

Loss of Freedom, Women, and Man's Struggle to Find a Place in Post-Revolutionary Egypt in Ibrahim's *The Smell of It*

غياب الحرية، ودور المرأة، وكفاح الإنسان؛ لإيجاد مكان في مصر ما بعد الثورة، في رواية
(تلك الرائحة) لصنع الله إبراهيم

The Smell of It is not just a story, it is a revolution, the beginning of which is the artist's rebellion against himself.

(Yusuf Idris, qtd. in *That Smell*)

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Abstract

This paper aims to have a glance at the ways wherein Ibrahim expresses the Cairo life with a special focus on the socio-political context of the nation in the 1960s. Ibrahim's *The Smell of It* came to light at a particular moment when transformations in all fields of life were in progress: culturally, politically, and socially. It is devoted to shed light on the Egyptian's life after Nasser's 1952 revolution¹. Ibrahim attempts to

depict the ordinary man's struggle to find a place in a corrupted Egypt. Moreover, this paper is an attempt to present the role of women in Ibrahim's *The Smell of It* which portrays a journey of sexual encounters and experiences as a means to show the author/protagonist's disconnect from his society. Women's role in the text symbolizes the social perception and representation of women during the 1960s. One of the goals of this paper is to show that

¹ On 23 July 1952, Jamal Abdullnasser (President of Egypt 1956-1970) with a group of Egyptian officers calling themselves the Free Officers Movement took power in a bloodless coup which

resulted in the defeat of the then Egyptian monarchy and the exile of King Farouk. On 18 June 1953, Egypt was declared a republic.

Arab women are doubly suppressed. In order to create some awareness of the ugliness of the society where we live, Ibrahim utilizes notions of marriage, love, and sex so as to talk about women's rights in Egypt and the Arab world in the 1960s. I give a special focus on the stories of the three women whom the protagonist

encounters in the text so as to clarify the suppression of the Arab women. The women Ibrahim writes about are the tip of the iceberg of the many stories that are known to everyone but remain untold.

Keywords: socio-politics, Nasser's regime, women oppression.

ملخص البحث

نضال المواطن العادي، الذي كان يسعى جاهداً لإيجاد مكان في مصر خاصة بعد تفشي الفساد فيها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يعتبر هذا البحث محاولة لعرض دور المرأة في رواية (تلك الرائحة) التي صورت رحلة ممتدة لوقائع ولقاءات وتجارب جنسية؛ كوسيلة لإظهار الضجوة بين (المؤلف/البطل) ومجتمعه. دور المرأة في النص يرمز إلى التصور الاجتماعي للمرأة آنذاك، ودورها في ستينيات القرن الماضي. أحد أهداف هذا البحث أيضاً هو إظهار واقع المرأة العربية التي تعرضت للاضطهاد بشكل مضاعف. يستخدم الكاتب مفاهيم: الزواج والحب، والجنس، للحديث عن حقوق المرأة في الستينيات في مصر خاصة، والعالم العربي عامة؛ وذلك من أجل خلق وعي مجتمعي يدرك مدى قبح، وبشاعة المجتمع الذي نعيش فيه. يركز الباحث بشكل خاص على قصص النساء الثلاث اللاتي يقابلهن

يهدف البحث إلى إلقاء نظرة معمقة، نتعرف من خلالها على الطرق التي عبّر فيها صنع الله إبراهيم عن حياة المصريين، في روايته (تلك الرائحة) مع التركيز بشكل خاص على السياقين الاجتماعي والسياسي للأمة في الستينيات. تجدر الإشارة إلى أن رواية (تلك الرائحة) للكاتب صنع الله إبراهيم، صدرت في زمن استثنائي شهد تحولات كبيرة في كل مجالات الحياة: ثقافياً وسياسياً واجتماعياً. وقد بدأ واضحاً أنها تهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على حياة المصريين بعد ثورة عبدالناصر عام ٢١٩٥٢. في تلك الرواية، حاول إبراهيم تصوير

٢ في ٢٣ يوليو ١٩٥٢، تولى جمال عبدالناصر (رئيس مصر ١٩٥٦-١٩٧٠) السلطة مع مجموعة من الضباط الذين أطلقوا على أنفسهم، اسم (حركة الضباط الأحرار) في انقلاب غير دموي أدى إلى هزيمة الملكية المصرية آنذاك، ونفي الملك فاروق.

