and history, Foucault's understanding of individuals as docile

bodies has the effect of pushing women back into this position of passivity and silence" (McNay 46). In this light, Bakr's text creates s text that is shockingly revealing of the shift from extreme submission to violent resistance.

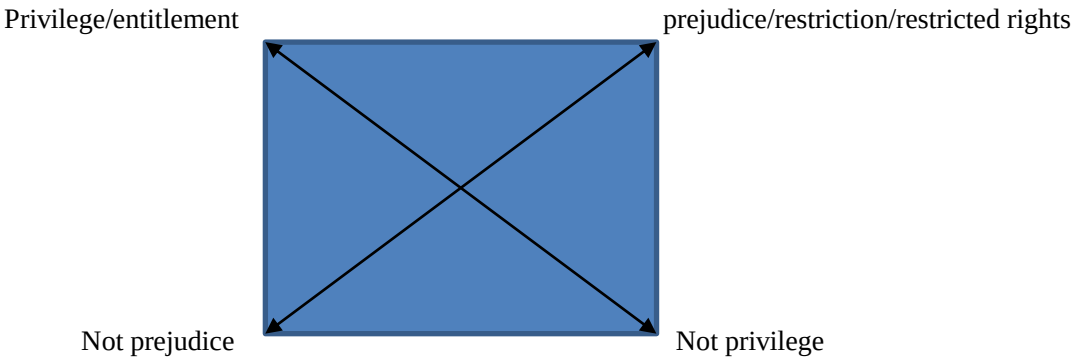
It is worth looking synchronously at the two squares of submission/resistance and prescribed/forbidden contradictions. The above discussion shows that the social model in patriarchal societies prescribe submission as the desired choice over resistance. Similarly, western societies prescribe texts of submission as worthy of attention and publication over texts of resistance. In both cases, power is used to propagate the powerful entity's ideas that work for its own benefit at the expense of the less powerful; the submissive. McNay rightly notes that "whilst the body is worked upon by gender constructions, it is also inscribed by other formations: class, race, the system of commodity fetishism. These formations may, to varying degrees, be internally gendered but they also work across gender distinctions, breaking down the absolute polarity between the male and the female body" (McNay 36).

The patterns of resistance we have seen in both texts are failure patterns, rather than stories of successful resistance. Bosworth rightly notes that "because the nature of women's imprisonment rests, in part, upon gender inequalities, the concept of legitimacy must be broadened to explore how agency, choice and resistance are influenced by identity" (Bosworth).The roles of submission did not mesh with the characters' self-identification. However, as resistance is not prescribed in their society, they are not educated on the right ways of refusing exploits of power, and what follows is that they destroy their lives in the process. "To be an 'agent', or to have 'agency' denotes the ability to negotiate power. It requires a certain self-image as active and participatory with others" (Mahoney and Yngvesson 1992: 45)" (Bosworth). And it is this lack of women's sense of self-worth that caused their revolt to be self-destructive.

Although Bakr creates sympathy for her characters, the reader cannot help but question why the characters made those choices. In such an act of wondering that the reader is led to think about the socio-economic circumstances representing the stage on which those transgressions occurred. At this point, Foucault's idea about the problematic 'extra-social' tendency of resistance is at play. He notes that "the sexed body is to be understood not only as the primary target of the techniques of disciplinary power, but also as the point where these techniques are resisted and thwarted" (McNay 39). In fact, the stories depicted involve resistance not only to the powerful forces that subjugated them but also against the society's alleged sense of justice and prescribed social values. As such, the focus is not on their failure but the causes of such failure as those women struggle to reconcile their rejection of the abusive power and the right way to challenge abuse without causing harm to their own exploited selves. In fact, the majority of women in patriarchal and racially prejudiced societies fall between the two contrarieties of non-resistance and non-submission as they juggle their daily struggles with the desire to avoid major disruptions in their lives, a disruption they cannot afford to have. Bakr shows how the two genders are not opposing ends of s spectrum. They exist and operate between the various degrees of powerful and powerless. Even their powerless mode still reveals their strength in bearing and adapting to the harsh circumstances inflicted upon them. Their adaptability sometimes takes the form of escapism or madness as depicted in Aziza's fictionalized reality of catching a wagon that ascends to heaven.

