**Social Justice and Greimas’s Semiotic Square: Women in Prison in Salwa Bakr’s The Golden Chariot and Piper Kerman’s Orange is the New Black**

**Abstract**

The genre of women in prison literature sheds light on a rich storehouse of an unexplored segment of society. As such, it needs to receive more attention from scholars and educators to promote its readability to a wider audience. The purpose of this often-neglected genre is to Women prisoners are perceived by a wide majority of the supposedly good citizens as constituting a sub-human level that does not deserve to be heard. On top of that, the stories of women prisoners are often are exceptionally rich in information about the various elements of their human experience, the societies they were shaped by, their value systems and the highly asymmetrical systems of domination and subordination. and can offer a valuable understanding of ways to reform such societies. A lot of the attention is given to exemplary women who are either active feminists or silent subjugated objects, and between those two ends of the spectrum, a wide range of stories are lost and voices are turned silent. More importantly, looking at women’s stories in prison and their complex subjectivities becomes more illuminating when those stories are compared and contrasted in different societies. In order to make that comparison, Greimas’s semiotic square comprises an effective tool in creating a visual structure to the contraries and contradictions manifested in the text. For the analysis, I chose to focus on *The Golden Chariot* by the Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr’s and the American best seller which became a Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* written by Piper Kerman. The two texts challenge the abstract image of a ‘typical female inmate.’ The two texts communicate who those women are, their subjectivity and their sense of self, and their own understanding of and feelings about that time in their lives. The two texts share the common purpose of reintroducing the desire and dream for a communal mode of existence that is less oppressive and manipulative to all its members. The two texts also explore the layers beyond the self to depict how women re-structure power, race, and kin relations in prison, while examining the intricate connection between the personal and the social scene. I argue that the social, economic, and individual squares are the same in both societies, “The conjunctions of those relations form a fundamental network that governs human social behavior and practice.” (Wang 341-342). The analysis investigates the intersectionality of women suffering, how those stories are interrelated as well as how certain cultures and individuals perceive relations between entities in the most profound and subtle sense that reveals the ugliness of moral hypocrisy.

**Introduction**

**Women in Prison Literature**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the stories of incarcerated women whose lives were forever changed by a moment when they decided to revolt against prescribed societal principles. A question that I address in this paper that is originally posed by Bosworth is “Is femininity a source of oppression, or can it also enable resistance? In short, are the women able to transform or challenge power relations from their ‘embodied’ positions, as feminist theorists suggest?” (Bosworth). A semiotic study seeks to find significance. In this article, I use the semiotic tool to compare/contrast how the two texts depict the experience of women incarceration in two different parts of the world and in different time periods. The two texts investigated in this article join forces in highlighting the significantly important aspect of ‘difference’ in feminist thought. Salwa Bakr focusses on third world women from lower social classes. And while Piper, the main character in Orange is the New Black is a white woman from an upper-middle class family, her role is more of an insider’s view of the less privileged women of different racial and social backgrounds. As McNay notes, “The category of difference—or the differences within sexual difference—has, for a while, been an important topic of debate within feminism as a result of criticisms from black and Third World feminist theory, which assumes that the struggle against gender oppression is primary regardless of the economic and political conditions under which many women live. Consequently, Western feminists have been trying to break down some of the universalizing categories they have previously employed and are attempting to develop tools capable of relating gender issues to the equally fundamental categories of race and class.” (McNay 6). This paper thus focuses on gender issues against the backdrop of social dynamics.

“One of the first concerns of the new wave of writers on women and crime was to put “women” on the criminological agenda, to demonstrate that most previous explanations of crime had in fact been explanations of male crime, and to argue that when women creak the law they do so in circumstances that are often very different from those in which men become lawbreakers (see, for example, McRobbie and Garber, 1976). A constant theme in these analyses has been that women’s crimes are preeminently the crimes of the powerless (see Box, 1983; Messerschmidt, 1986; and Carlen, 1988).” (Carlen 107). They are left with a forever scar, not only on the inside but on the outside as an everlasting tarnished reputation and relationships that lack trust in those women’s integrity and their capacity to lead righteous and fulfilling lives. In the two texts under discussion, the two writers fight against the erosion of their identities and communicate women’s feelings, their perception of the flawed notions of social propriety and their connection to their kins and to the society to which they belong. The two texts show how the postmodern rejection of metanarratives is essential for contemporary feminism. Scheffler notes that “While works by male prisoners often deal romantically or stoically with transcendence and heroism, women’s works are strikingly concrete. Their purpose is communication” (Scheffler 58). The two texts reveal the vulnerabilities of women who share their stories with their inmates, stories that are sometimes filled with anger for the unfair treatment they received, as in the case of Aziza in *The Golden Chariot*, or feelings of regret for reckless teenager behavior as in the case of Piper in *Orange is the New Black*. Elissa Gelfard notes that women prison writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were concerned with two main goals and those were:

“asserting their normal femininity and denying that they were “sick” or “unnatural monsters,” as well as to “emphasize their individuality and proclaim that they do not fit the stereotype“ (Scheffler 58). Despite the verdicts those women received and the judgements they get for their incarceration, they seek to assert their identities and fight for showing their human nature of the good and the bad, narrating their experiences in the hopes that the society would gain a better understanding of the complexities of their situations.