في ١٨ يونيو ١٩٥٣، أُعلنت مصر جمهوريةً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياسة الاجتماعية،
نظام ناصر، اضطهاد المرأة

بطل الرواية في النص لتوضيح فكرة اضطهاد
المرأة العربية. وما القصص المذكورة في
النص إلا غيض من فيض، للعديد من
القصص التي يعرفها الجميع، والتي لا تجد
طريقها للحياة والنشر، بل تظل في الكتمان.

1. Introduction

Born in Cairo in 1937, Sunallah Ibrahim is a very well-known Egyptian journalist, translator, and novelist. He is one of the leading lights in modern Arabic, and indeed, world literature. He is considered by many literary critics as “a modernist writer and by others as katib mushakis [a troublemaking writer]” (Mostafa 422). Due to his leftist and nationalist views that are obviously represented in his works, he prevents the Egyptian Higher Council for Culture from awarding him its prize during the second International Conference on the Arab Novel in 2003 because it is “awarded by a government that lacks the credibility for bestowing it,” he remarks (qtd. in Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture* 75). Such rejection is meant to “denounce, in public, not in fiction, Egypt’s normalization with Israel, the American occupation of Iraq, the impotence of [Arabs] foreign policy, the widespread of corruption and the absence of human rights” (74).

Ibrahim has published 12 novels. Many of them were translated into English such as *The Smell of It* (1971), *Beirut, Beirut* (1988), *Zaat* (1998), *The Committee* (2001), and *Stealth* (2007). Ibrahim’s essential goal in most of his novels is to show the corruption of the Arab capitalists. He unmasks the role of the Arab dictators/rulers and the elites in corrupting the Arab society. His novels not only document Egypt's most recent history, but also testify to their author's inventiveness, his continuing interest in technique and experimentation, his humane and perceptive portrayal of his characters, and his mastery of different kinds of tone—light-hearted mockery, satire and tragedy.

A major theme occurs over and again in Sunallah Ibrahim's fiction since his first novel *Tilka al-Ra'iha* [The Smell of It] (1971) to *al-Talassus* [Stealth] (2007), is his exploration of the economic hardships which the Egyptian/Arab middle class had gone through before and after the 1952 revolution. The novel to be studied in this paper *The Smell of It* was banned due to its sexual content and negative representation of the Nasser's regime. In 1971, Denys Johnson-Davies's English translation was the first published translation based on the original, uncensored Arabic version (Haist 161). It is the version from which I have taken all the quotations used in this paper. In what follows, I will refer to the book as *The Smell*.

In this paper, my focus is on two main points. The first is to discuss the author's aim to represent the naked reality of the Arab regimes who revolt on the name of justice and freedom and the Egyptian Free Officers Movement of 1952, with president Abdul-Nasser in the lead is a case in point. The second focus is to represent the sufferings and oppression of Arab women in post-revolutionary Egypt as depicted in *The Smell of It*. It may seem naïve to write about women and politics, and one may ask what the relationship between these two issues is. But my argument in this paper is that Ibrahim in the novel under scrutiny uses the protagonist's struggle to lead a normal life and his failure and disappointment as a metaphor to represent the failure of the Egyptian government in particular and the whole Arab world in general. The author and his protagonist strive to find a place in a dictatorship society so as to show the socio-political persecutions that silenced anyone who tries to expose them. The author, his protagonist, and women characters in the novel are all crushed and deprived of their basic rights.

2. The Absence of Freedom and Man's Sufferings in Post- Revolutionary Egypt

The Smell of It is devoted to shed light on the Egyptian's life after Nasser's 1952 revolution. "Nasser and his regime were in extreme control of cultural freedom" (Crabbs 408). The Egyptian time of the 1960s is described by the Egyptian critic Sabry Hafez in his article "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties" as follows:

A decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition of almost all political activities; massive industrialization and the absolute absence of freedom;... and the destruction of the spirit of opposition; the expansion of free education and the collective arrest of the intellectuals;... the deformation of social values and the pervasive growth of corruption... (68)

New novelists like Youssef Idris, Gamal Al-Ghitani, and Sunallah Ibrahim, to name a few, were encountering issues of punishment like imprisonment and censoring due to their representation of the ills of the regime. This exposes the regime's oppression of all those who oppose it.

