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## Renaissance Buried Alive in “The Collar and the Bracelet”

Sayed Elsis<sup>\*</sup>

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### Abstract

Through a close reading and interdisciplinary analysis of the 1975 novella *al-Tawq wa al-Iswira* (*The Collar and the Bracelet*) by Yahya al-Tahir 'Abdallah<sup>1</sup> and the 1986 cinematic adaptation directed by Khairi Bishara,<sup>2</sup> this article demonstrates how the textual and visual narrations converge and diverge in their representations of the Upper Egyptian village at a point of potential *Nahda*, or renaissance. It further demonstrates how the novella and the film utilize the image of the circle, alluded to by the titular collar and the bracelet, to uncover and disrupt the circular patterns of oppression that dominate rural life. These patterns of oppression are made manifest through the juxtaposition of binary oppositions: life and death, modernity and tradition, myth and science, and patriarchal structures and the push for increased gender equality.

This study examines not only the question of *Nahda*/renaissance in the novel but also the representation of women and their position within the popular imagery. As this study uses parallel narratives to read Abdullah's works, it traces the link between the representation of women in the novel and other women's representations with a distinct presence in the mythology, literature and the folklore; such as Isis in the ancient Egyptian mythology, and Na'sa in the folkloric story of Ayyoub Al-Masri (the Egyptian Job). Even though it is apparent that men have absolute power and occupy the pinnacle of gender hierarchy power in the rural village of the novel, this article questions the veracity of such a claim. While the novel begins with what seems to be assent to that gender hierarchy, the hierarchy is revealed as false through different contexts: Egyptian mythology, anthropology, folklore, and intertextual reading with other works by Yahya al-Tahir and writings of others.

**Keywords:** Nahda; Arab Renaissance; Upper Egypt; Modernity; Egyptian Mythology; Isis and Osiris; Folklore; Shahrazad; Patriarchy; Yahya al-Tahir 'Abdallah; Khairi Bishara

### Introduction

The collar and bracelet in the title of Yahya al-Tahir 'Abdallah's 1975 novella evokes both the image of a circle and the circularity of opposites. While the collar and the bracelet represent the apparent dream of every virgin girl, which is a wedding followed by a happy marriage, this marital gift later dramatically shifts to symbolize the manacles of subservience in a strict patriarchal society. The circle, and also the disruption of the circle, thus offers an entrance into a gender and sociocultural analysis of the patterns and relationships in the novel and the film, since we can consider it the central signifier in the construction of visual and textual

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narratives, alongside the construction of other patterns that overlap and interact with the narrative, including 'Abdallah's own earlier short stories, ancient Egyptian mythology, Arabic literary and visual heritage, and cultural analysis. These circles repeat and reinvent until they reach the character of Nabawiyya, who is the crux of the village's failed renaissance.

### 1. The Hermetic Circle

The novel tells the story of three generations in the upper Egyptian village of Karnak in the first half of the twentieth century. These are represented by the invalid Bakhit al-Bishari, his wife Hazina, their daughter Fahima, and their son Mostafa, who left the family for the Sudan. The father dies after al-Haddad, a neighbor, asks for Fahima's hand in marriage. When Hazina learns of her son-in-law's impotence, she takes Fahima to the temple to expose her to the god of fertility, which she believes will induce pregnancy. Fahima gets pregnant, but al-Haddad decides to divorce her anyway. A few years later, Fahima dies and Hazina takes care of her daughter, Nabawiyya. Soon after the absent son Mostafa returns to the village, young Nabawiyya falls in love with her neighbor Sabir. Her cousin al-Sa'di, who also desires Nabawiyya, kills her and cuts off her head. Traumatized by the tragic fate that has befallen his sister's child, Mostafa becomes paralyzed and an invalid like his father, Bakhit al-Bishari. In other words, the novella ends where it begins. This circularity permeates the book, both stylistically and thematically, prompting the reader to go back to the beginning and dwell on the interpretive signification of these repeated patterns. At the end of the book<sup>3</sup>:

The time for tears is past and the light was snuffed out of your eyes long ago, Hazina. Here you are, after all these years, squatting in your house with the invalid son by your side. Husband and daughter have departed and the daughter's daughter has perished ('Abdallah: 71).

This section reads like a re-write of the description at the beginning:

#### **Hazina's Thoughts, a Mother's Heart**

Hazina's thoughts are with her son. There in faraway lands. Her right ear – the one that hears – is here with the cooing doves that cry, He is the Lord of Creation! The light deserted her right eye two years ago. Her left eye watches: Bikhit al-Bishari stretched out on the stone bench...

Her two hands stroke – here, the spindle which never ceases turning and gathering up the thread. Her thoughts are there, with the absent one in far away foreign lands.

The circularity is conspicuous throughout the visual structure of the film which connects the film's beginning and its end, through a number of visual elements. One of the most striking elements of the film is the circular motion of the camera, which is repeated much like the circular motion of a millstone. Like a millstone, life grinds and crushes people like grains of wheat. The desolate atmosphere is established with the sad appalling music that begins the film, even during the jolly Fahima's singing a folkloric love song and despite the bright, delightful picture of the white birds flying over the Nile in the sunshine. The soundtrack of the introduction is a substantial combination of wailing wind sounds accompanied by echoes

of composing brass sounds of the Seventh-day birth celebration (Sobu'), while funeral bells hover between them.

Therefore, birth and death, joy and sorrow, love and separation, singing and weeping rotate on the same melody, only a change in the tone or rhythm changes the meaning and impression of the melody. Furthermore, in this context, it is meaningful how the same actors play the roles of the father and the son - played by 'Izzat al-'Alaili - while the daughter Fahima and granddaughter (Nabawiyya, or Farha in the film) played by Sherihan. Consequently, the film visually ties the identical appearances of the characters together with identical fates.

