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The Nile Bride Myth “Revisioned” in Nubian Literature

Ghada Abdel Hafeez

1. Introduction

Adrienne Rich coined the term “re-vision,” by which she means “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” to understand “the assumptions in which [women] are drenched.”¹ Sharon Friedman has added another dimension to the term by clarifying that “revision” in the sense of looking back places more emphasis on interpretation, both the contemporary writer’s interpretation of the story/myth he or she is retelling and also the interpretive possibilities opened up for the readers.² Helene Cixous, in addition, has rightfully observed: “All myths have been referred to a masculine interpretation” but when women read them, they “read them differently.”³ My aim in this paper is “revisioning” the Nile Bride myth as retold by two Nubian writers: Yahiya Mukhtar (1963) and Haggag Hassan Oddoul (1944) in their short stories “The Nile Bride” (1990) and “The River People” (1989). In my analysis, I use the critical tools of feminist theorists like Simon de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Helene Cixous, Sharon Friedman, Alicia Ostriker, Mary Daly, and Kate Millett to “look back,” “see with fresh eyes,” and “enter the old myth” with the purpose of unsnarling the hidden patriarchal practices in the writers’ myth-making. My “revisioning” reading also aims at exorcising and challenging the internalized patriarchal manifestations in Mukhtar and Oddoul’s “retellings” that have imprisoned women in their norms and symbolic moral legalities. Finally, in my “different” reading I seek to evaluate the two writers’ “interpretation” of the myth to see to what extent

1 RICH, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 35.

2 Quoted in FOSTER’s “Introduction” to *Dramatic Revisions of Myths*, p. 3.

3 CIXOUS, “The Laugh of Medusa,” p. 156.

they denied their brides' voice and visibility or opened possibilities of self-assertion for them.

2. The Nile Bride myth

Since the dawn of recorded history, the Nile and its inundation have been to all the Nile valley inhabitants their life cord, and the locus of their social, economic, and cultural activities and ceremonies from birth till death. This explains why Hapy,⁴ the Pharaonic Nile god, addressed as the "Father of the Gods,"⁵ held unrivalled position among the gods of ancient Egypt. He was worshipped and feared for his unpredictable powers associated with creation, renewal, and fertility and also with destruction and drought. Pharaohs and commoners paid him lavish honors.⁶ In the Nile cult, the Nile Bride myth or *Arous el Nil* refers to the practice of casting into the Nile/Hapy a beautiful young virgin as a sacrifice⁷ in order to obtain a plentiful inundation, ensure his bounteous yearly coming and avoid his wrath. Among historians and Egyptologists, however, this myth is highly controversial. Many have rejected it vehemently, as they claim there have been neither Pharaonic nor Coptic sources that allude to human sacrifices.⁸ Others postulate the possibility of human sacrifice based on the Hymn to the Nile, which has references to offerings and to a great festival or sacrifice for the river⁹ and the wooden statuettes called "Wives of the Nile" or "concubines of Hapy," which were seen as representation of "human sacrifices in a symbolic form."¹⁰ The origin of the myth can be traced back in the festivals and celebrations of ancient Egyptians to honor the Nile/Hapy. On the night of the 11th of Panoi, June 17th, ancient Egyptians observed an important event, the "Night of the Tear-drop" with reference to a tear shed by the goddess Isis,¹¹ which they believed was the cause of the inundation. During the festival, thousands of miniature figures of Hapy were manufactured in every sort of material, among them gold, silver, copper, lead, turquoise, which, along with seals, pendants and statuettes of his consort Repit, were carried through the towns and villages so all Egyptians might pray to him, after which they were offered to him.¹² This ritual passed on from one generation to another until it was allegedly stopped by the Caliph Omar Ibn Khatab. In the year of the

4 Sometimes spelled Hapi.

5 BUDGE, *The Nile*, p. 195.

6 See MONTE, *Everyday Life in Egypt*, p. 32.

7 BUDGE, *The Nile*, p. 197 and FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, p. 430.

8 MORGAN, "Bride of the Nile." See also FOUAD's *El-Qahera fi Hayati* [Cairo in My Life], p. 50.

9 MASPERO, *Hymne au Nil*, quoted by MORENZ, *Egyptian Religion*, p. 150.

10 KAKOSY, "The Nile, Euthenia, and the Nymphs," pp. 290, 291, 297. See also MONTE, *Everyday Life in Egypt*, p. 32.

11 See BUDGE, *The Dwellers on the Nile*, p. 106.

12 MONTE, *Everyday Life in Egypt*, p. 32.

conquest of Egypt by the Arabs in 641, Amr Ibn el ‘As, the Muslim army general, abolished what he described as a “barbarous custom” of throwing a young virgin to the river. But when the Nile did not rise, the people became afraid that there might be drought and famine. So, he wrote a letter to the Caliph informing him about what he had done. In response to his letter, the Caliph sent him a note and asked him to throw the note in the Nile instead, and it was said that the Nile flooded after that.¹³ If the ritual was allegedly prohibited, both Muslim and Christian Egyptians “kept the great Nile-festival” and also called it *Lelat al-Nuktah* (Night of the Drop), following the ancient Egyptians’ belief in the miraculous drop that causes the Nile to rise.¹⁴ This was followed by another celebration also observed by the Egyptians around the middle of August, when the Nile reached the 16th cubit on the Nilometer, and it was also accompanied by singing and dancing and attended by all social classes.¹⁵ Egyptians till today still celebrate the Nile Festival in August of every year, which is now called *Wafa el-Nil* (The Completion or Abundance of the Nile), a spectacular celebration, which aims at raising people’s awareness about the intimate bond between the Nile and the Egyptians and the deadly effects of polluting its water. Whether the myth is based on evidence or not and whether there was human sacrifice or not go beyond the scope of this paper. The point of departure here, though, is that the myth of throwing a bride into the river has transcended any historical moments and remained a source of enduring interest and inspiration for writers and poets for thousands of years.