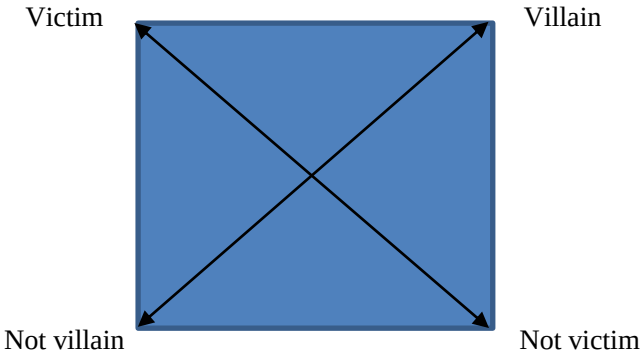
In patriarchal societies, resistance has a negative connotation. In fact, for oppressors, resistance is an act of transgression and has a negative connotation for all whose interests remain in the status quo and in keeping the oppressed in silence. While resistance can set things right, more often than not it can go wrong and it can involve the loss of lives. The stories of the women in both texts act as the souls lost in the act of resistance in the hopes that other women would not be put in similar situation. For oppressors, submission is propagated as an act of righteousness, and those who choose otherwise are misguided souls. Observing this square and how it aligns with the social mode, it becomes clear that submission is prescribed and resistance is forbidden.

The Privilege/Prejudice duality



In *The Golden Chariot*, the main character Aziza is narrating from prejudiced against/a non-privileged perspective. Aziza is the protagonist of the text because of her role that she took upon herself to help those women by taking them with her in the Golden chariot. Salwa Bakr shows the contrast of the privilege/lack thereof of the women outside the prison and those inside. She chooses to make the prison a safe space for the women who, having been exposed to severe injustice and oppression in the outside world, create a bond amongst themselves in prison where they are equal, a space where there is empathy, and a reincarnation for lost familial and friendship relations. Aziza, in her hopes to ascend to heaven, creates a position of privilege to herself, that is, being in charge of appointing who gets to go on the journey to Heaven. Yet, she manages to stay true to the unprivileged by looking into their stories and being keen on compensating those who suffered the most by ensuring they get a spot to be with her in the Golden chariot. What the society inscribes as a promise of success and happiness if the prescribed rules are followed is a lie that the privileged use to subjugate the prejudiced against and ends up turning their lives into a tragedy. Aziza represents the innocent figure who knows nothing about the outside world, the obedient daughter to the powerful privileged abusive step father. At one point in time, when her eyes clearly see the injustices she has been exposed to, her trajectory of innocence transforms into a blood bath. She decides to kill him when he leaves her to another girl and the trauma of the incident and her incarceration transform her to the border of insanity as she disconnects from life on earth and focuses her dreams and thoughts about how to ascend to heaven and who she can choose to go with her.

The Victim/Villain duality



In *Structural Semantics*, Greimas identifies six basic narrative roles or 'actants.' Those are modeled after grammatical categories as follows: subject vs. object, sender vs. receiver, and helper vs. opponent (Schleifer, Davis and Mergler 72). Interestingly, Aziza and the other women in Bakr's text experience a shift in their roles from object to subject, from receiver to sender and from helper to opponent. This raises the question of whether their roles also shifted from victim to villain. How can we define the contradictory terms Victim/Villain? Is it easy to say in clear terms who, in the story of a lifetime, the victim is versus the villain? Or can it sometimes become such a complex question that has to be left unanswered? Salwa Bakr shows how those women were grinded under the harsh economic circumstances as shown by the story of Umm Ragab. Aziza, angry at how she wastes her life for minimal pennies, cries: "Umm Ragab, you're in for something so trivial. Three years for stealing a wallet nobody would look twice at with a measly ninety pounds in it—that's thirty pounds for each year of your life in prison" (Bakr 5). It still would be a simplification of such life stories to blame the socio-economic circumstances as well as the patriarchal values instilled in men and women in society. And here comes the role of literature, to highlight existing situations and raise complex questions to call for change.

The complexity of the personas depicted in *The Golden Chariot*, the depth of the situations narrated, and the honesty with which the characters speak their minds leave the reader but in awe in an attempt to process the richness of meanings depicted and questions raised. Sommers (1995) highlights the importance of empowering women and instilling in them the belief of self-worth and the capacity to have a positive impact on the world. She notes that "It is also precisely this kind of empowerment that enables women to leave disempowering relationships. Women who are not empowered in this way become vulnerable to persons and situations through which they may achieve a false and transitory sense of power" (Sommers 123).