After the son's absence of twenty years, Mostafa returns. Having decided to settle in his hometown, he sees that nothing has changed. As he stares at all the things in the house with his mother, he realizes that nothing is missing except his father. Mostafa says in the film, "Oh my, how amazingly the days play out! Everything on the same spot, everything in the same place. "Bakhit al-Bishari is the only thing missing here". Even Fahima, his sister who has since departed, is not missing, as he sees her in his daughter Nabawiyya. Even though he knows his niece's mother has passed away he still calls her Fahima. Although he does not realize he is returning to face a tragic fate as his father has gone, in other words, he has to fill in for his dead father. Hence, in the film, the scene repeats with the son just as it did with the father in the beginning.

Only Hazina remains as an everlasting witness to the tragedy after they all departed, including the granddaughter Nabawiyya who is massacred when she is just a child. Before she became a woman, she's brutally slaughtered in a brutal, bloody scene which was not common in the Arabic novel before. The only exception may be Husna, Mostafa Sa'id's widow in al-Tayyib Salih's novel entitled *Season of Migration to North*.

## 2. The Two Mostafas

Two women in other Arabic novels of the time suffered a brutal death like that of Nabawiyya in *The Collar and the Bracelet*: Jamila, the educated girl who falls in love in Yahya Haqqi's 1956 novella *al-Bustagi (The Postman)* and Husna in Tayeb Salih's 1966 novel *Mawsim al-Hjra ila al-Shamaal (Season of Migration to the North)*. The brutal deaths of all three women stand in for the tragic failures of modernity in Arab societies during the first half of the twentieth century, especially when it came to women's rights and personal liberties. They further depict the brutal punishment of everyone who dared slip away from the dominating collars of the hegemony of the patriarchal traditions or to break the tight bracelets of stagnation. The Mostafa of *Season of Migration to the North* can shed a new light on 'Abdallah's novella. Like Mostafa al-Bishari in 'Abdallah's novel, he returns to his village after spending long years in Europe, battling with the western civilization as well as with himself. He returns in order to die, as he confesses by the end of the novel, in his own land of origin, next to the river. After his dramatic death, his widow is forced to marry Wad al-Rayyis, and she dies in a bloody scene that is echoed in Nabawiyya's death at the hands of al-Sa'di. Both al-Sa'di and Wad al-Rayyis represent the brutality and violence of sexist men in this southern patriarchal society.

The similarities between Mostafa Sa'id of *Season of Migration to the North* and Mostafa al-Bishari of *The Collar and the Bracelet* are not limited to their return to the homeland to die. More significantly, they return willingly to face their destinies and to receive the punishments they both believe that they deserve. They have the same deep belief that they do deserve the destiny that awaits them, not for the sexual sins they committed in foreign lands, for which they have already been punished, but rather for being touched by the soul of modernity and for their attempts to rebel against it or attach themselves to the nostalgia of tradition.

### 3. Virgins' Hearts in a Box

'Abdallah's 1974 short-story collection *The Tambourine and the Chest* was published one year before *The Collar and the Bracelet*. Many of the stories in this collection have echoes of *The Collar and the Bracelet*, but two, in particular, could serve as drafts for the novella, "The Sixth Month of the Third Year" and "Death in Three Tableaus." 'Abdallah interweaves the realm of al-Karnak village through the two short stories, intertwining the two texts in order to create a massive, rich tableau.

The two texts do not only depict the same setting, al-Karnak, but they also depict similar, or sometimes the same, characters, as well as identical themes and settings. However, 'Abdallah does not repeat himself: he presents the village and the people in two different dimensions and from two different narrative perspectives. Despite the repeated details, the two texts depict seemingly opposite realms, created through contrasting narrative techniques, as will be explained.

It is worth mentioning that the symmetry in the structure of the two titles, *The Tambourine and the Chest* and *The Collar and the Bracelet*, does not occur in 'Abdallah's other works. The vocabulary of the two titles belongs to the ritual of the wedding and celebrating, the syntax of getting married, joy and village celebration. Moreover, three words out of four – the tambourine, the collar, and the bracelets represent the circularity between the opposites already mentioned: of singing, joy, happiness, and weddings on the one hand; sorrow, wailing, chaining, tying, slavishness, and subservience on the other. The tambourine, supposed to be the instrument of singing and celebrating in the wedding is mentioned only once in the short story "The Tambourine and the Chest," when Maryam hears the sound of the tambourine as part of a tragic, sad context of wailing and crashing sounds: "*I hear the sound of the tambourine with mourning for wailing woman and sound of the cage crashes,*" says Maryam" (149).

"The Tambourine and the Chest" does not mention the chest at all. Instead, we find the chest in *The Collar of the Bracelet*, shedding new light on 'Abdallah's narrative strategy of intertwining the texts in order to extend the depth of his characters, especially the female characters, and to compel the reader to reconceptualize those characters who appear in the two texts from different perspectives and in a different semantic contexts.

A section dedicated to the virgin sister Fahima in the first chapter of *The Collar and the Bracelet* is titled "The Virgin's Heart in the Box (Chest)," which 'Abdallah further divides into two subsections, A and B. Subsection B focuses on Fahima's thoughts about the desired bridegroom, her own man in the future, the knight of her dreams whose characteristics she

gathers from the folkloric sirahs and stories, knights with whom she decorates her own chest-box; such as the heroic figures from the epic *Sirat Bani Hilal*: al-Zanati Khalifa, Abu Zaid al-Hilali, Kulaib, and Jassas (11). Although B is a near-repetition of A, 'Abdallah does not name the girl in section A, calling her "the girl," with a vaguely generalized depiction that does not suggest he is referring to Fahima, especially when he repeats the same description again naming Fahima in section B. Instead, we might recognize the girl of section A as Maryam from the short story "The Tambourine and the Chest," bringing her textually into the novella and identifying her with Fahima. The two of the girls, and Nabawiyya will join them later, complete the representation of the virgin girl in this narrative realm. In such sophisticated and delicate intertextual technique, 'Abdallah intertwines the separate sections within works into an interdependent circle of his narrative.