3. The Nubians’ Bonding with the Nile

Throughout the centuries, the ancient Egyptian and ancient Nubian civilizations were entwined in a symbiotic relationship. The two lands alternately traded and warred with each other. Egyptian cultural elements spread to Nubia, carried by priests, soldiers, traders, and travelers, whereas Nubian culture was spread to Egypt by Nubians as well as by Egyptian travelers returning from Nubia; in this way, both societies assimilated items of culture from each oth-

13 LANE in his book *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* referred to this note, which states: “From Omar, Prince of the Faithful, to the Nile of Egypt. If thou flow of thine own accord, flow not: but if it be God, the One, the Mighty, who causeth thee to flow, we implore God, the One, the Mighty, to make thee flow” (p. 500). Amr did and the Nile, as we are told, rose.

14 BUDGE, *The Dwellers*, p. 106 and *The Nile*, p. 196, and FOUAD, *El-Qahera*, p. 50.

15 BUDGE also gives detailed description of this celebration, which used to take place at Fum al-Khalig, in Cairo, where a dam was built every year. A conical mound of earth called an *arousa* or “bride,” in a clear allusion to the bride that was being sacrificed in ancient days, was always washed away before the cutting of the dam. *The Nile*, p. 197. See also FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, p. 430.

er.¹⁶ Like the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Nubians worshipped the Nile and “evolved close relations with it.”¹⁷ They also shared with them the same Nile beliefs and ceremonialism.

Oddoul has admitted that the Nubians followed ancient Egyptian religion and “worshipped the Nile,” but “with the conversion to the heavenly religions, they regarded it as one of God’s miracles to be revered and adored.”¹⁸ He even goes further to find affinity between the Nubians and the Nile, describing Nubians as “brothers to this enchanting river.”¹⁹ Moreover, Khalil Qasem emphasizes the same sacred bond between the Nubians and the Nile by saying: “The Nubians see God in the Nile and consequently love and fear him as they worship and dread God.”²⁰

4. Definition of Myth

Before delving deep in “re-visioning” how the two writers retold the Nile Bride myth, light will be shed on the meaning of myth. Myth can be regarded as “a mode of symbolic expression objectifying early human feeling and experience, [...] the product of the reflective or historical consciousness, or of the search for scientific or philosophical truth.”²¹ So, from this definition, it becomes clear that myth combines indigenous thought, the memory of a group with its cosmology and historical and social facts. From a feminist perspective, however, myth is described as “inhospitable terrain,” the medium through which patriarchy perpetuates its ideology through legitimizing certain perspectives of culture, history, and society.²² According to Mary Daly, the myth-makers are able to penetrate women’s “minds/imaginings only by seeing to it that their deceptive myths are acted out over and over again in performances that draw the participants into emotional complicity.”²³ Through this “acting out” and these “performances” both men and women in any given society accept their roles without question. Applying Daly’s logic, in giving the Nile Bride myth reality by acting it out, Egyptian and Nubian women have become “re-producers and ‘living proof’ of the deceptive myth.”²⁴

This is true because the ideology of the myth is transmitted through cultural institutions. Repetition and performance make the

16 JENNINGS, *The Nubians of West Aswan*, pp. 23–24. See also BUDGE, *The Nile*, p. 155.

17 AL-GUINDI, “The Angels in the Nile: A Theme in Nubian Ritual,” in *Nubian Ceremonial Life*, p. 104.

18 ODDOUL, *Nostalgia Nubiyah* [Nubian Nostalgia], p. 5.

19 ODDOUL, *Udaba’ Nubiyun wa Nuqqad ‘Unsuriyun* [Nubian Writers and Racist Critics], p. 67.

20 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.

21 RAHV, “The Myth and the Powerhouse,” p. 4.

22 OSTRICKER, “The Thieves of Language,” p. 71.

23 DALY, *Gyn/ecology*, p. 109.

24 *Ibid.*

myth and its embedded concepts authentic and undeniable. This explains why in spite of the time and cultural distance, Egyptians in general and Nubians in particular continue their engagement with the Nile Bride myth. Henry A. Murray affirms that in each society, there must be a mythologically instructed community "corpus of images, identities and models" that provide the basic range of metaphorical identity for these societies.²⁵ This is also related to Jung's archetype, which transcends the personal, hence the use of the same motif by different writers in spite of the differences among them. The same idea is echoed by Northrop Frye, who believes that myths "take root in a specific society and provide for the society a network of shared allusion and experience."²⁶ All these suggest the effect of this myth in culture and thinking.

Myths in general, with their stereotyped characters, predictability of events, and implicit didacticism, as Simon de Beauvoir has observed, "justify men's privileges and even authorize their abuse."²⁷ Myth over history has mutilated and muted women's minds and spirits. The Nile Bride myth, in particular, along with the male writers' telling and retelling of it, which Marina Warner sees as "a part of that myth,"²⁸ is embedded with gendered and patriarchal images and points of view. These images and points of view mold women's realities, fix their values, and limit their vision of individual possibilities.²⁹ The Nile Bride myth has been promulgated by patriarchy for its purpose, which is punishing any woman who commits any kind of transgression. The result is keeping women subdued, subordinated, subservient, and silent. The disenfranchisement and silence experienced by all Nile Brides, in different degrees, are shared by women in all patriarchal cultures.

When Mukhtar and Oddoul revisited and retold this culturally-grounded myth, they brought their patriarchal gaze to it,³⁰ which hardly questions gender roles or assumes full humanity for their female protagonists, especially in the case of Mukhtar, who succumbs blindly to the traditional myth. Laura Mulvey has pointed out that the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly.³¹ Farida and Asha, the two Nile Brides analyzed in this paper, in spite of their differences, are "styled according to" their creators' patriarchal assumptions about women, and consequently locate their agency in relation to the gaze

25 MURRAY, *Myth and Mythmaking*, p. 279.

26 FRYE, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature*, p. 19.

27 DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex*, p. 255.

28 WARNER, *Managing Monsters*, p. 13.

29 SHURBUTT, "The Cane River Characters," p. 14.

30 Both Mukhtar and Oddoul belong to the Nubian diaspora, whose parents emigrated to the North after the second rise of the Aswan Dam in 1933. Both also won the State Incentive Award for fiction in 1990 and 1991.