Ibrahim's *The Smell of It*, is said to be a semi- autobiographical novel. It records the author's experiences after his release from prison. It commences with an unnamed protagonist who has recently been released from jail just like the author who was imprisoned by Nasser for five years (1959-64). Following his release, the author/protagonist remains under house arrest. The text depicts the author/ protagonist's day-to-day life, including his love, going to the cinema, riding the subway, visit of his friends and relatives as well as his thoughts, dreams, and writing. Besides, flashbacks about the author/protagonist's stay in prison are present in order to give the reader an overview about his previous experiences or sufferings that are almost the same even after his release. Through the character of the protagonist, the author attempts to represent his sufferings and struggle to find a place in a corrupted Egypt. The author/ protagonist tries to re-associate himself with his family, relatives, and friends. Yasmine El-Rahidi in her article "Egypt in the Raw" enhances the same idea.

Semi-autobiographical, [The Novel] tells the story of a just-released prisoner as he struggles with the minutiae of day-to-day life: reacquainting himself with his family, friends, and city; seeking employment, trying to write; struggling with a sense of purposelessness, of loss, with feelings of alienation. (N.P)

The narrative " serves as a symbol of the struggle of the individual to find meaning....It tells the tale [of] one man's fight with himself and fight to find

meaning in the outside world when so much is happening around him” (Sabry 35).

Likewise, Samia Mehrez indicates to the similarities between the author and his protagonist in her book *Egyptian Writers*:

Tilka-al-ra'aha [The Smell of It] is to a great extent autobiographical and was written after Ibrahim's five-year experience as a political prisoner in Egypt (1959-64). Like Ibrahim, the nameless protagonist emerges from prison to confront an alienating reality with which he must learn to deal. (41-42)

Both the protagonist and the author are “alienated by the bourgeois literary aesthetics of the time” (57).

Ibrahim continues to illustrate his sufferings through the character of the protagonist. Like the author, the protagonist is still under house arrest from dusk to dawn and has to report daily to the policeman who “was due at any moment” (*The Smell* 12). If the policeman arrives at any moment, he will be punished if he is not in his house. Both the author and the protagonist remain in one prison despite their release from another. In his “Introduction to the 1986 Edition,” Ibrahim expresses his frustration as follows:

When I wrote [the novel], I had just gotten out of prison and was under house arrest, which required me to be at home from dusk to dawn. I spent the rest of the day getting to know the world I'd been away from for more than five years. As soon as I was back in my room, I rushed to record, in quick sketches, all those events and sights that had made an impression on me, that seemed to me completely out of the ordinary. (68)

Similarly, Egyptians live in fear understanding that they may be censored by the police and might have to report to the police at any moment. So, writers struggle to tackle socio-political issues, or criticize the regime in power. The image depicted in this novel reminds one of the Gorge Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* in which the big brother is watching everybody

Like his protagonist, Ibrahim is frustrated internally. He loses his zeal to change and reform his community. Again in his “Introduction to the

1986 Edition,” he declares: “I had lost the fire that lit my pen while in prison. The new reality consumed me” (68). Something is broken and missing in his eyes, heart, and body. The circumstances of his release from prison have perverted his long-awaited freedom and oppressed his pen. Like Ibrahim, the protagonist says:

I seized hold of the pen but was unable to write ... I got on my feet and went to the window and looked out at yesterday's window. However, it was closed. Again, I sat myself at the desk. I seized hold of the pen but was unable to write. (*The Smell* 32)

After his failure to write, the protagonist attempts to look at the girl whom he did see yesterday through his window. However, he does not see her. So he masturbates, then goes to bed.

I closed my eyes. I imagined yesterday's girl with her white body lying before me on the bed, full and rounded, her hair fresh and fragrant, while I kissed every part of her, passing my cheek along her thigh and resting it against her breast. I put my hand down on my own thigh and began playing with myself... (32)

The same idea is expressed by Samia Mehrez in her book *Egyptian Writers*. She avers that like the author, the protagonist encountered failure. So, he contents himself with masturbation.

The long and mechanical days of the protagonist are spent in crowded public transportation, alienating visits with friends and relatives, and failed attempts to write, compensated for by occasional masturbation in front of empty sheets of papers. (42)

The protagonist's act of masturbation suggests his utmost failure and defeat. He is unable to write to reform and make some change in his corrupted society. Also, his inability to have physical relation with any woman leads to his inner feelings of alienation. Because sex with women “is usually joyless, often solitary, and without fail unsatisfactory in some way or other,” he masturbates, and masturbation is a sign of impotence and surrender (Starkey 148). In other words, the relationship between socio-politics, women, and writing is very clear in this part of the book. The socio-political deficiencies lead to his failure in everything.