Maryam and Fahima share more: they are identical in desiring the brother who embodies their dreams of a coveted bridegroom. We can read almost the same scene with Maryam and Fahima when they surrender to death in a hallucinatory moment as they give themselves to the imagined, desired brother as the last attempt at escaping the men they have been forced to marry. Maryam, at the end of the story of "The Tambourine and the Chest," sinks into the swamp, hallucinating and giving herself to the desired brother, in the image of Death, who comes up behind her (149). Fahima also surrenders to someone who comes from behind in the ancient temple to escape horrific feelings: "Fahima fell backward into outstretched arms and lost consciousness" (26). In a later scene in her mother's house, she experiences the same horrific feeling and hallucinatory state of mind. We do not know for sure if it is because of a fever or because of a desire to extend the feeling of imagined contact with her brother, evoked when she gave herself to the god of fertility with his stony steps and fiery eyes in the ancient temple. In either case, he comes to her mind as the one who will take her:

This is my mother's house. I am lying on my dead father's bed. The person standing over there is my mother. She's taking care of me. She cools my burning forehead and smooths my burning face. She rubs my neck and chest. The cool water is good, and the warm water is good, and the long sleep that approaches is good. I crave moist dates.... But why are the days passing so quickly? I smell the smell of his sweat. I smell the smell of urine on the dry earth, and of rotten green sycamore fruit. I crave it. You're my brother and I'm the daughter of the mother and the father. Here are my arms. Take me. Come (26).

In similar moments of delirium, both girls, Fahima and Maryam, express their passions for the brother, or at least a man in his image. Maryam is resentful once she learns about her mother's intention to wed her to Sa'id, a worthless man compared to her brother Salih. "Maryam said only to herself as she cries, so they say to wed the dirty Sa'id to Maryam, the daughter of al-Amin becomes a wife to Sa'id, they mean that the fool becomes my master and he will be the one who calls the shots, to be the man!!" (143). Likewise, Fahima's mind and heart are full of her brother Mostafa. In her monologue in the short story "The Sixth Month of the Third Year," she says to herself: "When I get married I will leave this house ... I wish that my husband comes with the same body and image of him [Mostafa]" (133).

The novella goes into more details. When the virgin Fahima opens her private chest or box, she muses about the pictures of those heroic figures from the Sirah and folkloric stories,

saying: “This is the king of Egypt and Sudan with a curled mustache, a red fez, and gold medals on his chest and shoulders. And this is al-Zanati Khalifa, felled by the hand of al-Hilali Salama, and he's got a curled mustache even bigger than the king's! And this is al-Hilali, slayer of al-Zanati, with not a single medal on his chest and shoulders. Mostafa had no mustache on the day he left home. Does he have one now to curl?” (12). When she marries al-Haddad, he turns out to be incapable of satisfying the image of a man that she'd drawn in her imagination, either sexually or parentally, for he is impotent and infertile. He is incapable of either fulfilling any of her sexual needs or of procreating, and eventually does not even have the privilege of giving the daughter, who is not of his own blood, the name he desired. It is the brother Mostafa who gets privilege of naming her Nabawiyya.

#### 4. Modernity Causes the Plague

A significant place shared by 'Abdallah's *The Tambourine and the Chest* and *The Collar and the Bracelet* is the mill with its varying tools: the machine, the hand mill, the grinding stone running with its animal, the quern, and the mortar. The mill's significant presence takes different forms. As a machine, it is a site for the conflict between those driven by hope for modernity and the rejectionist majority who are scared to death by the machine that, in their minds, will not run until it is fed on children's blood. In both the film and the text, its sonic presence accompanies every depressing or tragic scene. With almost every death in the novella, the mill and its mechanical sound are a vital part of the scene. This is true of the deaths of Grandfather Hassan and Hazina in *The Tambourine and the Chest*, as well as Fahima's death in *The Collar and the Bracelet*. In the film, the mill-grinder reaches, visually and sonically, a very violent and bloody level, until it reaches extreme violence with the death of the granddaughter Nabawiyya. But the mill is treated differently in the short-story collection and in the novella.

The mill in the story “The Grandfather Hassan,” for example, is in harmony with its narrative context. Grandfather Hassan and his family own the mill, which is part of their prosperity. On the other hand, the mill itself represents horror and death to al-Bishari's family, especially to the women. Hazina repeatedly imagines and talks about the huge millstone in the hands of the three jinns, ceaselessly running to grind the souls, bones, and blood of all creatures: cats, dogs, frogs, and people. There are descriptions of cracked bones, ground flesh, and splashing blood.

The film focuses on the mill, or the machine, as a representation of industrial development against which the village people stand and fight. The film begins with an introduction to al-Bishari's family, and the following scene introduces us to the mill in a neighboring village to which the women travel. In the next scene, the capitalist Mansour al-Sadiq proposes to build a mill in the village, so that the women will no longer need to travel or to walk for long distances to the mill in the other village. The very first response he gets to the mechanized mill project is “al-Ttahun yejeeb al-Tta'un,” or “the mechanical mill brings the plague.” Such a short-rhymed sentence summarizes the villagers' stagnation as well as their tremendous fear of what the machine represents. Therefore, they could bear to travel on foot, with heavy loads on their heads, to the mill in another village rather than have a machine in their own village which, they believe, will not run unless it is fed their children's

blood. Based on that unshakable belief, they all stand against building a mill in the village, until the capitalist Mansour comes with a stratagem to convince them that only with the blessing of the holy sheikh of the village (Sheikh Harun, in the film) can the machine run with no need for any child's blood. Instead, it will run with the blood of holy sheikh's sacrifice and by having the sheikh's name on the mill: "The mill of Sheikh Harun – owned by Mansour al-Sadiq."