31 MULVEY, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," p. 272.

of their men, whose eyes reflect the same cultural ideals that produce them as victims.

5. The Nile Bride in Literature

Various literary works were modeled, even loosely, on the Nile Bride myth, whose recurrent narrative patterns and symbols become the ground for vestiges that can be traced in contemporary mainstream Egyptian literature, of which Nubian literature written in Arabic is a part.³² Khalid Montaser rightfully asks, "Is the ritual of flinging a maiden in the immortal river still lurking in the Egyptian consciousness?"³³ The answer can be traced not only in the literary works that still celebrate women sacrificing themselves for the sake of pleasing the angry gods of their households but also in the recurrent stories of ordinary women following in the Nile Brides' footsteps. Many Egyptian writers have adopted and adapted this myth to suit their social, political and aesthetic purposes and have expanded its focal image in significant ways, revealing their epistemology and their relationship to gender power relations.

Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006) for example, retold this myth in his novel *The Beginning and the End* (1949). Nafisa can be regarded as a contemporary Nile Bride forced by her brother, Hasanayn, an army officer, "to be wed to the Nile" to save his honor and the family's, after she "was arrested in a certain house in Al Sakakini." Now, in Hasanayn's eyes, she has become a mere "filthy prostitute."³⁴ From the patriarchal point of view, Nafisa has to pay for attempting to define herself and for all the sins she committed: being vulnerable to temptation, lustful, deceitful, and for breaking the taboo of female purity.

Yusef al-Qaeed (1944–) has also retold the myth in his novel *The Beloved's Country* (1985), and portrayed the Nile Bride in a more positive way, although the Beloved is not the narrator and is mute throughout the novel. But the Nile Bride in this novel is different in one perspective: she is not flung into the Nile by an angry patriarch. In a counteraction, she commits suicide on two levels of action: the realistic one narrated by a police officer at the end of the novel who testifies, "The Nile has chosen her [...] after the country has denied him a Bride; he chose her in particular because she's the most gorgeous woman on earth," and also on the imaginative level which takes place only in the narrator's mind, when he imagines that he

32 HEGAZY, "Introduction" to OUDDOUL, *Udaba' Nubiyuns*, p. 8, but Oddoul insists in the same book that Nubian literature is distinct and cannot be included under the umbrella term of Arabic literature, p. 28.

33 MONTASER, "Arous el-Nil mn Nafisa ela' Somayia" [The Nile Bride from Nafisa to Somayia].

34 MAHFOUZ, *The Beginning and the End*, pp. 396, 400.

takes her in a boat ride and she loses her balance and falls into the Nile. He says:

He [The Nile] grabbed my beloved from me. It seems that what has been narrated about the Nile Bride is infallible truth and that his request for a Bride every year is proven. The difference is that in the past, they used to bring him the Bride in a spectacular ceremony but what is happening right now is that it is he who seeks a Bride, makes a choice, and seizes her through a new channel – which is drowning.³⁵

Among the Nubian writers who employed this myth to address their own concerns are Mukhtar and Oddoul, who have cleverly interwoven it in the fabric of their works and have thematically presented two contemporary Nile Brides who end up flinging themselves in the Nile for different reasons. In addition, the setting in their two short stories is modern and the action takes place in two Nubian villages: the first in an unknown Nubian village,³⁶ while the second depicts “not the Nubia of ancient history – though it looms in the background – but the Nubia of the not-too-distant past, where the impact of the High Dam is ever present.”³⁷ The two short stories blend mythical elements with realism as well. Both are inhabited by mysterious mythical creatures like *Alkaby*, the mythical folklore ogre and the night’s devils,³⁸ and “The River People, demon of dry land, genie of the water, and Klow To, the Well Child”³⁹ because the authority of the myth employed has made it easy for the two writers to introduce unique supernatural beings.

But this simple formulation is where the congruence between the two short stories ends: Mukhtar deals with the entire myth, expanding it to encapsulate the details of Farida’s painful story narrated by her father, Abdul Rahman, who amalgamates bitter reminiscences of his despondent childhood as a slave with his daughter’s rape at the hands of the Umda’s son,⁴⁰ and the apathy, disgust, and scorn he received from the villagers for his daughter’s “cursed deed”⁴¹ till the last resolution when he decides to kill her, which coincides surpris-

35 AL-QAEED, *Balad el-Mahboub* [The Beloved’s Country], pp. 168, 145. All translations are my own.

36 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil: Qass mnal-nouba* [The Nile Bride], asserts in the foreword to his short story: “In this short story, names of tribes and names of people which are common among the Nubian communities and villages are used.” He also makes it clear that his intention is authenticating “the Nubian environment.” He finally warns us that in case the names mentioned “correspond with any real names of tribes or individuals,” it is by mere chance, as “they are not specified in particular” (p. 7). All translations are my own.

37 WOFFENDEN, “Voice from the South.”

38 MUKHTAR’s *Arous el-Nil*, pp. 14, 15.

39 ODDOUL, *Nights of Musk*, pp. 103, 104.

40 *Umda* is an Arabic word for the chief of the village.

41 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 21.

ingly with her jumping into the Nile. Oddoul, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on and glorifies the last moment of the myth/story in which Asha Ashry, defeated in the real world after the drowning/suicide of Siyam, her childhood sweetheart, on his return after years of servitude in the diaspora, takes refuge in the world of her dreams and responds to the calling of the River People. So, Oddoul has given the myth new implications by remodeling the motive of his Bride's suicide.

To use E.W. Herd's tools of myth criticism, Mukhtar's short story is an avowed retelling of an acknowledged myth.⁴² This is achieved through the use of the power of naming – the titles of the myth/the short story are the same: *Arous el-Nil* or the Nile Bride – and through the plot, which has the same outline as the Nile Bride myth on which it is based. Oddoul's situation, however, is different: in his case we can trace "literary allusion" which attracts the attention of the reader through "illustration or parallel."⁴³ He never admits that he is rewriting the Nile Bride myth, but this should not worry the critic, whose concern is not with the intentions of the author but with how the author weaves the myth to become an integral structure of the work, and includes a multitude of analogies and metaphors arranged in a manner which is not haphazard.⁴⁴ This is achieved through the journey of his protagonist Asha who drowns herself in the Nile. Oddoul has blended the myth with the Nubian myth of the River people,⁴⁵ and transformed it into a new expression of his *Nubianness*.

