

Kareema's Ecological Self in Salwa Bakr's "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees"

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Abstract



This paper deals with "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees", a short story written in Arabic by Salwa Bakr, the Egyptian critic, novelist and author. The reading I propose is extracted from deep ecology, namely the ecological self. It highlights the self's identification with nature; opening one's self up to the multifarious surrounding life forms, even when one lives in an urban setting. I hope to demonstrate that Kareema Fahmi, the protagonist, embodies the ecological self and tries to promote environmental ethics in the various settings in which the events unfold—her neighborhood, her work place, and the asylum she is admitted to. The events of the story also bring to the fore her experience of a marginalized woman in a conservative patriarchal Egyptian society. I hope to illustrate how her concern for the quality of life, her love of nature, her love of her city Cairo and her feelings of oneness with the ecosystem, paradoxically, lead to tragic consequences of greater marginalization, and isolation, thus underscoring the cultural specificity of the story at hand. "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" is unique in its representation of an Egyptian ecological self, that of a sensitive and environmentally conscious but ostracized young woman who desperately struggles to promote environmental ethics, free herself from bondage and assert her individuality in a society where women are silenced.

Keywords: Ecological self, love of nature, topophilia, environmental ethics, Egyptian patriarchy.

Resumen

Este ensayo explora "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees", un relato corto escrito en árabe por Salwa Bakr, la autora, novelista y crítica egipcia. La lectura que propongo procede de la ecología profunda, específicamente del ser ecológico. Destaca la identificación del ser con la naturaleza; la apertura de uno mismo a las múltiples formas de vida alrededor, incluso si se vive en un entorno urbano. Espero demostrar que Kareema Fahmi, la protagonista, personifica el ser ecológico e intenta promover una ética medioambiental en los diversos escenarios en los que se desarrollan los hechos—su barrio, su lugar de trabajo, y el centro en el que es admitida. Los sucesos de la historia también ponen en primer plano la experiencia de una mujer marginalizada en la sociedad patriarcal y conservadora egipcia. Espero ilustrar cómo su preocupación por la calidad de vida, su amor por la naturaleza, su amor por la ciudad de El Cairo y sus sentimientos de unidad con el ecosistema, paradójicamente, llevan a trágicas consecuencias de una mayor marginalización y aislamiento, enfatizando así la especificidad cultural de la historia en cuestión. "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" es único en su representación del ser ecológico egipcio, el de una joven mujer sensible y medioambientalmente consciente pero aislada, alguien que lucha desesperadamente por promover una ética medioambiental, por liberarse de las ataduras y reivindicar su individualidad en una sociedad en la que las mujeres son silenciadas.

Palabras clave: Ser ecológico, amor por la naturaleza, topofilia, ética medioambiental, patriarcado egipcio.

"Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" is the title of the translation of a short story written in Arabic by Salwa Bakr (b.1949), the Egyptian critic, novelist and author. The Arabic text "Ihdā wa thālathūn shajarah jamīlah khadrā" first appeared in *Maqām 'Atiyyah* (Atiyyah's Shrine) in 1986, and was translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies in *The Wiles of Men and other stories*, in 1992. Most of Bakr's novels and stories "focus upon the detail of everyday life as it is experienced by Egyptian women, and they express her discontent with the cultural attitudes, social institutions and economic policies that shape women's lives" (Seymour-Jorn 151). "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" belongs to this category of Bakr's writing inasmuch as its protagonist is a young woman, Kareema Fahmi, who is marginalized, cast out and incarcerated in a mental asylum for kissing a colleague forwardly and in public when on a date, failing to wear a brassiere to work, painting her work desk red, and making a scene on election day—actions deemed socially transgressive in a conservative Egyptian society.