While the machine in the short-story collection evokes hope to the middle-class characters who have a vision for the future (Grandfather Hassan, Sheikh al-Fadil, the entrepreneur Mansour al-Sadiq, and the teacher Mohammed al-Sharqawi), it portrays horror, death, and superstition to the impoverished people represented in the family of al-Bishari on whom the whole novella is based.

The image of the man as head of his household also differs between the two texts. Grandfather Hassan, in the short-story collection, and Bakhit al-Bishari, in the novella, are markedly different men. From the first page of *The Collar and the Bracelet*, and even before that, in "The Sixth Month of the Third Year" in *The Tambourine and the Chest*, Bakhit al-Bishari, who is head of his family and the master of his house, is incapable in the extreme: "After all that age he passed, he became carried like the large basket, she [the wife Hazina] carries [it] from a spot under the sun to a spot in the shadow, laying down on his back, watching the sun running in the sky" (128) which is repeated in *The Collar and The Bracelet* (3). Throughout the novella and the film, we see the patriarch Bakhit being carried or taken care of by his wife or his daughter, having no control at all of anything, even his urine, surrounded with pity and obsequiousness, and sometimes as a burden on the women of the house, who do not consider him as the man of the house, as they do Mostafa.

The short story depicts Grandfather Hassan as exactly the opposite: He is the head of the family and the master of the house, a man every man, woman, and child is eager to serve and to show respect, and sometimes fear. Everyone hustles to be at his service and everyone expects to be given something from him. Therefore, men like Grandfather Hassan and Sheikh al-Fadil are indeed the men who are qualified to represent the patriarchal type par excellence, equipped and enhanced with the power given them through the class they represent, a class with the economic and social power to put them atop the social hierarchy, superior to women in the house and even in bed. It is significant how the text depicts Grandfather Hassan sitting on the *mastaba* (stone bench) in front of his big house: everyone knows who he is and shows respect as they pass before him. They even tumble sometimes as they walk before him, women and men, from this world or the other. He is always prepared to welcome those who come from the other world, the good ones like al-Khidr, or even the bad ones like the cunning westerner:

Here you are, Grandfather Hassan, surrounded by your sons and their wives, dignified and honorable. Thank your god, there are as many as beads in your silver rosary. Everyone is waiting for your giving hands.

Come on in our master al-Khidr ... this is your house and this is the god's good. (The Tambourine 104)

Meanwhile, the men who possess nothing, such as Bakhit al-Bishari, are deprived of everything; the same society takes everything from them, including their manhood. They are



deprived of any gift, even from the other world. No one visits al-Bishari's house from the other world but the angel of death.

The men who belong to the class at the center of the novella are all knocked down by their inevitable heavy fate. Every one of them is struck down by one or another of the incapacity's forms, and some by many forms at the same time. They are incapable of even satisfying the needs of their women. They are deprived of fulfilling the smallest requirements of the patriarchal type. They are even deprived of complaining aloud and have no desire left, but that death may come to end their miserable existence, as Bakhit al-Bishari expresses in one of his monologues:

The lamp oil burns low and the long, dark night approaches. Oh, these aches and pains of old age! Sleep eludes me and I can't control my bladder anymore. Feeble-minded Hazina sees evil omens in an overturned shoe, in the breeze that carries off a garlic husk, in the foot that carelessly steps on a discarded crust of bread. It's not her fault. She is a woman after all, and the men of the house are resigned to affliction. Her thoughts are with the boy and the boy is in distant Sudan. The boy's heart is made of stone and I'm the invalid of the house. I want to sleep-I crave sleep. If I sleep a long, deep sleep without dreams or nightmares I'll go straight up to the merciful God-I, the Muslim-and I'll be rid of these aches and of this hateful life. I'll go to heaven (4).

He says this more expressively in another monologue:

*Hazina is a troublemaker. Now she's after my bones. She wants to dig her claws into my flesh. I'm the man of the house. When I was young and strong I knew how to shut her up. When night falls, I'll weep under my covers (9).*

The snares of this inability do not catch only the old, crippled Bakhit al-Bishari. They do not spare any of the men at the center of the novella, no matter how old or young. With his marriage to Fahima, al-Haddad discovers his impotence. This is a fact he cannot live with, therefore he denies it first, accusing his wife of sterility before he divorces her. Then, in order to save his image as a man, he gets married to the daughter of a fisherman and eventually kills her and himself to bury his secret. Al-Sa'di, the young alpha male, is also incapable of satisfying the girl he deeply and madly loves, Nabawiyya. She favors Sabir, the son of Sheikh al-Fadil, over him. Like his uncle, al-Sa'di hides his failings by killing the girl he loves and desires under the pretext of an honor killing.

Mostafa al-Bishari could not avoid this fate, despite the heroic image his sister Fahima holds of him, imagining him as one of the epic heroes from the folkloric Sira of Bani Hilal, an echo of his "heroic" stories and adventures in other countries. We hear briefly of his heroic escapades against the British. We are told that he amassed a fortune by tricking British soldiers with cards and drugged drinks, then stealing the supplies they guarded. With every raid, we are told, Mostafa kills a high-ranking English captain. However, that does not match his real image when he returns to the village. There, the spatial collar surrounds all men and women, and Mostafa is put in his place. Despite his declaration that he will not work any longer under the command of any mortal, and his refusal of the humble job offered to him by Al Wafd Party as a school janitor, he ends up serving drinks, food, and board games to the laborers on the Nile bank. We see him serving the men or washing plates, tea glasses, and

coffee cups in a bucket of water, with some help from his niece Nabawiyya before he decides to keep her in the house. When al-Sa'di breaks into Mostafa's house to kill Nabawiyya and throw her slaughtered head in the bucket where Mostafa cleans the cups, Mostafa can do nothing. In vain, he screams, trying to save or to regain his shattered image, before he collapses in silence and paralysis (70).