Indeed, the state's oppression of its people leads to their social failure and to the degradation of their moral traditions. In the text, the protagonist is oppressed politically, and this results in his failure socially. It is said that his choice of masturbating "symbolizes [his] strong desire for life and his wish to create something" (Guth 127). If it is so, then why does the protagonist only resort to it after he encounters failure to write or have intercourse with a woman? I believe that masturbation strongly suggests the protagonist's utter internal failure, disappointment, and frustration.

Ibrahim and his contemporary writers were attempting to write about issues that were suppressed by Nasser and his regime. This is expressed by Ibrahim who believes that writers of the 1960s were:

Revolting against the political experience of the country, its outdated social and moral traditions. What lay at the center of their perception was the need to fight against dualism, enforced by the backwardness and dependency. They strove for a unification of form and content, commitment and creation, art and politics. (qtd. in Sabry 7)

Egyptian society has become a place where there is no place for the simple individual. Speaking about a movie that he watched when he went to the cinema, the protagonist illustrates the truth that citizens are unable to recognize: "It was a film about birds that grew in number and size until they became savage, chasing people and attacking children" (*The Smell* 6). These birds are the Arab dictators who multiply and get wilder until they become monsters, consuming their own people. Arab rulers/dictators utilize their people to fulfill their triumphs. However, when in power, they change the rules of the game and torture their own people. Ibrahim questions the Free Officers Movement of 1952, with Abdul-Nasser in the lead, who along with his friends called for a revolution so as to bring about justice and equality, then when in power, changed into dictators.

From the sensation of being subjugated... [to] practicing persecution. From the suffering of pain ... [to] the enjoyment of inflicting pain on others ... At the beginning, it was a matter of high mindedness and it has now become a curse. The spring which used to suffer for others has dried up. (28-29)

Like the Russian Revolution of 1917, which is depicted in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the protagonist discovered that the revolution the Free Officers called for did not bring about justice or freedom for the Egyptians. On the contrary, Nasser and his regime turned into oppressors after they assumed power just like Napoleon in *Animal Farm*. "All of them are sons of dogs" (*The Smell* 28). That's why, the protagonist warns his people not to be players in

a game that knows no mercy, does not in fact have any rules and in which you cannot decide what is correct and what wrong and in which the victor is not necessarily the person who is in the right but he who is cleverer, more cunning and possessed of more luck. (29)

Ibrahim wants his people to be aware of the malignant and hateful role that Nasser and his regime played in the vulgarization of Egypt socially, politically, and economically. The protagonist started to search for himself after his release from jail, which is too late, and he wants his people not to encounter the same problem. He realizes that it is time to use his talent of writing to warn his people of Nasser's regime, which he considered one of the "corrupt post-revolution regimes" (Stone 139). However, it seems that people are unaware of such regime's dangers, and those a few people who realize its dangers choose to be silent.

Ibrahim represents the naked and ugly reality in order to tell his people their own tale, a tale of awful feelings that ramble around the city. Upon reading *The Smell of It*, Yusuf Idris, a very well-known Egyptian novelist and writer (1927–1991), opined:

This is not a novel but rather, let us say, a slap, a cry, a strong awakening moan that almost stirs terror. The real hero in this novel is a general overwhelming feeling which has no name. (qtd. in Draz 134)

Ibrahim has stirred up around taboo topics that in his society people have never been accustomed to discussing so frankly. His purpose is to shock the readers who have resigned "themselves to their fate, [and who need someone] to talk about what is going on in the surrounding reality" (Guth 129). Idris was aware of the urgent need for a literature like that of Ibrahim.

However, this was not the case with another critic, Yahya Haqqi, who reviewed a copy of the book and wrote:

I am still distressed by this short novel whose reputation has recently become notorious in literary circles. It might have been counted among our best productions had its author not shown such imprudence and lack of good taste. Not content to show us his hero masturbating (if the matter had ended there, it would have been of little importance), he also describes the hero's return a day later to where the traces of his sperm lie on the ground. This psychological description absolutely nauseated me, and it prevented me from enjoying the story despite its skillful telling. I am not condemning its morality, but its lack of sensibility, its lowness, its vulgarity. Here is the fault that should have been removed. The reader should have been spared such filth. (qtd. in Ibrahim, 2013: 67)

To some extent, I do agree with Haqqi because superb writer like Ibrahim could find many better ways to shock his readers rather than masturbation with especial focus on the scene of the sperm. I do ask myself: if masturbation is a symbol of failure, what is the use of such scene (sperm scene)? Haqqi's review of *The Smell of It* further alienated Ibrahim. He was alienated both as a man and as a writer; alienated both by other people and by his colleagues, writers, and critics. Ibrahim shocks the public by exposing their shameful reality, pointing out that it is worthless and offers nothing to be proud of.