The critical corpus on Bakr's work and the story at hand is essentially feminist. In their analysis, critics have focused on topics such as madness, the silencing of women, and patriarchal ideologies, to name of few. Dinah Manisty, in "Madness as Textual Strategy in the Narratives of Three Egyptian Women Writers," explains that "[t]he fictional character of the deranged woman who haunts the margins of [the] nineteenth-century texts [of Mary Shelly, Emily and Charlotte Brontë (among others)] re-emerges in women's texts in Egypt" (154), namely in the works of Radwa Ashour, Salwa Bakr and Sakina Fu'ād, "a generation of writers concerned with challenging the limitations placed on women" (154). Hoda El Sadda, in "Women's writing in Egypt: Reflections on Salwa Bakr" sheds some light on the various phases of women's writing in Egypt and reveals how

Bakr's fiction defies any reductive attempt at classification or categorization. She succeeds in doing so by refusing to depict 'the struggle of the sexes' through situating her women characters in a larger context of subjugation and enslavement which is the fate of individuals forced to submit to a life of drudgery and social inequality. (134)

In "The Madness of Non-Conformity: Women versus Society in the Fiction of Salwa Bakr" Rasheed El-Enany reveals how "[i]n the world of Salwa Bakr, both men and women are fellow victims of a repressive political regime and an unjust social order, but within their fellowship, women become additionally the victims of men. The norms of patriarchal society oppress them as women, just as the norms of authoritarian government oppress them (and men) as citizens of diminished rights" (377). In his analysis of "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" El-Enany states that

[t]he narrative demonstrates the synchronized degeneration of a society into moral and physical ugliness, and disintegration of the mental faculties of the idealistic, free thinking female protagonist, as she gradually loses the ability to sacrifice her own true convictions for the falsities of society. (384)

This is just a sample of the critical corpus on Bakr's works in general and specifically "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees". One can argue, however, that other readings of Bakr's story are possible and equally pertinent.

The reading of "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" that I propose in this paper

differs in its focus. I have chosen an ecocritical framework of investigation. Scott Slovic defines ecocriticism as "the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach, or conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world" (160). Within a multitude of ecocritical approaches, I have selected a theory extracted from deep ecology, from Arne Naess' conception of the ecological self. It is a potentially trenchant reading that highlights the self's identification with nature; opening one's self up to the multifarious surrounding life forms regardless of gender, even when one lives in an urban setting such as Cairo. In light of the events of the story, one might rightly argue that an ecofeminist approach is equally pertinent. However, in many instances, the arguments would overlap with the feminist critical corpus of the story at hand. By contrast, Naess' concept of the ecological self brings to the fore a facet that has not yet been critically examined and, from a broader perspective, instigates a rapprochement between a modern Egyptian short story and deep ecology.

Arne Naess introduces the "ecological self" in "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World". He believes that we tend to confuse our self with a narrow ego, though "with sufficient comprehensive (all-sided) maturity, we cannot help but 'identify' our self with all living beings: beautiful or ugly, big or small, scientific or not" (225). Naess calls for "a deepening identification with all life-forms and the greater units: the ecosystems and Gaia, the fabulous of planet of ours" (235). This "process of identification", which involves a deepening and expansion of the self, defines the ecological self and brings about self-realization (227). In order to clarify what he really means by the ecological self, Naess refers to what he calls a "paradigm situation" of identification (227). While performing a laboratory experiment, looking through an old-fashioned microscope at two different chemicals on a slide, a flea jumped into the acid chemical solution and struggled violently for several minutes to free itself, but to no avail. He felt a painful sense of compassion for the flea and empathy that, in his view, was more than basic. It was a process of identification, of seeing himself in the flea. He states: "If I had been *alienated* from the flea, not seeing intuitively anything even resembling myself, the death struggle would have left me feeling indifferent. So there must be identification in order for there to be compassion and, among humans, solidarity" (227).

In *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, Naess sheds more light on the process of identification, the opposite of alienation. He gives the example of children playfully spraying insects trapped against a wall. With indifference, the children watch the insects fall to the floor. An adult caringly picks up an insect and tells the children that perhaps those animals, like them, prefer to live rather than die. At this particular moment, the children overcome their indifference, here being synonymous with alienation. They spontaneously experience the insects as themselves (171-72). As such, identification acquires the meaning of similarity, which Naess clarifies when he states: "a process of identification is created by the very fact of your feeling something of yourself in something else. Not that it need resemble yourself, but there is something about it that you recognize in yourself" (Naess, *Life's Philosophy* 113-114).