All that might led Nadia Ya'qub, in her reading of the novel as *Sirah*, to question the type of heroism that Mostafa represents in the novel: “[T]he prey from whom Mostafa and his gang of forty steal are not the British themselves, but those subjects who are as much the victims of British imperialism as Mostafa himself. Rather than a hero, then, we have in Mostafa something closer to an anti-hero, not a villain, but an ordinary man who seeks to better his lot in any way that he can” (Ya'qub 118). But the book also offers a different sort of male heroism in Nabawiyya's gentler love, Sabir, who perhaps represents something genuinely different.

We may conjecture the tragic influence of the place on the characters in the novel based on the remarkable depiction of the place in the novel compared to the depictions of the same place and its components in the stories *The Tambourine and The Chest*. The stories depict the open, vast and seemingly boundless space of Grandfather Hassan, the expansive green fields, the houses in the open air and palm orchards in the open sky, as contrasted with the narrow, confined and oppressive space of the novel. Most of the places in the novel are limited to the house of al-Bishari, the small house of al-Haddad, and the dark room in the ancient temple. Al-Bishari's house is literally a prison to Fahima then to her daughter Nabawiyya who were hoping they would be free one day, but both are unable to leave the house alive. As for the men in this house, it is their open grave, where they lie down dead completely paralyzed, even before they die.

The contrast between the narrow places and the wide open spaces is emphasized in the film. On the one hand, we have the shots of the Nile with the white birds, high trees, and blue sky, on the other we have the narrow dark houses made of mud. Aside from the beautiful, bright, joyful scene of Mohammed Munir singing in the Nile, every other outdoor scene is mesmerized by the oppressive soundtrack that keeps the viewer trapped in that sense of dread and apprehension. The viewer cannot enjoy the visual beauty on the screen without fearing what the background music represents. When a depressive soundtrack accompanies almost every outside shot, one of the characters' lives will either come to end in a catastrophe: the death of Bakhit and Fahima, the discovery of al-Haddad's impotence that leads him to severely beat his wife Fahima as a sign of superiority he could not demonstrate in bed, of Nabawiyya losing her virginity, and the final scene of Mostafa collapsing in a horrific moment when Al-Sa'di brings the bloody tragic end to the life of them all by decapitating Nabawiyya.

In addition to the classical unities of place and action, we might indicate further elements that suggest this novella is not only in the drama mold, but a tragedy par excellence. Despite the tragic feelings in some stories in *The Tambourine and the Chest*, and the desire to make a tragedy that 'Abdallah expresses in the title “The Tragedy Maker Gathers the Threads” (126), only the stories of al-Bishari's family that developed into *The Collar and the Bracelets* qualify. In order to create his tragedy from those stories, there are more elements in

the novella to complement the dramatic structure, such as the hamartia, the prophecy, and confronting fate.

The hamartia comes when Hazina decides to play her cunning game to challenge the fate of her daughter after she learns about her son in law's impotency. Afraid of losing everything if her daughter divorces while the allegation of barrenness hangs over her, and thus losing al-Haddad's inheritance to his hateful sister, Hazina thinks that getting her daughter to conceive in the ancient temple will be safe, for "al-Haddad's perpetually drugged mind will never see through the stitches of Hazina's needle" (24). Nevertheless, she forgets that by doing so she is not actually cunning against al-Haddad, but against "The greatest of all cunning ones" (God) as 'Abdallah puts it as a title in the next chapter, referring to the verse in the Quran "They act cunningly, and Allah acts cunningly, Allah is the greatest of all cunning ones" (al-Anfal 8:30). The fruit of Hazina's cunning game is Nabawiyya, whose name implies the prophecy/nubuwwa. It is with the girl who embodies the prophecy; the tragedy of this family reaches its climax: the death of Fahima, the paralysis of Mostafa, and finally the brutal death of Nabawiyya, the fruit of Hazina's cunning that brings the end to Hazina's lineage.

Yet 'Abdallah chooses not to end the novella with Hazina's death, even after the long-detailed description of her death earlier in the short story "Death in Three Tableaus" in *The Tambourine and the Chest*, where he devotes the story to depicting the deaths of the father Bakhit, the daughter Fahima, and the mother Hazina:

The house is dreary and Hazina is alone, al-Bishari has died, Fahima has died too, and Hazina is fevered, unable to seek help from a neighbor, the mill machine is ceaselessly percussing in the silence of the night in a clear hammering monotone: tick... tick. The three pixies are here... their eyes glow in the dark like ablaze embers. But she will seek protection from that who stands right next to her. Hazina, then, smiled to the naked black big hefty man with exposed loins (*The Tambourine*, 137).

Just like Nabawiyya, Hazina bears her fate in her own name that means sorrowful as we mentioned before. Thus, the novel does not end with Hazina's death but instead with a bitter, mournful depiction of her endless grief.

## 5. Why Nabawiyya?

"Why Nabawiyya?" is the title that begins chapter five of *The Collar and The Bracelet*, and it's also the question asked by al-Haddad when he comes to Hazina's house to see "his newborn daughter!" wondering "why Nabawiyya and not Huriyya [hour] for example? Huriyya is a beautiful name and, the girl is beautiful. Can't you see?" But he never gets an answer, nor does the text explicitly answer the question.

In the film, the girl is given another name, Farha, meaning Joy, the name suggested by Mostafa to tease the grandmother whose name, Hazina, means sad and sorrowful. But the newborn girl's name in the book has significance beyond just a joke or a tease, especially when we interpret it semantically and place it against other textual, historical, and mythological contexts.