As for the two modern Nile Brides as a reflection of their writers' engagement with the myth, Farida and Asha vary in the degree to which they are denied voice and visibility, but they also prove what Helen Cixous has concluded that "writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy" where "woman has never [had] her turn to speak."⁴⁶

42 HERD, "Myth Criticism: Limitations and Possibilities," p. 174.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 175.

45 Nubians believe that there are people under the river living in communities, and they have their palaces and waterwheels. They also believe that sometimes the surface of the Nile would open for human beings to go and spend some time with the river people. See SHARAWI, *Al Kurafa wa-al Ustutra* [Superstitions and the Myth], p. 111. See also KENNEDY, "Nubia: History and Religious Background," p. 17. The River people can be an example of the direct impact of the ancient Egyptian religion on the Nubians' belief system. The ancient Egyptians believed that a number of supernatural beings had a close relation to the Nile or inhabited it; sometimes they were portrayed as "a man of the river" or the "women of the river" and sometimes as frightening spirits. For more on this, see KAKOSY, "The Nile, Euthenia, and the Nymphs," p. 294. ODDOUL also admits in *Udaba' Nubiyun* that all 38 books written by Nubian writers revolve around the Nile and the creatures that inhabit it (p. 67).

46 CIXOUS, "The Laugh," p. 249.

6. Mukhtar's Silenced/Invisible Bride

Mukhtar's narrative mode is appropriate to his concern with the details of the myth. And at the same time, it reflects "the sociological" attitude toward the myth,⁴⁷ which is firmly grounded in the social realist tradition of poverty and injustice that engulf the unnamed Nubian village. Thus, the short story opens with a detailed description of the natural setting in which we can see the Nile "already brimful, with the dark, fast-moving flood water overflowing its banks,"⁴⁸ and listen to the croak of frogs and the nervous beatings of the oars, in addition to the heart-wrenching details of Farida's rape that heaps all the misery upon her head and her father's, and eventually leads to her slaughter at the altar of honor.

In this retelling of the myth, the Bride is an object to be described rather than a speaking subject. The father's point of view dominates the narrative, leaving marginal space for Farida's. The third-person, omniscient narrator puts the father's perspective center stage and condemns Farida. The narrator admits: "Farida's crime is of magnitude and she has to be punished."⁴⁹ Although a third-person narrator is supposed to be "objective," "the impersonal, omniscient [narrator] [...] will make choices which are guided by judgments [...] structured by a set of attitudes, interests and prejudices."⁵⁰ So, from the beginning, the narrator "makes choices" and establishes Farida's position as a sinful culprit, and this helps the father turn her invisible, and it also facilitates "negating of [her] vibrating impulse, stripping her utterly of existence, pulsation, life, and memory, till she has become a mere name."⁵¹ As Daly proclaims, "It's hard to see/name the fact that phallocracy reduces women to framed pictures/holograms/robots." Then she adds, "the see-ing, nam-ing of this nonbeing is essential to liv-ing."⁵² Because his daughter has been turned into "nonbeing,"⁵³ it has not been difficult for him to reach the resolution of killing her. Of course, the narrator gives highly persuasive details in an effort to convince us of the father's right to execute the action: firstly, the graphic description of how he and his wife have become "fugitives," rejected by all villagers, followed by "spits and dogs' barking."⁵⁴ Secondly, he is haunted by the horrific image of the Umda's son "preying on her,"⁵⁵ which "stabs his soul like

47 VICKERY, *Myths and Texts*, p. 30.

48 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 14.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

50 BARWELL, "Feminine Perspectives and Narrative Points of View," p. 68.

51 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 18.

52 DALY, *Gyn/ecology*, p. 56.

53 *Ibid.*

54 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil*, pp. 18-19.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

a dagger.”⁵⁶ Thirdly, the burning of his skinny goat and of the hut he built after his master had freed him from his long slavery. The burning of his humble hut has become like “the sharp sickle” that “has pulled out the roots of his life and existence.”⁵⁷ Even “Heaven” has been in the conspiracy against his daughter and his prayers and offerings to the two Sheiks Sidi Abdullah and Sidi Kabeer have not been accepted. Finally, he adds one last excuse, which is that killing her is “his revenge from them.”⁵⁸

On the other hand, Farida’s point of view is fragmented and subordinated to her father’s predominant one. When we first see her, she is alone, with her father, on the boat, scared to death, engulfed by “night, darkness, the river, the tranquil stillness which stirs in her soul terror waves, spinning her in an insane whirlpool.”⁵⁹ And the only scene in which she is the main player is the horrific one, the culmination and embodiment of her subjugation and oppression, the scene of forced brutal abortion. We see her dragged by her mother till they reach the Parlor of Hassan Tid, where old women are sitting, staring at her, and their eyes have become like claws “laying her flesh bare, devouring it, and tearing it into pieces.”⁶⁰ Then the narrator shares with us more painful details:

The slave girl Gebaya Marsilia snatched her left arm, so she collapsed...they crawled to her ... dozens of hands ... scores of them ... they removed her dress ... forcibly opened her legs ... the harsh boney fingers went deep in her flesh ... they tore her underpants ... her tongue became like a piece of dry wood in her throat ... her body was permissible to all fingers ... Gebaya’s hand sneaked to her belly ... touching her ... she murmured ... three months ... she cursed her father and mother ... Her fingers like fiery pliers began squeezing her womb ... as if burning skewers penetrated her insides ... they carried her and turned her upside down ... Gebaya stood still on her back ... then they turned her and the slave girl’s hands sneaked again between her thighs ... blood poured hot ... sweat covered her whole body ... everything was enveloped by darkness ... no longer could she see anything.⁶¹

The narrative provides no details about how the Umda’s son seduces Farida, whether she was a willing and active participant in the affair or not, or the number of times they met. The only reference to this affair is Farida’s reminiscences of her friends Zainab and Awada,

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., p. 26.