My analysis of the ecological self in Bakr's "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" will be based on the Arabic text. However, I will be using Denys Johnson-Davies' faithful English text for quotes to make the story accessible to non-Arabic speaking readers. I hope to demonstrate that Kareema Fahmi persistently embodies the ecological self and an environmental ethics irrespective of the various settings in which the events unfold—her neighborhood, her work place, and the asylum she is admitted to. Clearly, the events of the story bring to the fore her experience of a marginalized woman living in a conservative patriarchal Egyptian society. One can also argue that her concern for the quality of life, her love of nature, her love of her city Cairo, and her feelings of oneness with the ecosystem do not lead to self-realization. Paradoxically, they lead to tragic consequences of greater marginalization, and isolation, thus underscoring the cultural specificity of the story at hand. "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" is unique in its representation of an Egyptian ecological self, that of a sensitive and environmentally conscious young woman who desperately struggles to instill environmental values in others, free herself from bondage, and assert her individuality in a society where women are silenced.

The opening of "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" is devoid of any reference to nature. The story opens with a first-person narrator who decides to tell her story, "to write it and set it down precisely" as it happened to her. She wants to tell how she lived before being brought to what she refers to as "this terrible place," without immediately and directly divulging that she is in a mental asylum (Bakr 12). What leads the narrator to adopt an objective stance in the narration of such a subjective experience? Is it because she is a woman? Manisty analyzes the function of the narrator in the works of Radwa Ashour, Salwa Bakr and Sakina Fu'ād. She states:

Unlike their Anglo-American counterparts who often place the figure of the madwoman on the margins, Ashour, Bakr, and Fu'ād have placed the madwoman in a central, narrating role. The role of narrator enables the protagonist to resist marginalization of voice and space and to question the validity of binary logic in which women in patriarchal society are defined in terms of lack, irrationality and silence. Through appropriating the label of madness habitually used *against* women, they invert its function to expose the "real madness" inherent in the prevalent social conditions and show the irrationality of patriarchal binary thought which erects false truths and "false madness". The alternative knowledge which the women articulate puts the male monopoly over public discourse at risk; they dismantle the patriarchal premise which links woman's voice to madness by positing an alternative premise which equates woman's voice with truth. (154-55)

Kareema's autobiographical writing can be seen as a vital negentropic measure with the function of representing a multifaceted yet coherent self-identity, not only that of an unfairly ostracized woman but also that of an eco-conscious person. However, her desire to write is an activity fraught with difficulties since we see her encouraging herself to write her story in detail and hide it in a safe place, perhaps in the mattress, in a hole she has scooped. As such she posits a contrast between a safe place (an enclave of order) and a terrible place—the asylum. One cannot ignore her constant and repetitive reference to the asylum as a hellish and terrible place, which would highlight one facet of ecocriticism, its attention to place. In "Literature and the Environment," Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber state:

[E]cocriticism's attention to place reflects its recognition of the interconnectedness between human life/history and physical environments to which works of imagination (in all media, including literature) bear witness—hence the claim by one of ecocriticism's earliest spokespersons that its distinctive addition to the commonly studied triad of race, class, and gender was place as a critical category. (420)

Kareema's life at present cannot be dissociated from the place she lives in and how she perceives it. She describes the asylum as a place with grey filthy walls that induce insomnia and keep her staring at the ceiling the whole night fearing that these walls will close in so tightly on her and asphyxiate her. She stares at them and sees them drawing nearer and nearer, getting close to her to the point where she screams with all her strength, leading the walls to return to their original positions. The asylum is a place of confinement, a place of utter isolation from the world, with no hope of being released except in death. Clearly, it is a place where she experiences "existential outsidership" in its extreme forms, "[t]he weakest of all levels of identification with place, which [Edward] Relph equates to a sense of not belonging, feelings of un-involvement with and alienation from the place" (Liu and Freestone 6). In Kareema's view, it is a place she was brought to wrongly and by force because "[she] preferred silence, everlasting silence, that day when [she] decided to cut off [her] little tongue, that simple lump of flesh with which [she] was always giving vent to words and thoughts" (Bakr 12). Kareema's desire to cut her tongue evokes the myth of Philomela in Greek mythology whose tongue was cut by her husband's sister to silence her after he raped her.