To those who stand against Ibrahim and his writings, the question I would like to ask here is this: What is the writer's duty if not to expose our shameful reality? If life is shameful, then why do we blame the writer for exposing its profanity? According to Waed Athamneh, the answer is political. I do agree with her belief that "we are so ashamed of our lives and ourselves that we prefer to hide our heads in the sand and turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what has become our life" (460). She adds that Ibrahim understood the ills of his society and knew that the only way to change the status quo in Egypt and the Arab world was by helping people admit how miserable they are. Only then they would be able to see the possibility of change. As long as people are unaware of the ills of their society, they

cannot change. She avers that Ibrahim's protagonist is "a metaphor for Arabs who have not only embraced their impotence, but have also become so accustomed to it that it now seems normal" (461).

Novels like *The Smell of It* alert the reader to a certain degree of the social, economic, political, and sexual filth that Ibrahim witnessed. Ibrahim's novel is an attempt to raise questions about our awareness of what our lives have been reduced to. Ibrahim wonders:

Does not the matter require some ugliness to express ugliness inherent in beating, to death, a defenseless human being; in inserting an air-pump in his anus and attaching an electric cord to his genitals? All of this because he expressed an opposing view or defended his freedom or his national identity? (qtd. in Mehrez, 2005: 51)

Here, Ibrahim justifies his use of some indecent words and shows the inhumane and barbarous way the regime deals with those who oppose it. The same savage way is still used by Arab rulers/dictators even today. Therefore, it can be said that the novel has proved to be timeless. It was written about 50 years ago, yet it can still be read as fresh nowadays. Reading the novel, one feels that it talks about the ills of Arab societies nowadays. Ceza Kassem Draz avers that

In societies where truth is concealed, distorted and repressed, literature's function becomes the revaluation of this truth and its discourse. The modern Arab writer has become the bold ad hoc spokesman of society. (146)

What has changed in modern Arab literature is the ways in which art and its writers are perceived by society or its readership. Here, Ibrahim is sad for the readers who choose to be deaf and blind and dare not change their miserable situations. Ibrahim calls his people or readers to re-evaluate the freedom of expression in the Arab world.

3. Women's Oppression in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

In what follows, my focus is only on the protagonist's encounter with three ladies in the novel *The Smell of It*. These stories represent the sufferings and oppression of Arab women not only by their dictator regimes but also by their patriarchal society. The protagonist's encounters with these three women – his girlfriend (Nagwa), a prostitute (unnamed), and a married

friend (Samiyya) – become the story of the status quo in Egypt, and his failure to have any successful relationship with any of them suggests the author's failure to either adapt to or change his society. Women in Arab society are either oppressed daughters, unhappy wives and mothers, or isolated girl-friends, and unrespected prostitutes. The women in *The Smell of It* are introduced to us through the lens of the protagonist who views both women and his whole world “through a distanced, neutral, and emotive superficial gaze” (Amireh and Al-Ali 860).

The first woman the protagonist meets after his release from jail is his girlfriend, Nagwa. He embraces her, but he pulls her face away when he kisses her on the lips. “I put my hand on her mouth, drew her head towards me, and kissed her. I took hold of her hips between mine in the same savage, unsophisticated manner. She moved away from me” (*The Smell* 13). She insists on him to talk, but he “had no desire to talk” (13). Therefore, “she talked a lot, then she was silent” (14). He wants to make love to her. However, they neither talk nor make love, and she leaves in the morning before he wakes up. This first encounter results in a cheerless ending for both of them. He does not talk to her, and she does not respond to his attempts to “cross the line” or even to kiss her (Al-Sanea 32). Therefore, he comforts himself with masturbation.

I had a feeling of pain between my thighs. I got up and went to the bathroom. Having freed myself of my desire, I returned and stretched out beside her. I slept and awoke. I slept again. When I opened my eyes the next morning, I found her dressed. (*The Smell* 15)

This disappointing and heart-breaking encounter with Nagwa confirms for him that nothing is the same anymore, including love, and he has no control whatsoever over the situation. This encounter with his girlfriend shakes him up and unveils the ugly reality around him. Unable to come to terms with either his girlfriend or the regime, he continues his purposeless and meaningless life and starts daydreaming about a beautiful and clean girl whom he sees one day on the metro. “I walked to the Metro. I saw an extraordinary beautiful girl...” the protagonist says (35). To escape his miserable situation, he loses himself in his daydream about this girl.