The story of Hinna in The Golden Chariot best embodies Sommers ideas. Hinna told Aziza about "her husband's insatiable appetite for the opposite sex, which she had discovered that day, long ago when she was married off to him. The insane urge which impelled him to have sex with her on their wedding night no less than nine times, despite the terrible pain that she suffered" (Bakr 39). Hinna is married at a very young age and is taught to depend on her husband for financial sustainability. She lives with him for forty-five years, a life full of helplessness, fear, and a devoted pleaser for the husband, not knowing her rights to pleasure and happiness as an equal partner in marriage. After those long years of enduring pain, feelings of humiliation and disdain, the husband threatens he will marry another woman. Fear takes grip of Hinna and she starts suspecting all his acts of coming

late and showing more disdain for her than ever before. Being in a state of helplessness and having nowhere else to go if he marries another woman and kicks her out of the house, she decides to bring his life to an end in the hopes to bring her suffering to an end as well. It is clear that her fear and her actions spring from a place of lack of knowledge and having no access to resources that could be of help. If she was empowered in the first place, she would not have had to endure those long years of insult and pain, and she would have been able to make a right move of resistance instead of resorting to the choice of murder when she was past the age of sixty. In this story, she is the villain for committing murder, and yet other villains on top of whom is her husband who has been committing acts of aggression against her for forty-five years is the victim. Her family that did not teach her the importance of self-respect and self-worth, and that did not let her continue her education past the primary stage is not the villain. The government that did not provide resources to protect women from domestic aggression is not the villain. The society that places a wife's needs as secondary to her husband's is not a villain. The depiction of the details of Hinna's suffering in the text is a cry for help to redefine the meanings of victim and villain for the consequences of oppression are so grave that can turn an innocent sole into a merciless killer. Does the judicial system define and criminalize sexual violence and oppression in domestic households? Are crimes of conscience criminalized as well?

It is illuminating to look at this square simultaneously with the previous two squares. The social model square represents the society's prescribed routes versus the forbidden, and the square of submission versus resistance represents the spaces along which an individual can shift, with respect to what is prescribed and what is not. It becomes clear that the social model prescribes submission and prescribes being a victim. When one rejects that prescribed norm and the soul aches for resistance and the taking off the victim robe, it is a reaction that is frowned upon to say the least and can lead to incarceration when the revolt takes the form of an act of aggression directed against the one who was the aggressor in the first place. Foucault (1985) makes a distinction between the law enforced by the state and the ethics and morality set by all religions for man to establish better relations with himself and with others, and for which no man-made laws are established to hold people accountable for following them or not, which is the reason behind a lot of the tragedy we see in women's stories in *The Golden Chariot*.

Conclusion

Greimas's semiotic squares create a visual aid for the reader to observe the interrelations between the different episodes of the text, revealing the common threads that dovetail the stories together, showing the real portrait that the author attempts to bring to life. The Golden Chariot portrays how power can be prohibitory and repressive. Further, it shows that women's experiences are controlled by culturally constructed images of feminine behavior. Salwa Bakr's purpose is to rediscover and reevaluate the experiences of women. The changes that took place in the Sadat era, on the political, economic, and gender aspects of life are notably the stage on which the events of the novel take place, and as such cannot be overlooked as contributing factors to the misery witnessed in those incarcerated lives. As El-Enany notes, "the plight of women in her work is part of a larger social illness, and the cure she is seeking is one for the entire social body, so to speak, and not just for the female part of it" (El-Enany 376). Ironically, the prison, where freedom is curtailed, becomes the space where a lot of the misguided societal perspectives are corrected and practiced in a way that matches those women's instincts. This was highlighted in the episode of Umm el-Khayr showing kindness and motherly love to Aida, when she was no longer under the pressure of the society to act in a certain way or enforce certain rules upon her daughter. Meanwhile, the text focuses on women's transgressions as we are watching women's stories on the forbidden/not prescribed axes, looking at non-conforming women, who are "criminals" or "Aggressors" as opposed to the "victimized" model presented in the majority of stories about Middle Eastern women. As noted in the above semiotic analysis of Greimas's contradictory and contrary terms, the meanings of "aggressor," and "victim" come to be more complex that the dictionary definition and it is the brilliance of Salwa Bakr's writing that makes the reader criticize their actions, and yet sympathize with them all at once.

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