In the description of her life in the asylum, Kareema brings to light one facet of her ecological self. Despite the state of mental anguish she lives in, and despite the utter alienation she experiences, she is deeply concerned about the fate of a sparrow who slips through the window of her room and eats a few crumbs of what she believes is poisoned food she has to ingest daily. In a frantic attempt to save its life she runs towards it to scare it away but it has already picked up some bread crumbs in its beak before flying away. This causes her to weep for a whole day as she thinks about the miserable end that unfortunate sparrow would meet. One cannot but notice Kareema's great sensitivity, who, regardless of her mental state or how she is perceived by others, demonstrates a strong bond with the natural world and its non-human inhabitants.

In her autobiographical account, Kareema chooses to limit herself to writing about her life before her incarceration. She chooses to highlight the interconnectedness of things around her and the changes within herself. The changes around her are environmental and cataclysmic. No sooner does she graduate from the university and is employed at the Water Company than "a few drops from the flood had already made their appearance on the horizon" of the city she inhabits, "affecting both people and things, and even animals and plants" (Bakr 14).

Kareema portrays herself as a witness to the destructive power of this flood, which may simply be a delusion, a symbol of the deterioration of the quality of life in Cairo. She sees the flood "sweeping over everything, everything of beauty in [her] beautiful city" (Bakr 14). One cannot be oblivious to her perception of the city as beautiful. She could have simply said the flood destroyed the city she was living in, and

not "the beautiful in [her] beautiful city." Is it because she is a woman and women are more sensitive to beauty than men? More interesting is the way she appropriates the city, referring to it as *her* beautiful city. This appropriation is symptomatic of Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of *topophilia* (literally: "love of place") as "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (*Topophilia* 4). Oftentimes she also expresses her love for the street she takes to go to work, describing it as the street she loved so much, was so proud of and had strong feelings for (Bakr 14).

Kareema brings her love for her city to the fore even on the day she is brought to the asylum—when riding a van that passes through the streets at a crazy speed. She cannot but smile tenderly and look at the tall buildings scattered here and there. She says: "Farewell, farewell, my beautiful city, the flood has once again swept you away" (Bakr 14). The destructive effect of the flood is not incidental. She had previously seen the signs of the flood in the street which she used to walk along daily on her way to work at the Water Company. The flood had caused the street to lose its landmarks little by little:

The glass of the clean bright shop windows in which, so brilliantly did they shine, one could of a morning see one's face, had begun to lose their lustre and grow dull, and the well-laid pavement damp with water during the hot hours of summer had come to be pitted with holes in which dirty water had collected, and I would notice that these holes were becoming larger day by day till they formed what looked like stagnant pools spread round the pavement. (Bakr 14-15)

Kareema's love for her city is so intense that even in the asylum, when she is about to write her autobiographical account, she reminisces about her beloved city. She is possessed by what Svetlana Boym calls "a mania for longing." She experiences flashes of joy and her heart is filled with yearning and nostalgia for her city, one that operates by "associationist magic," whereby aspects of everyday life, including minutia and trivia, sensations, tastes, and sounds are conducive to triggering a nostalgic reaction (4).