While the surface level in both texts is the sum of women stories that tragically ended with incarceration, the deep level of the two texts is similar in the purpose of taking a free of judgement approach to creating a perception of the lives of those ‘criminals,’ while exposing the socio-economic injustices in both societies as well as to highlight the gap between the euphoric dreams and the dysphoric reality. “The prison is used in this text to denote both a specific site or institution, and a representation of the state’s power to punish. The prison is considered both as a material structure and as a symbolic institution.” (Bosworth). The prison is a symbol of the government’s power in enforcing its prescribed rules regardless of how ruthless or unjust those rules might be, a manifestation of gender inequalities, particularly when the victim is the one who eventually is incarcerated, while the aggressor is perceived as the victim. The women who commit crimes due to a severe sense of injustice like Aziza. “The frame-story is that of ‘Aziza, the upper-class woman who becomes mentally unstable and murders her stepfather who had seduced her into an incestuous relationship and then abandoned her. Within ‘Aziza’s story there are those of her fellow riders in the golden chariot, the women to be raised gloriously to heaven in recognition of their suffering at the hands of men and society” (El-Enany 388-389). Those women grieve the loss of the utopian sense of justice they had envisioned for this world, and as such create an alternative of their own, yet the trauma led that creation to be violent and against the law that was supposedly set to protect their rights as well as the rights of others. Both texts call for a society that is both civil and ethical.

For the purposes of that comparison, I chose the text *Orange is the New Black*, which also depicts the stories of incarcerated women, but the major difference between them and the women of *The Golden Chariot* is that they live in the United States of America. With the factor of incarcerated women in common in the two texts, does that make it merely a comparison between Egypt and the United States? Again, if the answer is a mere yes or no, both would involve an oversimplification of the project. The contrast/comparison involves societal, cultural, economic similarities/differences, injustices, and most importantly, how all of those factors combine to shape a woman’s choices or lack thereof in life. The analysis using Greimas’s squares showed that despite the differences in time, societies, culture, incarceration system, the two texts’s main concern is the same. Those differences amounted only to the level of complementary details, whereas the portrait that the reader finds oneself looking at is essentially the same across the two texts.

The portrait of injustice that is painted of shades of prescribed and forbidden aspirations, submission and resistance rules, privileged and prejudiced positions, adorned with the broken lines of gender inequalities and question marks about who is the victim and who is the villain.

**Semiotics and Greimas’s Square:**

Semiotics as an aspect of language study deals with a signaling system. According to John Duvall (1982), Semiotics is “the study of sign systems; like Freudianism and Marxism, it analyzes social and cultural phenomena by isolating units of signification and examining their structural interrelationship” (Duvall 192). “Narrative semiotics seeks, rather, to reveal semantic and ideological content of texts.” (Duvall 192). Greimas introduced the diagram of the semiotic square in 1966 essay, *“Les Jeux des contraintes semiotiques,”* reprinted in English in Yale French Studies two years later as *“The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints”* (Greimas and Rastier 86). The fundamental (and narrative) semantics is characterized by a certain type of structure or relational network: the semiotic square. It involves three types of relations: the relations of contrariety (A/B) and of sub-contrariety (non-B/non-A); the relations of contradiction (A/non-A; B/non-B); the relations of implications (on the deixes, i.e., the vertical axes, non-B-A; non-A-B). “Greimas (1966:19) emphasizes that single terms do not possess meaning; meaning arises through differences. Thus ‘masculine’ is a meaningful unit because of its differentiation from ‘feminine’” (Hendricks 108).