When I embraced her for the first time, she was silent for a while, then pushed me away.... And I hugged her to me and buried my head in her neck, I enjoyed for an instant the softness of her skin against my cheek. ... Then I kissed her on her mouth. I felt giddy. I wanted to do it again...she took me between her arms, allowed me to touch her breasts and hands, to kiss her cheeks and lips. But she was cold. (36-37)

The protagonist encounters failure not only in real life but also in his dreams. Even the girl of his daydreams “was cold... [she] turned her eyes away...she did not pay [him] any more attention” (37).

Again his failure after his daydream leads to his second encounter with the unnamed prostitute whom he desires for physical pleasure with the hope that this might help him to reconnect with the world. After his daydream failure, he “sat down and tried to write,” but in vain (37). So, he tells his friend Hassan: “we should without fail get hold of a women for tonight” (37). When the prostitute is brought to his residence, he wants to smoke, to talk, and to know her name. Instead of having sex, he asks her to stay the whole night and leave in the morning. But she refuses his offer, rather she wants to do her job and leave.

‘I do not want to smoke,’ she said. ‘Let’s get on with it.’

‘Let’s finish the cigarette first,’ I said. ‘What is your name?’

‘I want to get it over with,’ she said....

‘Sleep with me tonight,’ I said, ‘and then leave in the morning.’ (39)

She tries to unbutton his trousers, but he turns her away slowly. And when she pulls him toward her and tries to kiss him, he turns his mouth away. Seeing him struggling to have sex with her, she tries again to kiss him, but he moves his face away, gets up, and puts his clothes on.

She stretched out her hand to my leg and undid my trouser buttons. Slowly I turned her hand away.....

She pulled me towards her and tried to kiss me. I turned my mouth away from her face, then got to my feet... She tried to kiss me. I turned my face away. At last, I got up and put on my clothes. (39)

Before meeting the prostitute, the protagonist knows that he has neither the ability nor the desire to have intercourse with any lady but he still wants to try. He does not want sex per se; rather, he wants to converse, to smoke, to know each other and deal with her as a friend rather than a mere prostitute. The woman is surprised because she is not used to having such good treatment. She refuses his offer and thinks him to be just jesting.

What draws one's attention is the protagonist's refusal to kiss the woman though she tries to kiss him more than one time. I think that Ibrahim here endeavors to express that kissing means love which cannot be found between a man and a woman who gives herself for money. This idea is clear when we compare between his encounter with his friend Nagwa and that with the unnamed prostitute. He tries to kiss Nagwa, but refuses to be kissed by the prostitute. This paradox means that he has the feeling of love and intimacy for Nagwa, his friend, but this feeling is not for the prostitute.

In spite of the identical unsatisfactory results of the two encounters, he has a third experience and encounter with a third lady named Samiyya. Samiyya is married and has a child which means that his chance to have sex with her is almost absent. In his first meeting with her, he understands that she is not happy with her husband, and asks his sister about her life:

Samiyya's nice, I said to her [his sister]. 'Is she happy with her husband?' I asked her.

'Yes,' she said.

'I bet she doesn't love him,' I said.

'Impossible,' she said. 'Where else would you find a man like him, both as a person and from the point of view of position?' Then she said: 'they used to meet up together before marriage.' (18)

The protagonist's sister's criteria for happiness are not love and understanding. She sees no reason for Samiyya to be sad or unhappy for she would not find a better husband as a person and position or job. The institution of marriage is to be successful if the man has money, position, and personality. Like any Egyptian woman, the protagonist's sister follows

the theory of Samiyya. When her brother asks her if she loves her fiancé, she says that she does not love him at the beginning, but she loves him now. The protagonist notices that she raises her voice when she says that she loves him now which means that she is telling a lie.

‘Do you love your fiancé?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘When we first got engaged I could not bear him, but I have come to love him with time,’ she said, raising her voice.

‘Why are you shouting?’ I said to her.