Nabawiyya's prophet-referencing name, set alongside the way her mother was conceived in a temple, provokes a number of implications for how we might read the novella. Ancient Egyptian mythology has a large influence on the narrative, beginning with the setting of al-Karnak. Ultimately, ancient Egyptian myth and history obscure 'Abdallah's vision of the question of whether or not there is a renaissance or Nahda. Nabawiyya is at the very heart of this question. She is the fruit of the union between Fahima and the god of fertility, or “the hefty black god of fertility with exposed loins,” as the novella refers to him. This was Fahima's only choice, as her husband was incapable of producing children, or future. Her husband al-Haddad is not alone, as we learn later that Mostafa himself did not, and probably could not, have any children from his marriage to the Levantine woman. That makes Nabawiyya the only hope for any continuance in the family line, especially after the death of her mother Fahima and the total paralysis of Mostafa, who already confessed before he collapsed that he would never get married to any woman again.

Nabawiyya is the outcome of the encounter between the two women, Fahima and Hazina, and the ancient Egyptian fertility god. Thereby, she is the perfect incarnation of the vision of the modern Egyptian Nahda/renaissance that occupied the Egyptian mind across the twentieth century. Another embodiment of that vision can be seen in Mahmoud Mokhtar's statue *Nahdet Misr* (Rise of Egypt) of a Sphinx and a peasant woman both representing Egypt. With her left hand she unveils her face signifying Egypt's revival, while her right arm stretches over the Sphinx, which recalls the greatness of Egypt's history. The Sphinx rises on its front legs to denote power and enthusiasm for the future.<sup>4</sup>

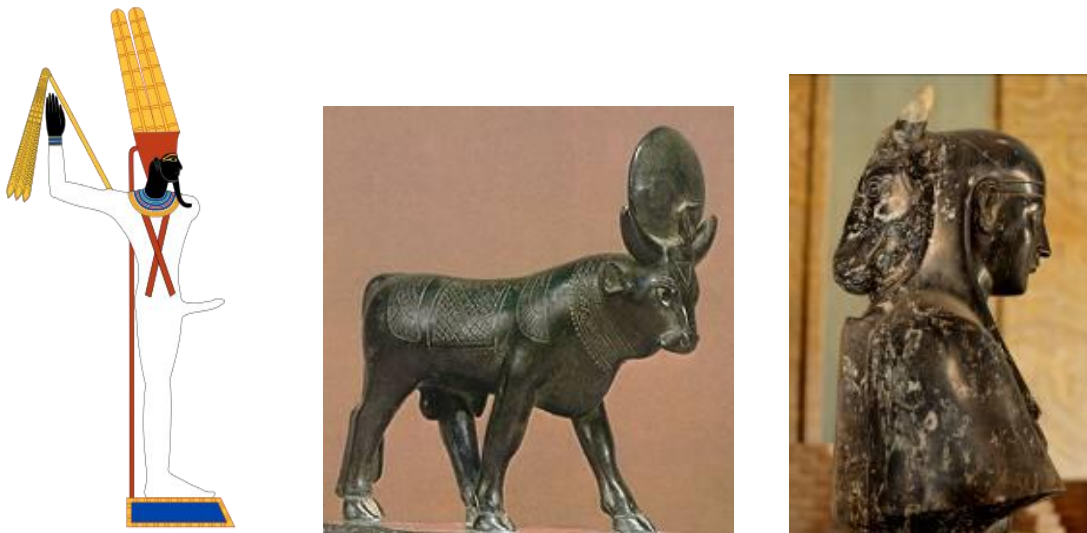
The novella depicts Nabawiyya's creation like a moment from an ancient myth. The film instead relies on mere realism, implying that Fahima had sex with the black man that guards the temple. However, the novella asserts that Nabawiyya was conceived with the black god of fertility:

Fahima is alone now, and the chamber is damp and musty. Bats fly close to her face and disturb the still air. Fahima can hear the sound of her breath and of her beating heart. Slowly, by the faint rays descending from a skylight high up in the ceiling, her eyes make out the silhouette of the naked black giant, and she sees two red eyes glowing like coals. She tries to scream but the scream sticks in her throat. She tries to still the sudden violent shaking of her body as she watches the naked black giant move closer (25). Thickly falls the darkness: vision sputters and fails. Heart misses its beats, mind spins delirious, but her ear continues to pick out the thump of heavy stone feet on the stone floor (25).

In ancient Egyptian mythology, there is more than one god of fertility. The most remarkable among them is “Min,” the main god of fertility with his erect black penis, as depicted on the temple walls in al-Karnak and on his famous mural in the British Museum. There is also Apis, the black bull, which is connected to the god Min in the mythology, where Min might take the shape of a white bull. There are also long bull horns on the gate of god Min's temple (Kingship and the Gods 188). The two gods, Min and Apis, come together with Osiris as another god of fertility, and they incarnate the god Osiris. In a unique description, the historian Diodorus the Sicilian provides a significance depiction of the procreation rituals between women and Apis the bull:

During the forty days before mentioned, none but women are admitted to see him, who being placed full in his view, pluck up their coats, and shew their privy parts. Afterwards, they are forbid to come into the sight of this new god. For the adoration of this ox, they give this reason. They say, that the soul of Osiris passed into an ox, and therefore, whenever the ox is dedicated, to this very day, the spirit of Osiris is infused into one ox after another, to posterity. But some say, that the members of Osiris, (who was killed by Typhone), were thrown by Isis into an ox of wood (Book I - p 86).

The god of fertility, Min, with whom Fahima conceived in the ancient temple, is an incarnation of Osiris; he is also the son of the father Osiris and the mother, Isis. The bull Apis is also an incarnation of Osiris who represents, to Isis, the husband, the brother, and the beloved man. Such remarkable unity between Apis and Osiris is represented in a Roman statue in the Vatican museum that unifies them both in one figure.