Greimas’s square is a fascinating tool in its semiotic capacity to reveal the depths of ideas in the text by looking at semantic units and their contraries and contradictions and seeing the interplay of those meanings in the lives depicted in the text. In other words, the square reduces the narrative to its structural bones. Greimas’s square reveals the underlying structure of the text, the foundation upon which it stands. The square acts like an icon that when you click on, you see the picture zoomed in, clearer, with intricate detail, and in some cases, more shocking. Perron (1989) rightly notes that “The strength of the theory lies in the fact that it distinguishes between two levels of representation and analysis: a manifest level and an immanent level of narrative that forms a common structural source where narrativity is situated prior to its manifestation.” (Perron 530)

The visual surfaces that Greimas’s square allow to formulate represent the interrelations between meanings on the square, as played out in the complexity of women’s lives depicted in the texts. In fact, A woman’s life can go through a cycle of changes that leaves her at different corners of the square over the span of her lifetime. The squares with their four words represent a lens through which we look at the women’s lives and contemplate a closer shot of what defines and governs this human life. More interestingly, that close reflection allows for a more concrete comparison among characters in the text as well as across other texts. As Corso (2014) notes, “The semiotic square has instigated an expansive range of critical responses that use the device to consider paradigmatic analyses of characters (actants), narrative and thematic structures, discursive boundaries, and a variety of objects that depend on oppositional relationships” (Corso 70).

As Greimas explains in his article “Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Art,” an object can only be understood through its decomposition into smaller units and then recomposing those units to grasp the bigger picture. Greimas et al add that “Whereas the reading of a written text is linear and unidimensional (from left to right or vice versa) and allows us to interpret spatialized speech as smooth or flat syntgamtic, the painted or drawn surface offers no obvious artifice which might reveal the semiotic process that is supposedly inscribed upon it. The frame appears to be the only sure point of departure” (Greimas , Collins and Perron 638). According to Paul Perron (1989), semiotics gives readers a deeper insight to literary texts particularly by examining the interplay between the figurative and the deep structure of narrativity. (Perron 528)

**The Golden Chariot**

The 1970s writers have achieved what Ferial Ghazoul, the noted Iraqi scholar, critic, and translator, refers to as ‘Magical Dualism’ in reference to “the successful fusion of politically or socially committed literature with artistically innovative literary techniques.” (Seymour-Jorn xvii). The 1970s marked the economic deterioration experienced by Egyptians as a result of Nasser’s policies and the corruption of his entourage, with the rapid dismantling of the ideals advocated for by the 1952 revolution. Further, the open-door policy enacted by Sadat in the early 70s enforced a significant economic pressure on the middle and working classes, which allowed the rich to become exceptionally richer and the poor were left to squirm in a mire of poverty. As such, the gap between social classes significantly widened in Egypt, dragging the society back to the severe injustices of feudalism in the pre-1952 era. The rich and the powerful had an iron grip on the country’s resources, and the poor received minimal pay from government jobs and suffered the deterioration of public services in all life sects of life that range from education, to health and housing, to transportation systems. As Seymour-Jorn notes, the 1970s writers were unique as:

“Their stories and novels respond to the multiple ramifications of the troubled economy along with a host of other issues, the increasing influence of Islamic conservatism, the challenge to women’s authority posed by work outside the home, the struggle of working-class people to find appropriate housing, and the economic and public policy-driven dislocation of people from one part of the city or country to another” (Seymour-Jorn xix).

Salwa Bakr (1949) is a novelist and playwright who took upon her shoulders the responsibility of critiquing the moral fabric of the Egyptian society. As Rasheed El-Enany (2006) notes: “The politics of the two eras are never far from the surface in her work, and are inextricably interwoven with her main concern—the politics of gender and the status of women in society.” (El-Enany 376). Bakr’s works in English translation include *My Grandmother’s Cactus: Stories by Egyptian Women* (1991), translated by Marilyn Book; *Such a Beautiful Voice* (1992), translated by Hoda El Sadda; and *The Golden Chariot* (1995) translated by Dina Manisty. El-Enany notes that “as the author’s first novel after several collections of short stories, *The Golden Chariot*, appears to be a compromise between two genres, those of the short story and the novel; a gradual transition for a writer, as it were, from the first to the second. This is so because in many ways the novel can be seen as a collection of thirteen short stories welded together by means of a frame story and minor interactions among the protagonists of each story.” (El-Enany 387-388)

The Golden Chariot offers a bold and blatantly honest depiction of women’s lives and stories of oppression enacted by the patriarchal values that shape and govern their lives as well as by the rapid deterioration of the political and economic conditions in the 70s. “A standpoint is an understanding of one’s individual location in the social order as part of and shaped by that order’s social and political contexts.” (John 96). While the stories of the incarcerated women are not categorized under ‘heroic,’ the stories raise questions in regards to the complexities of the villain/victim roles amidst significant changes in the moral system of society. “It may well be that the seeds of degeneration in the quality of life that was to happen in the Sadat era and to continue ever since had already been sown in the late 1950s and 1960s, but that their bitter fruit was to be reaped only later, encouraged by a complete shift of political and social ideology under Sadat” (El-Enany 378). In fact, it would be an oversimplification of such life stories to lay the blame on the socio-economic circumstances and the patriarchal values engraved in men and women. The multi-dimensional depiction of the characters in *The Golden Chariot*, the depth of the situations narrated, and the honesty with which the characters speak their minds raise the reader’s curiosity to reach the deep layers of meanings depicted and find answers to the questions raised.­ As Al-Nowaihi notes, “The humor resulting from these often-clashing perspectives on the women allows us to sympathize without suspending our critical faculties, to understand without necessarily accepting, and to evaluate without harshly judging” (Al-Nowaihi 12). The name of the ‘mad’ character ‘Aziza’ is ironic as the meaning of the name is Arabic is ‘honorable,’ ‘precious,’ ‘valuable,’ ‘dear,’, all those attributes she is deprived from in the real world. This drives her to seek an alternative world that matched the uptoipa she had imagined before the disillusionment. She seeks to escape in a chariot that ascends to heaven as she is denied the basic human needs on this earth.

