

Marriage, Madness and Murder in Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* and Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*

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Marriage is one human relationship that is portrayed in many Arab women's fiction. It is usually employed as a means to question traditional female roles, re-define feminine selfhood, explore the conditions of female singleness in a patriarchal society, alert us to the emotional and psychological pressures exerted on women within these institutions, and confront us with dramatic examples of the ways in which marriage may legitimize the abuse of women. These ideas are clearly expressed in Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* (Eng. Edition 1996) and Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (Eng. Edition. 1995). By focusing on traditional and non-traditional discourses of marriage, both Bakr and Mamdouh provide a very interesting and yet troubling perspective on the politics of marriage in the Arab world. They also show that for many women, the experience of marriage threatens a woman's identity, worth and existence. In many instances, it leaves nothing but the remnants of a self on the verge of madness.

In *Mothballs* Iraqi writer Mamdouh tells the story of nine-year old Huda's complex relationship with the setting and the people around her. Through the eyes of this young girl, the reader learns of a household filled with women whose lives are marked by tragedies, sorrows and frustrations. For instance, Huda's grandmother is a widow who has been mourning the death of her husband for a long time. Huda's mother – who is sick with tuberculosis – loses her husband to a second wife and one of her aunts waits endlessly to consummate her marriage. Thus, in *Mothballs* there are actually two stories taking place at the same time: the story of Huda's childhood and the story of how marriage affects the lives of the adult women around Huda. In fact, the latter is clearly manifested in the character of Huda's mother, Iqbal, and her younger aunt, Farida.

Iqbal's experience with marriage is one charged with defeat, sickness and lack of an independent identity. Early on in life, the young Syrian girl moves to Iraq with her mother and brothers. Later, she marries an Iraqi police officer and lives with his family. These changes play a very important role in molding the young woman's character. Cut off from her roots, her family and her surroundings, Iqbal adopts a new place and identity for herself. She understands and sees herself only as a wife and later on as a mother. Iqbal echoes this reality when she tells Jamouli, her husband: "You are my family. Your mother is my mother, and you are the father of my children," (37). Although these words reveal Iqbal's attachment to her husband, they are not born of love and devotion. Rather, the underlying reality is completely different.

Iqbal's marriage is one resembling a small prison. The wife dares not anger her husband or challenge his orders. She treats him well, out of fear, submission and duty. Like a prisoner who seeks the approval of a prison guard, Iqbal also seeks to satisfy her husband's every whim to avoid any threat to her peace. The narrator writes:

She had whetted his appetite for sleep and snoring. She had covered him and gazed at him. She had sat at the end of the bed until he awoke, and when he called to her she went to him, bruised but radiant...

Elsewhere the narrator says:

This was the bed where she had learned he was a man, that he was the ruler, the father and the chosen one. (41)

If this says anything, it is that Iqbal's existence and identity is closely tied to that of her husband, despite

the lack of love that marks this relationship. Yet what happens when this existence is threatened by the presence of a second wife? What happens when Jamouli asks Iqbal to leave? Can the self, which has survived only in relation to the other (husband), exist as a single entity?

Iqbal, losing her home and family implies the loss of all emotional and psychological stability, as well as any notion of identity. The woman no longer knows who and what she is nor what will become of her. In short, her existence, which had been deeply rooted in the institution of marriage, collapses. The author writes that upon learning the news of Jamouli's second marriage, Iqbal "opened her legs and beat on them. She raised her nightgown from her slender thighs and scratched them." She shrieked, crawled and "opened her mouth in an obscene movement, lifted her hair up and then let it fall on her face." The narrator tells us that:

Her eyes bulged, as if she were emptying her bowels. She let out a cry and put her hand over her mouth, slapped her face and tore at her hair. (40)

Iqbal's breakdown is so fierce it borders on madness. And as the woman leaves her husband's home she wonders where to go and what to do. Iqbal realizes that there is no place left for her. She succumbs to the disease that had wracked her body for years and dies, revealing that in a patriarchal society like the one depicted in the novel, women can only exist as wives, and mothers. Once they lose that, they lose the basic essence of living.

Like Iqbal, Farida's experience with marriage is marked with hardships and tragedies. It is an experience that rocks the very foundations of her femininity and leaves her bitter, angry and insane. Yet, the young girl had once been full of confidence, spark and the glow of youth. Her beauty had wetted the appetite of many men of her neighborhood. Still, it is Munir that Iqbal seeks. Although the latter is twenty years her senior and with "something of an evil spirit about him" (2), he is considered a perfect candidate for a husband. The reasons are clear. Munir is Farida's cousin and marrying him means they can all live under the same roof. Also, the man is terribly rich and will pamper his young wife with all that she desires; nevertheless, things don't work out as planned.

After endless preparations for the marriage, the marriage is not consummated because the bridegroom disappears for no apparent reason. In the eyes of society, Farida is neither a virgin nor a wife. Her marriage contract makes her a woman in the eyes of everyone,

and her virginity keeps her a girl in her assessment of herself. As a female, she is suspended between two poles with no hope of settling in any. She does not belong to either institution. This is a very harsh reality for any woman to survive within, especially one who belongs to a traditional society. Farida's existence is possible only within defined borders and institutes, i.e. she can only exist as a daughter or as a wife. Since she has married, she has lost the status of a daughter without gaining the full status of a wife. Furthermore, she is now considered a source of potential diversion for many men. The latter no longer seek her hand for marriage but perceive her with something more sinister in mind. Everything turns upside down, and the young woman awaits the return of the husband.