*At left: Min. Center: Apis. At right: Union between Apis and Osiris. All image credits: Wikipedia.*

The novella mentions that Mostafa, when Fahima gives birth to Nabawiyya, sends her a gift of “a small candy bull with two pointy horns” (32). Nabawiyya keeps the toy bull in her private chest, exactly as her mother Fahima did. Even if she has never seen her uncle Mostafa, she is an extension of her mother in her relationship with the absent beloved uncle/brother Mostafa/Osiris, of whom the bull is an incarnation. Nabawiyya keeps making the connection between the bull and the beloved uncle: “She looks at the red candy bull (she never did eat it; still keeps it, even though one of its pointing horns has broken off) and thinks of her dear uncle in Palestine” (48). Later again, she remembers the bull in her hallucinatory thoughts as she is buried alive: “And Nabawiyya is hungry (she craves the broken-horned candy bull in her wooden box)” (68).



## 6. Patriarchal Culture?

Anthropology and folklore offer a different way to see the women of *The Collar and the Bracelet*, particularly the mother, Hazina. She can be linked to Isis in the myth of Isis and Osiris, and Na'sa in the folkloric story of Ayyub Al-Masri, or Job the Egyptian. The anthropologist El-Sayed el-Aswad calls a characteristic exhibited by Isis and Na'sa “the positive patience”:

Women are distinguished by positive patience while men by negative patience in the narratives of that realm. In the story of Ayyub (Job), for example, we find the man has surrendered with patience to God's will, doing and trying nothing during his illness, which represents the passive patience. Meanwhile, the woman, the wife, ceaselessly moving and always active, does every possible thing in order help and save her husband until she rescues his life and helps him to reestablish his health and his life back. That is what we exactly have in the myth of Isis and Osiris. (al-Ma'thurat al Sha'biyya 84).

We can add Hazina to those symbolic figures of endurance. Like Na'sa in the story of Ayyub, Hazina literally carried her paralyzed husband in his large basket, ceaselessly and enduringly serving him until he died, exactly as she does with her other man, her son Mostafa. Thus, women in the folkloric legacy, unlike in the institutional legacy, have more endurance, more positive patience, more courage and even boldness to face the cruelties of life and fate. *The Collar and the Bracelet* thus disputes the claim of male superiority over women. The novel begins with some statements that would seem to satisfy the claims of male superiority as it describes the relationship between Mostafa and Fahima:

Mostafa is the younger by two and a half years, but he is Fahima's master: he beats her and she loves him. ... Mostafa protects Fahima and instills the fear of disgrace in her. Mostafa is a man and Fahima is a girl. A girl is a long-trained white dress ( 4). She must gather up the hem of her dress and pick her way carefully along the muddy, refuse-strewn road (5).

This text seems to outline the hierarchy and gender roles between the boy and the girl, the brother and the sister, in the patriarchal society. However, it is Fahima who controls the boy's emotions and behavior. She provokes him into beating her to see his reaction:

**The Girl is Anxious and Night is the Friend of Reverie**

She is the daughter of the mother and father, and he is her brother. She loves him and he certainly returns that love. At first, she used to cry. As time passed, she began to provoke him into beating her. Then she would only pretend to cry, and she would hurl insults at him. And so the fire within him would spark and flare and his blows grow violent. (...)

He used to swim in the irrigation canal with the other boys behind his parents' back... He stripped and stood naked as on the day he was born. Fahima followed him secretly, without a word to her parents. Could she have spoken even if she so desired? And even now, neither he nor they know ( 5).

Only Mostafa embodies the concept and the image of “man” to Fahima, and no other man can take his place. Her husband succeeds in taking her virginity in the wedding rituals. However, he could never manage to achieve a complete sexual relationship with her.<sup>5</sup> The film does not hesitate to show this aspect, since we hear, in the scene that follows the wedding, Fahima's terrified and disappointed scream calling the name of her brother. Then, in an attempt to bridge the gap between fantasy and desire, and in a deeply moving scene in the film, she subtly proceeds to knit him a fantastic tale of jinn and magical charms. The husband is spellbound and forgets his rage. Immediately, the image of the Scheherazade and Shahriyar of *The Thousand and One Nights* springs to life, as the camera focuses on their faces in extreme close-up against the background of a pitch-black sky and a full moon, which is suspended between their profiles. Just as Scheherazade told her tales to ward off death, Fahima does the same (Ghada Helmy 195).

The same cycle repeats when Fahima's daughter falls in love with Sabir, the son of Sheikh al-Fadil, who the community thinks is like a brother to Nabawiyya. However, there is a remarkable distinction between the nature of Nabawiyya and that of her mother, Fahima. While the latter's main goal was being an echo of her mother Hazina, Nabawiyya, by contrast, is resentful and dissatisfied with her grandmother's attitude and manner, which glorifies everything that was in the past and degrades everything modern or present. Nabawiyya is touched by the soul of modernism, as represented by the man she falls in love with, Sabir, the educated young man who enchants her with his stories and his knowledge of ancient history, and who corrects her superstitious information about the world.

Unlike her mother, Nabawiyya has the courage to rebel against the “collar” the men impose on her, in the guise of an unwanted suitor. These are men who aim to be the tough alpha-male heroes from the folkloric stories, and they represent the opposite of Nabawiyya's desired man: the educated, compassionate delicate man, Sabir, who does not feel ashamed when crying over a little dead rabbit. She rejects al-Sa'di's love, just as she rejects the restrictions of her uncle Mostafa. Instead, she falls in love with Sabir and gives herself to him to become pregnant. Moreover, she refuses to tell her angry uncle the name of her lover, and is willing to pay the ultimate price: her life. She additionally shows how much stronger she is than her killer al-Sa'di, who murders her to overcome his inability to have her. The patriarchal realm is deeply shaken by Nabawiyya, even if she is killed. Before he collapses, Mostafa gives a short confession that reflects how deeply the girl can unveil the weaknesses of the patriarchal system. As Mostafa attempts in vain to regain some of the respect he just lost, he talks about his adventures with the women of other extremely powerful men, but, when it comes to having control over their own wives' vaginas, he and the other men are

totally powerless. He himself, as he confesses, could not exercise control over his own wife. He could not close the circle on her.