‘That is my normal voice,’ she said. (19-20)

Here, Samiyya’s marriage suggests the political oppression in Egypt. The state is represented as a man. The nation is a woman, married to a man of personality and position, and is expected to be happy. However, people are miserable and unhappy, and they are unable to end this misery or object to it. Moreover, the protagonist’s sister knows that this kind of relation that she is going to get into will lead to unhappy married life like that of Samiyya. Nevertheless, she chooses to continue this relation. Like Samiyya who is stuck with her husband, the protagonist’s sister, too, is stuck with her fiancé because where else will she find someone like him? The fact that she continues a relation with someone whom she could not stand indicates her suppression. However, she does not admit such fact pretending that ‘love’ is only existent in books, and if it exists, it comes after marriage. She is of the notion that “all this talk about love and the meeting of eyes and tremor of souls was nothing but so many phrases out of novels... Perhaps love would come” (19). Besides, raising her voice when she says that she loves her fiancé now confirms her brother’s doubts about her love. Indeed, Samiyya neither loves her husband nor enjoys sex with him, and once she meets the protagonist, she seems to confirm this:

Every now and again she would give a deep sigh.

‘O Lord,’ she said.

‘If Freud could hear you,’ I said to her, ‘he’d have had something to say to you.

‘All sorts of things,’ she said. (16)

Both Samiyya and the protagonist’s sister are aware of their misery. On the other hand, neither of them is willing to talk about it forthrightly. In the

same way, the Egyptians are aware that they are ruled by a dictator, however, they choose not to object to it and continue their suppressed lives. This unconditional surrender of the people disappoints the protagonist and makes him unable to reconnect with his community.

What draws my attention here is that we as readers blame Samiyya and the protagonist's sister for accepting lives that are not based on love and forget the depressing lives they had with their families before marriage. For instance, at twenty-seven years, Samiyya does not have the freedom in her house that any woman should have. She does not have a room of her own. Besides, her family feels that she is an unwelcome burden and blames her for not being married at this age. Hence, getting married to the first proposal is the best solution to her problems even if it does not lead to a happy life. At least, it is much better than her life with her family.

At home, she [Samiyya] used not to have a room of her own. She used to sleep in a room which was more like a hallway. She was never to lock the door of her room and be by herself, to take off all her clothes, for example. She never kissed her body before the mirror. It was no longer possible for her to bear the way her father and mother looked at her every night. There was never any subject of conversation apart from the awaited husband. She was blamed for not having been able to get herself one. (18-19)

Samiyya's problems at home had to do not only with marriage but also with privacy and freedom. Therefore, marriage proposal offered her a refuge and a heaven from the harassing questions and looks of her parents and society. Her marriage allowed her to escape from the hell of her parents' house to that of her husband. I do not blame her and sympathize with her. Even after marriage Samiyya is stuck in her new life, especially after the coming of the first kid.

After one year, came the child and thus her everlasting bandage was completed. She had no choice but to resign herself. Then there were the times when.... I noticed a faraway look in her eyes and her face wore a stamp of sadness. What happened after marriage? (19)

After Samiyya has become a mother, divorce is not possible for her family could not endure her alone, let alone with her kid. Husband is needed to

grant her refuge and to support her financially. As has been mentioned before, it is obvious that being a woman in Cairo/ Arab society doubles her problems and challenges. All the women characters in the book are challenged not only by the regime as their men, but also by their families.

On the other side, there is the protagonist who is as stuck as she is. He is advised to get married, but not blamed as is the case with Samiyya. Unlike Samiyya, he feels free to express his opinion about love and marriage.

'We would like to see you married,' said my sister's fiancé.

'These things take time,' I said.

'Why,' he said.

'Love is not that easy,' I said to him.

'Take my advice,' he said with a shrug of the shoulders, 'Love comes after marriage.'

'I have been married five times,' said the uncle. (15-16)

The advice of his sister's fiancé is going to lead him to be in the same trap as that of Samiyya when she agrees to marry someone whom she does not love. Nevertheless, he is able to take his time before he finds the right woman. But that does not mean that he is not unhappy. Like Samiyya, the protagonist is stuck though marriage may not be an obstacle for him, but love is. The protagonist is caught between an emotional past and an unsatisfactory present. He is not capable to connect with any woman, including his girlfriend, Nagwa. Their love was romantic and innocent before he is jailed. However, after his release, it has become broken and cold. The protagonist, his sister, Samiyya, Nagwa, the prostitute and everyone else is unhappy because they all have nothing to make them happy. "Everyone I see in the street or in the Metro is glum, unsmiling. What have we to be joyful about? (17).

Indeed, the Cairo life in the 1960s, as to the writer and the protagonist, has become cold, boring, meaningless, and love becomes an inexistent idea and masturbation an act to have inner relief. In the text, Samiyya, a representative of the Arab/Egyptian daughter, wife, and mother is represented as submissive and stuck forever, before and after marriage.