Kareema writes:

I imagine the pictures made by the bright, laughing colors of the shop awnings, bright orange and sparkling blue, and that marvelous awning I used to gaze at so long while the vendor handed me the paper cone of monkey nuts, the awning of the 'Freedom Star' shop that sold chick-peas and all types of salted melon seeds and other things to munch and chew. (Bakr 14)

Kareema then moves on to describe the beautiful little trees she would gaze at on her way back and forth to work, providing the long-awaited reference to the title of the short story. She would amuse herself by gazing at the beautiful trees. Kareema would even count them—thirty-one green-leafed trees—adorning the street. The reference to the exact number of trees is puzzling. Is it perhaps to show that the number might diminish? Or is thirty-one a symbolic number? It represents practical, yet creative, energy, all of which are traits of the protagonist (Walmsley n.p.). Nonetheless these traits are going to be ignored, mislabeled by her conservative entourage, and one of the reasons why she is admitted to the asylum. More significant than numbers is the impact of the trees on her emotions. They bring joy into her heart, thus revealing how intimately connected with nature she is:

Making my way along the street daily, coming and going to work on foot, I would generally amuse myself by gazing at the street's beautiful little trees, and I would count them. I would know that after the blue gum tree there would be the casuarina, then the Indian fig, and some ten meters before arriving at the door of the Water Company there would be a beautiful tree whose name I never got to know, a tree with spreading branches almost all of whose leaves would fall at the coming of spring when it would be resplendent with a vast quantity of large purple flowers; it would look magnificent, a unique spectacle among the other trees. I knew by heart the number of trees along the way; thirty-one green-leafed trees adorning the street and bringing joy to my heart whenever I looked at them. (Bakr 15)

The emotions the trees trigger in the protagonist are not simply those of joy but also sadness. One day, on her return from the water company at noon, Kareema counts the trees and finds that they are thirty and not thirty-one. She thinks that, having a lot on her mind, it was simply a miscalculation. To her dismay, she sees that one tree had been uprooted and thrown on the pavement with the rubble of an old building that was being torn down. The reader cannot but establish a parallel between Kareema's uprooting from home, incarceration in the asylum and the uprooting of the tree.

Kareema laments the loss of one of the Indian fig trees. She weeps bitterly and feels a lump in her throat that is about to choke her. She cannot but compare the uprooted dumped tree to the dead body of some harmless innocent bird that has been killed. This is the second reference to birds being harmed. She feels diminished because of the possible death of the bird, and more so now because of the uprooting of the Indian fig tree—she is part and parcel of the ecosystem.

Kareema chooses to highlight the correlation between nature, in the form of birds or trees, and her physical health. She explains that as soon as she saw the tree thrown on the pavement, she sensed that changes were taking place inside her. From that moment she begins to feel pain in her insides—a pain that would last for days and weeks and subsequently deteriorates into ghastly and crazy pains in her head with every breath she takes. The diagnosis, she explains, is a chronic intestinal inflammation brought about by nervous tension (Bakr 16).

Kareema also chooses to portray the deterioration of her mental health as a result of environmental degradation. More trees are felled, and when there are only three trees left along the entire road, she falls into a state of confusion. She sinks into depression and puts on so much weight that she is perceived to be obese. She loses her capacity to be cheerful and becomes quite uncommunicative. She loses her interest in going to the cinema or in conversing with her women friends on any of the topics she used to talk about. She does not know exactly what has come over her, or what calamity has befallen her city or the people in it, thus proving once more oneness with the ecosystem.

Being a witness and a victim of environmental destruction, Kareema changes her mind about marriage and her future. She decides not to think about marriage at all despite her getting on in years. One may conjecture that this change is caused by her obesity in a shallow society where women are judged based on their appearance. However, she hastens to say that despite her gaining weight, her complexion is still good, her eyes large and her hair soft. She is still regarded by some people as possessing

a certain beauty. The real reason for her change of mind is environmental. She expresses her worry about her children and grandchildren living in a concrete city:

How could I one day get married and bear children who would live in this city? What misery they would experience when they looked around them and found nothing but a vast jungle planted with concrete and colors of grey and brown! Also, I won't conceal the fact that I was even more afraid for my grandchildren, when I thought about what it would be like for them when they came out into the world and lived in this city, without seeing a flower or knowing the meaning of the word. (Bakr 16)