58 Ibid., p. 27.

59 Ibid., p. 14.

60 Ibid., p. 15.

61 Ibid., p. 16.

who “envied her for the Umda’s son interest in her and his constant chase.”⁶² In spite of the gaps, which help magnify the father’s point of view and diminish hers, it can be concluded that the Umda’s son has abused his superior position and control to reach his goal. For him, sexuality and power are associated, equating his pleasure with the pain and humiliation of Farida along with her family, who in his eyes are nothing but mere objects.

Even her father has become an instrument manipulated by the hands of the patriarchy to which he himself adheres by not only turning his daughter into a “nonbeing”⁶³ but also accepting their decree of abortion. He wrongly thinks that acting as their agent and conforming to their decree might please the Umda and the elders of the village, not knowing that it is his former master, Sheik Shahin Tamush, who was the one behind the idea “of aborting that embryo from the profane womb”⁶⁴ for his own materialistic benefit so as not to lose “Abdul Rahman’s strong and unpaid hand.”⁶⁵

Farida’s father forgets that his status and class in this community equal zero. The power relations in the Nubian community are overtly displayed and flagrantly enunciated. Oddoul has shed light on the rigid class system and the social stratification in the Nubian villages, which make the class to which Farida’s parents belong, as ex-slaves, “socially humiliated and sexually vulnerable.”⁶⁶ Instead of penalizing the rapist, and supporting the victim, the whole village conspires against the helpless girl and her powerless father. This legitimizing of the rape exposes “the case of injustice which possesses the Nubian village,”⁶⁷ which lays bare the predicament of the poor.

Now, in my Re-visioning reading, the question I would like to pose is why we should blame the victim. Why describe what happened as Farida’s “cursed action”?⁶⁸ As the narrative mentions, she was “chased by the Umda’s son,”⁶⁹ “devoured by him,”⁷⁰ raped, impregnated, and forced to have an abortion so as not to have a baby from the Umda’s son. For the villagers in general and the Umda in particular, this is not enough to erase the “stigma” which *he* felt for combining his son’s name with Farida’s! “That’s why he ordered his guards to burn their hut in the same day in which Farida was forced to abort.”⁷¹ Kate Millet has commented on cross-class adultery by saying it is the lower-class woman who is convicted of sexual

62 Ibid., p. 30.

63 Daly, *Gyn/ecology*, p. 56.

64 МУХТАР, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 21.

65 Ibid.

66 ODDOUL, *Al Marawa wa el Gens* [Women and Sexuality], p. 17.

67 Ibid., p. 15.

68 МУХТАР, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 21.

69 Ibid., p. 30.

70 Ibid., p. 19.

71 Ibid., p. 27.

adultery (and for violating taboos of class and sexuality), while the upper-strata male culprit goes unpunished.⁷²

Victimized by her rapist, his family, by tradition, and by her own father, Farida starts regarding herself as a culprit, although she has not transgressed any patriarchal confines of sexual inactivity or honor. Her oppressors force her to characterize her actions by their definitions, and so she changes into a mere thing. This “thing,” the “nonbeing,”⁷³ is forced to be silent and invisible without “full access to language”⁷⁴ and without authoritative expression. To use Daly’s terms, she has become “male-identified, male possessed brains/spirits.”⁷⁵ She now sees, like all villagers and her father that, the only way out for her and for her family is accepting the death penalty. The death of the Nile Bride is not only predicted but expected and highly appreciated by the community.

So, if in the original myth, the maiden was forced to be wed to the Nile to ensure its yearly coming, Mukhtar’s male-made Nile Bride, through this dehumanizing brainwashing, accepts the same fate but for a different reason, which is “to redeem her father, [and] ease the pain that torments him.”⁷⁶ The use of the active voice suggests Farida’s willingness to perform this ritual and to be an agent of her own destruction. Now the scene is set for her to reproduce the Nile Bride myth by determining to “fling herself in the Nile.”⁷⁷ In so doing, she can ease her father’s conscience, so that he might stop regarding himself as a murderer. In addition, the villagers will raise her from a state of sin to one of grace and her parents will emerge from an unfavorable state to a more acceptable one. In this way, the whole village will be purified of the *sinful/evil/rebellious* Farida who challenges the social and class hierarchy by having a relationship with the Umda’s son.

Farida’s decision proves what Gilbert Highet has stated, that all writers “are good psychologists” as they “discover new yet credible motives for the actions recorded in mythical tradition.”⁷⁸ The minute she stands up to execute the action, “a mysterious power throws her in the Nile” and eventually she “was swallowed by the river.”⁷⁹ As Oddoul states, “She has been turned into a Nile Bride; even though she is not a virgin as her virginity was deflowered slyly and forcibly.”⁸⁰

72 MILLET, *Sexual Politics*, p. 43.

73 DALY, *Gyn/ecology*, p. 56.

74 LANDY, “The Silent Woman,” p. 19.

75 DALY, *Gyn/ecology*, p. 57.

76 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 30.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

78 HIGHET, *The Classical Tradition*, pp. 535–536.

79 MUKHTAR, *Arous el-Nil*, p. 31.

80 ODDOUL, “Women,” p. 15.

This scene magnifies women's subordination to the superstructure of male domination, which includes Farida's denial of life to preserve the honor of her family. In this scene of murder/suicide, Farida is confined and denied an identity of her own and the right to authorship. She is subjected to the worst of the patriarchal sins, which is invisibility and erasure.

My re-visioning reading has exposed how this short story camouflages reality and creates a cultural mindscape that subjugates women through legitimizing the masculine value system. In this light, Farida, as an incarnation of the Nile Bride, "cannot speak," to echo Spivak's famous question, "can the subaltern speak?,"⁸¹ because her muteness results from her inability to find a language capable of articulating her suffering, needs or hopes, since she has been systematically denied expressive freedom. The present text of oppression hardly provides such a language because it positions her as mute by claiming to speak for her.

My re-visioning analysis of the re-enactment of the Nile Bride patriarchal myth in Mukhtar's short story has unmasked his blind adherence to patriarchal ideology and authority, which perpetuates the same negative myth that has entrapped women in the web of silence/erasure.