The days stretch endlessly and the rage heightens:

Months of days. Hours of bruises and slow, repressed rage. Every day she [Farida] fed her beauty with bribes and great blessings, never leaving her bed of indifference. She wanted the appearance of the first scream: a man and a woman. (133)

She does not understand why Munir has left, and talks to herself for hours. As a woman she feels rejected and denied the most important weapon she possesses, her beauty and femininity. Because she has been emotionally abused, Farida is psychologically traumatized. Her rage reduces her to the level of a wild beast, while her bitterness eats up all the vigor of her youth. When Munir finally comes back, her enthusiasm had become so destructive she almost killed the man. Farida pushes Munir's head into the toilet, spits on him and bites him. His presence unleashes a savagery so uncontrollable that it frightens all those who witness it. Yet, nothing is gained. At the end of the novel, we are told that:

She remained a virgin, lifting up the title and contemplating it day and night. She took off the black dress, washed her dusty skin, and proceeded to put on a seductive nightgown; madness returned to her face. (151)

As one can see, the reality of marriage in Mamdouh's novel is traumatizing and arduous. Through the characters of Iqbal and Farida, the author reveals the threat marriage exerts on many a woman's sanity. Yet, if the experience of marriage leads to madness and violence in Mamdouh's *Mothballs*, Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* incites women to destroy the force that abuses them. By so doing, they liberate and purify themselves, in the only way possible, from the dehumanizing and demeaning treatment they endure at the hands of men.

The Golden Chariot is the story of woman in a prison ward. Through the voice of Aziza - one of the inmates who decides to create a golden chariot to take her to heaven where all wishes come true - the reader learns about the various crimes that Aziza and her fellow inmates have committed. The crimes range from murder and theft, to drug dealing. Indeed, almost all of the crimes committed are the result of man's abuse of woman's body. Thus, Bakr weaves a narrative whereby the violence committed by women against men (husbands, brothers, fathers) is merely a social protest against gender injustice, and the abuses they have had to endure. For instance, Aziza kills her step-father for violating her body, while Azimah castrates her lover who enjoyed her body for years but refused to marry her. Yet, it is Hinnah's crime that provides a striking example of the lot of women who exist as wives and who commit crimes to liberate themselves from the confining grasps of their husbands.

For Hinnah, marriage is a humiliating and degrading experience. On her wedding night, the young girl learns of her husband's insatiable appetite for sex. She also learns the meaning of marital rape. She tells Aziza:

[An] insane urge impelled him to have sex with her on their wedding night no less than nine times, despite the terrible pain that she suffered and which made her beg him to desist from the painful act that made her feel as though she was going to die. But instead of responding to her tormented pleas, he persisted in violating her over and over again until day-break, by which time she was in such agony...(39)

This experience soon becomes her lot in life. Marriage becomes a continuous process of sexual abuse. No matter how hard Hinnah tries, she cannot satiate her husband's desires, desires triggered at any place and time. The reader learns that sometimes her husband forces her to have sex with him in the bathroom, while visitors are waiting outside. Sometimes he surprises her by returning from work earlier than usual and "she would have to drop everything to go to bed with him." Worst of all was when she was forced to leave "her screaming suckling child to attend to his father's sexual needs". Accordingly, the house remains neglected. Because she was her "husband's mare, at his disposal day and night," (40) she had no time to attend to the domestic work.

As she grows older, Hinnah is forced to wear clothes which make her feel "like a tart in one of those night-clubs which had spread all over the city and not like a wife from a good family" (40). When finally she reaches the age of fifty, Hinnah hopes her husband's needs would subside. However, once more things do

not change. The old woman finds herself forced to sleep with her false teeth because her husband did not desire an empty mouth. This leads to nights of wakefulness for fear of swallowing her dentures. Even her old body had to endure the cold January nights because her husband insisted on her sleeping naked.

The narrator writes that Hinnah desired nothing more than to be left in peace to enjoy uninterrupted sleep throughout the night and to be able to wear clothes of her choice which made her feel comfortable: "She wanted to feel comfortable in herself and to spare the old wrinkled skin of her face from make-up" (44). Because Hinnah has been denied any kind of dignity in her relationship with her husband, she unleashes her rebellion and refuses to have sex with him. Accordingly, he punishes her by taking a second wife and throwing her out of the house. Soon Hinnah realizes there is no alternative but to rid herself of the man thereby ending the matter once and for all. She opens the gas cylinder, makes sure the windows are closed, and hides elsewhere while her husband suffocates to death.

As one can see, Hinnah's crime becomes a process whereby the victim can reorganize her victimized self and restore a sense of dignity that had been denied her earlier on in life, and threatening to be denied to her once she is asked to leave her home. In other words, the planning and execution of the murder helps Hinnah reconstruct and restore the world of the self which had been so violated it had lost all will, power and independence for forty-five years. Since Hinnah had never refused her husband's demands her rebellion bursts forth in a violent manner. On a symbolic level, the murder liberates and purifies her of the humiliation she had felt when she was forced to have sex with him. It also restores a semblance of independence. Perhaps for this reason, Hinnah refuses to plead that "she killed in a moment of rage" (36). She also refuses to disclose the reasons behind the murder to any man present. Only when she is among female inmates that the true story is told, the depth of humiliation Hinnah had felt in her marriage relationship. Killing her husband releases her of a sexual obligation she had abhorred. Only through murder can Hinnah find freedom, the freedom to survive her last years in the dignity she desires.

Finally, both Bakr and Mamdouh's novels portray the politics of injustice and suffering that exist within the institution of marriage. It also reveals the traumatizing effect that such an institution has on women. They become psychologically unbalanced, violent and sometimes destructive. In short, both authors reveal that in a traditional, patriarchal society there is a tragic story to tell about the lives of women who exist solely as wives and mothers.