One may be tempted to interpret Kareema's worries as an anthropocentric form of environmentalism, one which clashes with her ecological self, since her concern about environmental damage is linked to the loss of benefits for future generations. Nevertheless, one should not be oblivious to the fact that Kareema thinks of humans as part of the ecosystem. Positions in deep ecology are concerned with

future generations rather than the next few decades, with the Third World rather than just the developed world, with non-human species as well as human interests, and with cultural diversity and resistance to economic and cultural domination rather than endorsement of the status quo. (Attfield 38)

The environment, be it the natural or the physical one, influences Kareema's conception of the ideal husband. She dreams of a husband who differs from all the young men who have presented themselves to her. He would be someone who would love his city as much as she did, and who would not get bored counting its trees on warm summer evenings when the sky is clear and the moon is shining down on the world from on high. This dream husband would accompany her as they walked hand in hand in the city's streets chatting and eating monkey nuts. Nowhere does she refer to the ideal husband as one possessing wealth and having a high status in society.

Even when it comes to dating, Kareema cannot but be close to nature. Whereas many girls would dream of going out with a date to a fancy restaurant, Kareema prefers to sit with a colleague at work, right at the river's edge, and watch the water as it makes its way aimlessly to the sea rather than accept his proposal to sit at a riverside café. In addition, nature becomes the instigator of romance. Sitting with him at the edge of the river, with the golden rays of sunset making Kareema's colleague look very handsome and gentle, leads her to kiss him on the lips, even though there is simply affection between them. This angers the conservative young man who scolds her for being so forward in a public place. This incident leads both of them to depart angrily, and she stops talking to him.

Kareema's dreams are environmental. Nature infiltrates her unconscious in the form of a beautiful dream. The felling of her beloved trees has such a traumatic impact on her that she sees the trees of her beloved street not only return to their original place, they do so in leaf and in full bloom. They also produce wonderful, fantastically shaped fruits of exquisite colors she has never seen before (Bakr 18). The colorfulness of the fruits stands in stark contrast to the dirty street that is crammed with cars.

The consequences of this beautiful dream happen to be detrimental for Kareema on the emotional and physical level at the Water Company. She wakes up from her dream feeling the heat of the sun on her forehead only to realize that she will be late to

work. She skips breakfast, dresses hurriedly, rushes to work, only to realize that she has forgotten to wear a brassière. Going back home to wear one would delay her arrival at work. She thinks it is stupid to insist on wearing a bra as there is nothing shameful about a woman's breasts, just as it is ridiculous for men to wear a necktie. At work, her boss, Mr. Aziz, is scandalized by her unconventional attire and deems her behavior disruptive and indecent. He asks her to return to her office and asks a woman colleague to talk to her, who in turn reproaches her for her audacity. Manisty explains that "the bra and necktie are metaphors for the prevailing restrictions imposed on human beings which bind them emotionally and physically. More specifically, the bra is a symbol of male control over female sexuality and its absence threatens the *status quo* and accounts for the exaggerated reaction of Kareema's boss (159). The bra incident, Kareema states, brings a large number of male and female colleagues to regard her as mad. The Water Company with its patriarchal and close-minded views destroys Kareema in the same manner men destroyed the trees and the flood destroyed her beautiful city.

Strangely enough Kareema is concerned about the quality of life of her coworkers. Her concern is revealed in her decision to beautify the work place of six of them with whom she shares the same account room. We have already seen her sensitivity towards beauty in her description of the thirty-one beautiful green trees and in the reference to beauty in her city. She can tolerate neither filth nor gloomy colors. She asks: "Why is there all this filth at the Water Company? Why is the color of the desks always a gloomy grey? Also, why is it that so many files and heaps of papers are stacked up in corners to form a nightly playground for insects and rats?" (Bakr 20) Her desire is to turn the space of the office into a place. In "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective" Yi-Fu Tuan explains that "[p]lace incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning" (387). Consequently, she goes early to work, sweeps the office, polishes it and cleans the windows, then places on the desk of each employee a pretty bunch of flowers in a glass of water.