7. Oddoul's Ambivalent Nile Bride

If Mukhtar blindly follows the Nile Bride myth both thematically and technically and consolidates the myth of the woman as victim, Oddoul has only kept the mytheme of the traditional story – the drowning of the main protagonist Asha in the Nile – but reconstructed it by weaving in its fabric the Nubian myth of the River People. In so doing he reexamined the representation of gender and gender roles and adapted them to new social and aesthetic purposes. In other words, he invented a new mythical structure that maintains its resemblance to the Nile Bride myth but at the same time has kept an inextricable connection with the primordial ancient Nubian roots.

For Oddoul, his short story "The River People" is not only a rewriting and reconstructing of a syncretized version of the Nile Bride myth but also a rewriting of Nubian history. The Nubians endured four successive waves of uprootedness, displacement and resettlement in 1902, 1912, 1933, and finally in 1964 with the construction of the Aswan Dam and the High Dam, which Oddoul describes as "crimes against humanity."⁸² While the High Dam symbolizes one of Egypt's modern miracles, the sacrifices of the Nubians were ob-

81 SPIVAK, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" p. 66.

82 KHALLAF, "Right of Return."

scured and overshadowed by the national, mainstream narrative. Consequently, as Anthony Calderbank argues, “the tragedy suffered by the Nubian people as a result of the construction of the High Dam at Aswan is one of the great untold stories of the twentieth century.”⁸³ What aggravates their situation is the historical failure of successive governments to fulfill their promises, the non-recognition and the amnesia of the Egyptians, and denial of their right to return to their home territories. Oddoul, a vocal defendant and activist of Nubian rights, sees in Nubian literature an outlet for this tragedy and a documentation of a rich culture on the verge of extinction.

Oddoul adopts the oral tradition in his narrative, reflected in both the setting and structure, which “vividly conjure up the sights and sounds of Nubia.”⁸⁴ As for the setting, it is not a mute background, but it is actively and intricately interwoven with the spatial practices of the people. The human/land interconnectedness functions not only as mere setting but as vibrant character. The setting is realistic, trimmed with Nubian geographic and cultural elements like the Nile and the green palm trees, but his realistic mode of representation is grounded in his unshakable belief in the mythical dimension of the Nile and its creatures. As he maintains:

I still believe in stories about the Nile’s creatures. My own parents believed that there were evil beings called Amoun Dugur living there. Such stories were inherent in their daily lives. My parents used to throw pieces of bread into the Nile to appease these evil beings. They never ate any fish, nor did they throw any waste into the Nile.⁸⁵

In addition to the intimate relationship with the Nile, there are also references to the palm trees, which represent another major element in any Nubian context. The very first page of the short story sets the scene for the centrality of this environmental element in the lives of Nubians. In the description of the setting, references are made to palm trees as lovers; this image represents the two lovers Asha Ashry and Siyam. As Oddoul comments: “The two palm tree lovers stand for Asha and Siyam, her childhood sweetheart, and how Siyam’s long travel leads to Asha’s tragic downfall, as she is leaning on him.”⁸⁶ Asha has seen herself and Siyam as “a medium one leaning against a tall one, like a young woman resting her head on the chest of her tall, young man. I said the shorter one was me, Asha

83 CALDERBANK, “Translator’s Note,” to ODDOUL’s *Nights of Musk*, p. vii.

84 Ibid.

85 AMIN, “I have a dream.”

86 ODDOUL, *Udaba’ Nubiyun*, p. 71.

Ashry, and the tall one was you, Siyam. The two palm tree lovers ... just like you and me.”⁸⁷ So, from the outset of the short story, Asha establishes herself in direct relation to the natural surroundings.

The structure of the short story is dynamic because of its inextricable relation to oral tradition. Oddoul favors the cyclic plot structure and not the linear one. The beginning of the short story reverberates with mythical force and mystery, which establishes both the cyclic structure and the mythical nature of the narrative in which the distinction between Asha Ashry, the main protagonist and main narrator, and that of her great aunt, also named Asha Ashry, are blurred and the distinctions between reality and myth, conscious knowledge and unconscious desire are dissolved as well.

The beginning of the short story foregrounds the doubling between the life and death of the two Ashas. Years ago, the great aunt Asha disappeared mysteriously but her sister, Korty, “insisted that her sister had gone to the River People” and prophesized, “But she’ll come back, she will come back.”⁸⁸ Years later, her prophecy came true when her daughter gave birth to another Asha. It is here that Korty exclaims, “Asha, Asha, Asha has returned.”⁸⁹

The same mythical/magical atmosphere is maintained by the cautionary warnings of the grandmother to young Asha: “Beware ... Don’t stick too close to the river. Don’t wander along the bank at the time of the flood Don’t go down there on your own.”⁹⁰ These warnings are a clear message to young Asha to resist the irresistible attraction of the Nile and its creatures, which for the grandmother equals trouble. Yet the grandmother’s cautionary warnings sound unconvincing to young Asha, who seems more resolute than her aunt to explore the unknown because the knowledge she gains is fundamental to her development and empowerment.

When we first meet young Asha Ashry, which means “beautiful” in Nubian, we know that she is destined to follow the footsteps of her great aunt. Through their intimate connection and bonding to the natural rhythm of the cosmos, both have become different and more defiant of patriarchal constraints. Young Asha has learnt from the lesson of her great aunt, who was “locked up in the house in compliance with the elders’ ruling” and consequently was forbidden from “sitting on the bank of the river to look at the clear waters and whisper secrets to its people.” Gradually, late Asha withered and “suffocated between the walls”⁹¹ and finally when one day the whole village was attending a wedding, she sneaked out of the house and

87 ODDOUL, *Nights of Musk*, p. 93.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

90 *Ibid.*

91 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

vanished. Young Asha has become more defiant against the mutilation and muting of patriarchy and endeavors to restore an intimate relation with nature and the cosmos.