Mostafa's confession nods to the main theme in the first stories of the Arabian Nights, where the powerful king Shahrayar and his brother king Shahzaman leave their kingdoms after they discover that their wives have betrayed them. They meet a woman on the shore who's been captured by a powerful jinni. In order to humiliate the jinni, the woman insists on having sex with every man she encounters, using the ignorant jinni's power to coerce the men. After the woman has had sex with the two kings, she asks for their rings as a souvenir, to add to a sack full of over five hundred others. Thus, the ring, the circle that symbolizes the dominance and superiority of men over women, turns out to be the collar around the necks of men themselves. The circle that represented the center of the patriarchal pattern also deconstructs that pattern.

### **7. The Future Buried Alive**

The film here departs sharply from the book, changing Mostafa's response to Nabawiyya's killing to a heroic one. Instead of begging the respect of the attendant men, as in the book, he criticizes their rotten lifestyles. Mostafa screams at the stunned men in his hut: "For twenty years I've been away, twenty whole years! I thought I would return to find things changed. But I found everything just as it is, ignorant people living on superstition and nonsense! You have not absorbed the wealth or strength of the land. You have only internalized its waste and ruin!" (Ghada Helmy 198). Then he demolishes the hut over the heads of the men and runs through them, shouting threats and promises of revenge against the unknown enemy lurking in the village and breeding amongst its passages. Nonetheless, like the novel, the film ends with the paralyzed son Mostafa lying in bed and the mother Hazina with a lowered head, mechanically feeding the pigeons. In both, the realm that al-Bishari's family represents has to come to its end, and the loop is tightly closed. The hermetic circle now ends as their grave, even though some are still alive. The past is desecrated even where they, unconsciously, remain deeply connected to the past and vitally rely on it.

This realm does not hesitate to condemn whoever has the courage to open up that hermetic circle to establish a renewed and dynamic connection with the past that might lead to a better future. Everyone who is touched or demonized by the soul of modernism is harshly punished. Nabawiyya's conception in the ancient temple was a moment where a modern Egyptian renaissance might have been generated, a connection between future and past. Although Nabawiyya's name is changed in the film, she is still the carrier of prophecy. Her death in the film serves another purpose: In the film, al-Sa'di kills Nabawiyya at the big new mill house. Right after her horrified scream, we hear the loud sound of the mechanized mill for the first time. Thus, the prophecy of the machine not running until it is fed on children's blood comes true.

#### **THE END**

The night with its stars passed away and the day with its sun arrived. The large frightened rabbit poked his head through the open door of Bakhit al-Bishari's house. Then he shot outside followed by the rest of the rabbits, big and small, and headed off in the direction of the copious grass in Shaykh Fadil's unfenced palm orchard--the one behind his house (72).



With the brutal killing of Nabawiyya, not only the lineage of al-Bishari's family has been uprooted, but also the dream of renaissance that she symbolizes. Her child with Sabir, son of Sheikh al-Fadil and representative of the future, dies with her. Yet the last mysterious lines of the novella quoted above lead to an interpretation where the big rabbit, followed by all other rabbits, leave al-Bishari's house, heading towards the large, green leafy field owned by Sheikh al-Fadil. With all that Sheikh al-Fadil represents of hope and vision for a brighter future. Hence, as the hermetic circle closes its loop, the rabbits may beat the circle by escaping and looking to the house of Sheikh al-Fadil and his son Sabir for a future that is not predestined for defeat.

## Notes

1. 'Abdallah, Yahya Taher, Samah Selim (translator): *The Collar and The Bracelets*, American University in Cairo Press 2008. Yahya al-Tahir 'Abdallah was born in 1938 in the village of al-Karnak in Luxor. He moved to Cairo in 1964 and belongs to the generation of writers and artists who emerged in the cultural scene after the Naksa, the 1967 War, carrying a new vision and sensitivity in a variety of genres: the short story, the novel, poetry, theatre, cinema, painting, music, and criticism. 'Abdallah died in a car accident in 1981 at the age of 43.
2. Khairi Bishara is an Egyptian film director who began work in cinema in the 1970s. He is counted as one of the main directors who redefined realism in Egyptian cinema in the 1980s. Three of his films were listed in a book published by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina as among the best 100 Egyptian films, first and foremost *The Collar and the Bracelet*, which was also listed as one of the top 10 films in the history of Arab cinema by The Association of Cinema in Egypt 1995, then by Dubai International Film Festival 2013.
3. The quotes from *The Collar and the Bracelets* are from the published translation by Samah Selim. All the other translations are by the author.
4. The statue Nahdet Masr (Rise of Egypt), is of a Sphinx and a peasant woman both representing Egypt. With her left hand she begins to unveil her face signifying Egypt's revival while her right arm stretches over the Sphinx, rousing him from sleep, which recalls the greatness of Egypt's history. The symbolism of the statue was part of a movement which borrowed Pharaonic themes for its nationalist rhetoric which depicts the 1919 Revolution against the British occupation as the awakening of an Egypt infused by the spirit of Pharaohs. In her book *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, Politics*, Beth Baron writes that "The sphinx and the woman both represent Egypt: the sphinx rising represents a rebirth of Egypt's ancient grandeur, the peasant woman lifting her veil symbolizes the liberation of the modern nation" (Page 68). Also, in his own words, Mahmoud Mukhtar said, "that he wished to create a statue that combined all the dreams of Egypt and its civilization, blending the glorious past with the nation's future aspirations. This is how the idea of Nahdet Masr was born" (*Tale of a statue: Nahdet Masr*, Al Ahram Weekly, Egypt, May 24-30, 2012).
5. According to the traditions of taking the bride's virginity then, some women, basically the mothers of the bride and groom witness the procedure, therefore the bride's groom is only allowed of using his finger to take the virginity. Thus, taking the virginity does not necessarily prove the husband's potency.

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