Kareema decides to beautify her working station as well. In a moment of epiphany she comes up with a surprising idea. She buys a beautiful desk with her saved money, has it painted in bright red and asks for its delivery to the Water Company. To her dismay, the security officer refuses to let the delivery man in even when informed that she had paid the bill. In a more oppressive move the security officer contacts the office manager who summons Kareema and inquires about the situation. In an emotional outburst Kareema objects about the absence of colors and highlights the impact of colorful desks on the mental state of people at work: "Why do we have to have grey desks? What would be wrong if one employee were to be seated at a red desk, another at a green desk, and a third at a yellow desk, and so on? Wouldn't this make everyone feel jolly?" (Bakr 21). For Kareema, the beautiful is an essential condition for a happy life. El-Enany posits that beauty is at the core of Bakr's worldview, though it is a fluid concept. In his view, Bakr strives for an aesthetic sense of life and her characters are distressed about the disappearance of the value of beauty from society (392-93).

He adds:

If the absence of beauty can lead to crime in Salwa Bakr's world, it can also lead to insanity, as many stories across collections demonstrate. The souls of Bakr's women are thirsty for beauty and, when it is denied them by a harsh, arid and inhospitable reality that sets no value on beauty morally and physically, but is ever preoccupied with expediency and basic material needs, they exit from society into one form or another of madness—the madness of non-conformity, a madness which in Bakr's worldview is superior to sanity. (393)

The work place is ideally a comfortable place, a place where one works harmoniously with one's colleagues and superiors and where one is happy, but it is not so in reality. When Kareema informs the manager that she will buy some simple pieces of furniture for the accounts room when she has saved enough money, he gives her a scornful look and asks her to go back to her office. Losing her composure Kareema shouts: "This isn't fair! Why do you think in this way? What's wrong with a red-colored desk?" (Bakr 21). Had the manager been a woman, would his reaction be similar? One cannot but wonder whether the manager's reaction is personal, gender-related or instigated by a rigid bureaucratic system. As a consequence of his response, Kareema has a slight fainting fit and is taken back home. This incident not only reveals her inability to be heard as a woman but also her inability to give an identity to this space, to turn it into a place that dramatizes her aspirations. Tuan explains that "identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life" (*Space and Place* 178). This incident also highlights the tyrannical power of the administrative officers of the Water Company who silence Kareema and crush her creativity: a creativity that stems from her concern about the quality of life of other fellow beings.

In her autobiographical narration Kareema then moves on to draw attention to another facet of her personality, her environmental ethics and her political activism, past and present. She explains that she has always been interested in public affairs, the realm of men. She used to attend several discussion groups and while still at school she participated in demonstrations. Kareema asserts that what happened on Election Day is the real reason for having been brought to the asylum wrongly and by force. On this day, while she was walking towards the elementary school where the elections were to be held, she noticed a weasel sticking its head out from the doorway of one of the closed shops, then dashing across the street in the direction of the school. She could not interpret the meaning of seeing a weasel in full daylight. The sight of the weasel triggered in her intense emotional and physical reactions. Her violent headaches recurred and her stomach became bloated. She lost control of her feelings at the sight of this small animal with the dejected face and soft, lithe body roaming through the streets of the city. She had seen it many times before freely crossing the streets. She sat at the edge of the pavement in a state of semi-collapse, sobbed bitterly and ignored the inquiries of an old woman. One may postulate that Kareema's reaction is due to her realization that the weasel's appearance during the day in the city is most likely symptomatic of the animal's loss of habitat. It is also well known that weasels are nocturnal carnivorous mammals. Weasels live in a variety of habitats, such as open

fields, woodlands, thickets, roadsides and farmlands, abandoned burrows, or nests under trees or rock piles. They are not usually seen during the day in the midst of a city like Cairo. Kareema's tempestuous reaction reveals, once again, her sensitivity towards the earth's non-human inhabitants and her concern about environmental degradation.