Like her great aunt, she violates the boundary between the natural and supernatural and evolves close and intimate spiritual relations with the river creatures: the fish, the perch, and the River People. One day, as she recalls, "I was still young. I waited till the fisherman wasn't looking, then I grabbed his laden basket and threw the poor fish back into the hamboul." She later confesses, "It wasn't the first time I'd rescued tormented fish from his basket prison."⁹² With all the ridicule and sarcasm she receives for caring about the fish, and the kids' merciless taunting that she is "in love with the fish and the River People,"⁹³ Asha not only brags about her passion for the Nile and its creatures but also has unshakable belief in their magical powers, as she admits, "The fool wouldn't understand the lesson. They didn't learn anything from what happened to the fisherman. The River People punished him [the fisherman]. He had a daughter with a harelip."⁹⁴ As a sign of the supernatural relationship with the river beings, they have "taught her how to dance their dance the correct way."⁹⁵ As an active believer in their powers, she feels so secured under their protection that unlike all the villagers, she is not "afraid of the demon of the dry land [...] [or] the genie of the water."⁹⁶ Her difference from the rest of villagers is established and highlighted early.

By endowing his protagonist with vitality, power and agency not given to any Nile Bride before, Oddoul is not only strengthening and empowering Asha but also his readers. Asha is given a wide field of action, elevating her from the stereotypical level of the passive Nile Bride to an active person who challenges traditions, decides for herself, and demands her rights in a male-dominated society. For example, in spite of her unrivalled beauty, which she inherited from her great aunt, the daughter of a Turkish governor and a Nubian woman, "a blend of milk and molasses,"⁹⁷ she turns down marriage proposals and disobeys her parents and the elders of the village and waits for years for Siyam, whom she describes as "my heart's desire [and] my true love incarnated,"⁹⁸ who travels to Alexandria after the building of the High Dam. In her monologue, she confesses: "Nothing could keep me apart from you, no word of admonition that we were too old to be playing together, nor the gossip of the old women

92 Ibid., p. 90.

93 Ibid., p. 99.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., p. 100.

96 Ibid., p. 103.

97 Ibid., p. 91.

98 Ibid., p. 94.

who sit by the wall, nor the stern censure of my uncles ... not even my father’s violent slaps.”⁹⁹ So, we are presented here with a strong-willed young woman who breaks women’s enslavement. Even when her mother tries to appeal to her logic by saying, “Asha! You are trying my patience. Siyam has been away a long time. Your father and your uncles are saying that you’ll bring us nothing but trouble,”¹⁰⁰ she gives her a deaf ear. Even the passage of years, the marriage of all her peers, the emergence of a younger generation of girls, the rumors about Siyam’s infidelity with a Greek maid, all these have not made her give up on Siyam. In this way, Asha Ashry becomes more capable of breaking the silence and challenging some of the patriarchal assumptions about women, which shape women’s realities and limit their vision of individual possibilities.

After Asha waits patiently for years for his safe arrival, Siyam, in spite of his ailing, decides to return back and marry his beloved. But unfortunately, when the mail boat he is riding sinks, he drowns/commits suicide in the Nile “with some will on his side.”¹⁰¹ As one of his trip companions explains, “Siyam did not help us to rescue him.... He sank to the bottom as if resigned to his watery fate.”¹⁰²

The question here is why he submitted to “watery fate.” My interpretation lies in Oddoul’s transformation of the climax of the ritualistic mythic moment into a new signifier to meet requirements of both mythological and psychological plausibility. Through Siyam’s suicide, Oddoul gives us new implications and explains the facts but in a new way. He remodels the traditional mythic paradigm through adding the psychological inner conflict that has been taking place inside Siyam. He has grown up in a traditional community, with steadfast religious, moral and cultural beliefs and social norms, but the prolonged crisis of his voluntary migration to the North and being away from Nubia for years represent a kind of discontinuity or rupture that facilitates his accommodation to different cultural practices. This eventually leads to drastic change in thought and behavior, specifically the adulterous relationship with the Greek maid, drinking alcohol, and not fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.¹⁰³ As a Nubian, Siyam knows deep inside him that these sins – which are violations of religious and social prohibitions – pollute him and “that pollution means possible infestation with evil spirits”¹⁰⁴ and it is only through the Nile water – with the help of the good spirits of the Nile – that he can dispel them.¹⁰⁵

99 Ibid., p. 90.

100 Ibid., p. 95.

101 ODDOUL, *Hadduta Nubia* [A Nubian Folktale], pp. 20–21.

102 ODDOUL, *Nights of Musk*, p. 111.

103 Ibid., p. 104.

104 For more on pollution and ritual cleansing see KENNEDY, “Mushahara,” pp. 130, 131.

105 Ibid., p. 132.

When the boat sinks, there was a possibility for him to rescue himself, especially since he was known as “the river swimmer,”¹⁰⁶ but being in the midst of the Nile, he felt nostalgic for his pre-departure purity. His ritual use of the river symbolizes for him his oneness with the Nile. His suicide can be read as his final engagement with the Nile to be cleansed from his sins. It also reflects his inviolable belief in the spiritual world under the Nile. So, to atone for his sins and to compensate Asha for the years he has forsaken her, he decides to wait for her with the River People. It can also be seen as harsh punishment with a moralistically appropriate closure. So, as in the case of Nafisa and Farida who were sacrificed for the sake of the honor of their families, Siyam’s drowning in the Nile can also convey the same “perennial struggle between inner demand and external necessity.”¹⁰⁷

In Oddoul’s rewriting of the Nile Bride myth, he departs from the traditional model by reconstructing not only the female and male figures but also by giving them new motives to emphasize the infinite complexity of human life. If in the traditional myth, it is always a female figure that is being sacrificed either as a punishment or a gift to please an angry patriarch, here through the amalgam of the Nile Bride myth with the River people myth, Oddoul has struck a balance between the genders.