From the above discussion of the protagonist's encounter with the three ladies along with his sister's story, I believe that it is clear enough that women are doubly persecuted creatures. In other words, the protagonist's girlfriend (Nagwa) is oppressed for she has been waiting for her lover (the protagonist) for more than five years when he was imprisoned without known even where he was. And when she meets him, he refuses to talk about his absence. What he demands is only to have physical relation. She does not have the right even to ask him where he was. The second oppressed lady is the prostitute who is called at any moment for physical pleasure for the sake money. She is deprived from her right to be loved and respected. The third sample of the oppressed ladies is Samyia who is unhappy before and after marriage. As a wife she is oppressed in the sense that she lives with a husband whom she does not love and cannot object to that; and as a single she is oppressed for she does not have the freedom and privacy that any girl needs. The last victim to be mentioned here is the protagonist's sister who is also suppressed for the circumstances enforce her to marry a man whom she does not love. Indeed, all the above samples lead or choose to lead unhappy lives because of poverty for which the government is responsible. If these ladies had the opportunities to work and to be independent humans, and not being burdens on their families, they would not be prostitutes or marry men whom they do not love. Hence, it is obvious that the state's oppression of its people lead to their disappointment, unhappiness, frustration, and failure.

In the same manner, Waed Athamneh in her article "Women, Writing and Politics," avers that Ibrahim uses issues of love, sex, and marriage to address women's rights in Egypt and the Arab world in the 1960s. She remarks that while dictators are oppressing their people and depriving them from their basic human rights such as freedom of expression, women are oppressed twice by their society. They are suppressed by the government as their men and also by the patriarchal Arab community. The stories of the protagonist with the three women that Ibrahim writes about in the text under scrutiny are mere samples of the many stories that are known to everyone but remain untold. Athamneh is of the view that

Their [the three women in the text] stories are the tip of the iceberg; whether it is his girlfriend, the prostitute or the married woman. The state of women in a society reflects the state of the whole society, and a society that is abusive and oppressive to its women is not civilized or democratic. These women are not only doubly alienated but also doubly challenged. (448)

Athamneh illustrates her view by providing some instances from the narrative itself where the unnamed protagonist is able to refuse the insistence of his family to get married and could express his opinion about love freely. "Love is not that easy," said the protagonist (*The Smell* 15). Samiyya, on the other hand, accepts the first proposal of marriage though it is not based on love for she was blamed by her family for not being married at the age of twenty-seven. This oppression of Samiyya leads her to have an unhappy marriage life for the rest of her life.

4. Conclusion

Truly speaking, Ibrahim uses issues of marriage, sex, and love to discuss women's rights in the Arab world in the 1960s. Unfortunately, nothing has changed since then. All the characters in the text are not living good lives or having the basic essentials to do so. In Arab societies, while men are oppressed by the state, women are subjected to double oppression by the state as their men and by their patriarchal society. Ibrahim's goal of writing about women rights is to reflect the state of the whole society. He avers that societies which are corrupted and suppressive to their women have nothing to do with civilization or democracy.

To conclude, it can be said that the roots of the Arab community's sufferings lie in its socio-political deficiencies, the misfortune of women, and the role of the writer. These matters have to be discussed openly so as to make some change. Like some of his contemporaries, Ibrahim aims "to awaken the reader to a new reality or, at least, to the necessity for a new reality" (Draz 135). He revolts against the culture of the 1960s, when writers used their art as a propaganda tool in the hands of the regime. Unlike them, in *The Smell of It*, Ibrahim revolted against the traditional function of literature, the role of the artist and their relationship to their readers. Ulrike

Stehli-Werbeck in her article “The Question of Identity,” expresses that Ibrahim is one of those writers who insisted on absolute honesty and truth in all areas of life, including sexuality and politics. Furthermore, he called for a revolution in the artist’s role in Egypt. The writer as to him “must reveal the way forward, he must choose the direction, and change the direction” (*That Smell*, 2013: 80).

Further academic studies on Arab societies can help to create an awareness among its people to realize the miserable conditions they live in. Further research in the field would help to call for gender equality in the Arab world. The need of the hour is a wider international readership conscious of the fact that Arab women are oppressed individuals who cannot stand up for their rights and beliefs because their Arab states do not grant them the opportunities to be independent individuals. Arab writers should write to demand the promotion of women’s rights, not only in theory but also in practice. This would have a greater impact in the Arab world. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a foundation for further research in this field, and that further studies can be carried out on the views expressed through this paper.

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