Kareema's sensitivity to the natural world can be contrasted with that of other people at the elementary school where the election is to be held. Someone there distributes papers to the voters with texts, patterns, pictures of animals (dogs and camels) and trees (palm trees), and small gifts. Not that the candidates and their supporters care about nature; they are simply keen on capturing the votes of the illiterates. By contrast, we see Kareema's passion towards environmental issues. When someone notices that she is reading the pieces of paper with interest, he comes up to her and begins a conversation, indicating that she should vote for the candidate to whose party he belongs. In an outburst, Kareema questions him about environmental issues that are closely connected to her mental and physical health: "Does your party do anything about planting trees in the city instead of concrete? Has it formed a well-equipped army to deal seriously with the weasels? Does it possess some medicine that can restore my good spirits?" (Bakr 23). Altman and Churchman explain that "[e]nvironmental implications of women's lives relate to all scales of the environment: from the dwelling to the neighborhood, to the settlement and the region, and to the nature of the personal and societal decision-making processes that affect them" (3-4.) Kareema wants politicians to address problems that arise from humans interacting with the natural world, in contrast to another view where "it is the scientists who bear the major intellectual responsibility for coping with [environmental] degradation" (Conway et al. 2).

Indisputably, the political cannot be dissociated from the social and the environmental. Kareema then moves on to attack the current ministers. She shouts: "[M]ost of our ministers are ugly and they have such fat necks one doubts their ability to do anything useful" (Bakr 23). In a loud voice, she moves on to inquire about women's participation: "Where are the women? I see no women around me. Why have you not sought out the reasons for the sparrows having fled from our city and why is it so full of flies and mosquitoes?" (Bakr 23). This might be an insinuation that women are concerned about environmental issues whereas men are not. Kareema's ethics is also that of animal-welfarism. Sadly, the reaction Kareema gets from the people is nothing but mockery and laughter. Only one man asks her for her identity and voting cards which she submits in good faith, not knowing that it is an attempt on his part to silence her and prevent her participation in the elections. To her dismay, the man does not offer any explanation and does not give her the cards back. This leads her to curse him and hit him, and to people attacking her. She calls the police and the people in charge and does not know what happens subsequently, except that she finds herself at home. Clearly her society is indifferent to environmental issues and has entrenched codes and norms that restrict female individuality and free expression of speech.

The marginalization of Kareema is even more violent at home. One would hope that upon her return home Kareema would be able to express herself freely and would

find a sympathetic ear. Instead, she has to confront a mother who scolds her, reproaches her for ruining her brother's future, accuses her of silliness and tells her that she deserves to have her tongue cut out (her mother had already threatened to do so in the past). Dejected, Kareema thinks of cutting her own tongue, an ironic act of self-silencing, in conformity with a patriarchal society that silences women. She opens the scissors and places her tongue between the blades. At this crucial moment her mother comes in, snatches the scissors and starts screaming. The neighbors and people gather in the street. Kareema is admitted to the asylum. There she tells her story to all the nurses and doctors around her, but they smile and pat her on the back. To no avail, she tries to make them understand that the thought of cutting off her tongue was simply a way to stop herself from talking and avoid getting in trouble. Kareema's marginalization continues in the asylum.

The story ends with the image of Kareema as a diminished woman, mentally and physically. She does not know how many years she has spent in the asylum. She simply remembers the numerous visits of her mother who would talk to her without getting any response. But her mother is no longer coming. She remembers her brother's infrequent yet silent visits. Kareema realizes that she is on the verge of dying. She sees that her body has withered, her hair has gone white and her legs are weak. Despite this grim picture, she reiterates her love for her beautiful city, her street and her hope to see the thirty-one beautiful trees, which as we know, are no longer there. She says: "Yet I hope to get out of this place, be it even for a single hour, that I may see my city and the road so dear to my heart, which I have so often walked along and in which at such time I would so hope to see thirty-one beautiful green trees" (Bakr 26). Clearly, her experience of marginalization, accusation of madness, and unjust confinement has not annihilated her love for nature. Let the so-called madness and fantasy prevail if they entail dreaming of a city with beautiful green trees!

Submission received 11 August 2018

Revised version accepted 5 January 2019

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