With all the motives behind Siyam’s suicide, Asha is momentarily disempowered. In her grief and disbelief, she denies Siyam’s death and refuses to cry, and bursts out not only “laughing” but also “dance[ing] the perch dance at the funeral.”¹⁰⁸ Then she runs off to everything that reminds her of Siyam, first to the “palm tree lovers [and] embraced the slender male tree [She] embraced him until his barbed scales dug into [her] flesh.”¹⁰⁹ Her embrace was so fierce that the villagers “had to tear [her] away.”¹¹⁰ Then, she runs to the Nile and its people, assuring herself that he must be with “the River People where every pleasurable delight is seen and heard.”¹¹¹

Time passes and people forget about her tragedy, and the weddings begin once more. Feeling completely abandoned, she cries for the first time since his drowning. She rushes to the river, to be shocked by “the drowning of the valley” which has been “eaten up by the flood.”¹¹² In a moment of epiphany, Asha sees “the lid was taken off the river, the translucent sheet removed” and she hears

106 ODDOUL, *Nights of the Musk*, p. 113.

107 FEDER, “Myth, Poetry, and Critical Theory,” p. 52.

108 ODDOUL, *Nights of the Musk*, p. 113.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid., p. 115

"The River People ... calling ... and Anna Asha ... and Siyam."¹¹³ It is at this moment that she decides to drown herself. So, she hurries to her grandmother's house, pulls "the disk of the Almighty," which she "hung on the middle of [her] forehead" and then she laughs with joy: "Tonight I will be married to proud Siyam."¹¹⁴ In addition, she takes the sword off the wall and sang, "Raise your sword, O groom. Raise up your sword for your guests."¹¹⁵ She flees to the river, singing, laughing, weeping, holding the sword in hand, with "the gold jingle-jangled" and drowns amid the frogs' croaking, the crickets' chirpings, her mother's heart-wrenching screams and shrieks, and her grandmother's wailings, assuring them while "smearing the silt on her head" that "Asha Ashry has gone to the River People."¹¹⁶

So, with all her relentless attempts to free herself from patriarchal shackles, the ritual ceremony of her suicide that starts with donning the accouterments of Nubian nuptials and dressing herself up as a bride for her wedding/death by her drowning or "going to the River People" establishes the masculine rule over her conscious life. In my Re-visioning reading, I see that this represents a relapse in Oddoul's liberating experiment, although he denies it. He regards her willing "steps into the depths of the Nile" as a "return to the resource for renewal as her great aunt, late Asha Ashry, did."¹¹⁷ That might be true in the case of her great aunt who returns or who is resurrected in young Asha. But I read the willing and voluntary drowning of both Siyam and Asha as a descent into the unknown, which carries with it the risk of annihilation. It does not guarantee rebirth, as Oddoul suggests. On the contrary, it carries a very pessimistic message, a death knell, which Hala Halim has read as "a metaphor for the trauma of Nubia's drowning"¹¹⁸ and might be a reference to the disappearance of the Nubian culture.

Asha's final decision exposes Oddoul's ambivalence. Throughout the narrative, Asha prides herself in her vocal resistance to the patriarchal institution but now we know that her resistance might have been triggered and kindled by her romantic attachment to her fiancée and the feeble dream inside her that they can be reunited one day and live happily ever after in their familiar surroundings. But his death, along with the disappearance of their land under the lake, and the indifference of the villagers, make her reach the disturbing but transformative realization that without Siyam and without her natural habitat, she is just a "nonbeing"¹¹⁹ like Farida.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., p. 116

115 Ibid., p. 116

116 Ibid., p. 119

117 ODDOUL, *Hadduta Nubia*, p. 23.

118 HALIM, "Nubian Salvage."

119 DALY, *Gyn/ecology*, p. 56.

She has become a “willing victim”¹²⁰ and her willingness transforms her into a man-made construct. To use Daly’s words, Oddoul in this way can be described as a re-producer and “living proof” of this deceptive myth.

In my Re-visioning reading, Asha’s suicide in the Nile elucidates the patriarchal taking over of Oddoul’s Nile Bride. By choosing to commit suicide in the Nile, Asha like Farida, Nafisa and the Beloved, have totally imbibed the patriarchal ideologies that shape their existence and their death. Farida seeks suicide in the Nile compulsively, as an escape from the trauma of “nonbeing,” invisibility and muteness; Asha too reaches the same destiny after being fragmented and her life force devitalized.

8. Conclusion

The writers’ variations in their retelling of the Nile Bride myth, in their techniques and symbolic action, are the products of their attitudes toward the myth. Mukhtar presents the typical patriarchal image of the Bride who is punished for breaking the image of the self-sacrificing, complaisant, pure female imposed upon the society. Oddoul has taken big strides in the rewriting and replacing the old myth by reconstructing both Siyam and Asha and by presenting Asha as one who ventures into the discovery of her own identity, but unfortunately she is defeated and relapsed into a context similar to Farida’s. So, eventually, both Mukhtar and Oddoul – to different degrees – perpetuate the same oppressive myth. This echoes what Gilbert Highet declares that writers chose myths for their subjects because “the myths are permanent”, while “problems do not change, because men and women do not change.”¹²¹

I would like to conclude by saying that without facing the ills that have been done to women by the patriarchal telling, retelling, and revisiting of myths, women will remain mute, invisible and disempowered. Both men and women writers and critics alike need to cease perpetuating the myth of the voiceless woman whose only way out of a male-dominated society is through suicide—throwing herself literally or figuratively into the river. Both should step outside “the modern canonical core,”¹²² seize the patriarchal myths and rewrite them with a completely different orientation. Not only can they subvert the ideologies of gender, but also construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct offered gender roles. In this way both male

120 BACCHILEGA, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 122.

121 HIGHET, *The Classical Tradition*, p. 540.

122 SHIPPEY, “Rewriting the Core,” in *A Companion to the Fairy Tale*, p. 264.

and female writers can rewrite, unwrite, and replace the male-authored constructions of femininity.¹²³

When myths are boldly transformed, they can be therapeutic in nature to heal wounds and pains inflicted upon the female psyche for thousands of years. They can also be exploratory to enable women to discover hidden capabilities and talents and unfold the experience of emerging female self and multiple identities. In addition, they can postulate more assertive and active protagonists, more feminist versions as role models than the passive Nile Bride. These are inevitable steps if we want to start shaping our thoughts and actions.

123 KNOEFLMACHER, *Victorians, Fairy Tales, and, Femininity*, p. 426.

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