“Salwa Bakr’s belief in the power of ordinary women, poor, uneducated women who subsist at the very bottom of the social scale, but who possess such qualities, in Bakr’s view, as to make them the real worthwhile feminists. Of those women Bakr writes:

Upholders of the women’s movement are in my view not those who climb onto podiums in conferences to demand changing personal statute laws, nor those who look for a women’s society to go to in the evening as an aid to good digestion. Rather, they are the millions of women who go out to work every day to save their families from poverty and hunger … Those are the upholders of the women’s movement who contribute to the advancement of society, and confronting life, not shying away from its difficulties, and the inherited values that put a brake on their female creative energies.” (El-Enany 380)

“These economic policies promote an atmosphere of rampant consumerism and lack of meaningful productivity which makes this the era of the middleman, or so-called businessman. The possession of nonessential consumer goods becomes a sign not only of power, but also of “modernity” and “civilization”, and since the unfair education system and hiring practices dash any hopes of upward mobility for most people, and simply allow an elite minority to maintain its position in society, then any aspirations to become a “modern civilized” individual are doomed to failure.” (Al-Nowaihi 16)

**Analysis**

**The Social Model**

Prescribed A1 Forbidden A2

Not forbidden A-2 Not Prescribed A-1

The contrariety and contradiction that the Greimas’s square delineates allows for an in-depth discussion of the interplay between the abstract and the practical, or what is preached versus what is practiced, as well as if /how they align. The social model is used to outline and discuss what is prescribed by the society for an individual versus what is forbidden, as well as the shades in between primarily categorized as the not prescribed and not forbidden. “Research has shown that in most societies, gender is an all-important subject that is linked to the social order as it were. Gender therefore is communicated by parents first at home, then the society at large. So, children become aware of their gender at a tender age, and they are repeatedly reminded of the roles they ought to play in a society that they form” (Ottoh-Agede and Essien-Eyo 15). In the Egyptian society, what is prescribed for a woman is that at a young age her life centers around the preparation for the role of a good wife she is expected to play in the near future. She is taught how to cook and the education she gets is primarily for the purposes of her becoming an educated wife and mother rather than for her aspiration to build a career for herself. It is prescribed that she obeys the husband and follows the path of life he outlines for the family. What is forbidden is for her to engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage or to decide that she does not want the role of a wife or mother or both. It is also forbidden that she prioritizes her career over her husband and children. while the man is not expected to contribute much to the family duties other than provide for it financially. While those were the expectations in the 70s, to a large extent they are still the same in the modern Arab world. While society is now more accepting of the women’s right to excel at work and build a successful career for themselves, the biggest responsibility for holding the family together and raising the children lies upon her shoulders. With the current harsh economic circumstances, society excuses the man for not being able to fulfill all the financial obligations of the family and hence the woman is expected to help, while the man is not expected to help in her house management obligations and duties toward the mental health of the children. What is not prescribed is that she looks after herself and discusses her needs or wants.

The women in *The Golden Chariot* experience a heightened consciousness about the oppression they face. “Foucualt’s thesis that power relations are constitutive of the social realm, and that they operate principally through the human body, provides a way for feminists to show how the construction of gender inequality from anatomical difference is central to the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies.” (McNay 46). As such, they take a non-complying to a violent standpoint in a revolt against what is prescribed by the societal norms. As Caresse John (2011) points out, “The possibility for marginalized individuals to achieve standpoints has not often been explicitly discussed by theorists. The usual, though implicit message is that those who are in a position to achieve a standpoint are those who are the nonmarginalized. This suggestion arises from the foundational argument of standpoint theory: Namely, that we must begin our research and thinking from the lives of the marginalized or oppressed” (John 97).

Is that the same social model in the US?

Leaving domesticity to occupy the liberty their male counterparts enjoy

Alter dominant social values

Gradually that view is grinding down

The limitations they face as women

Give voice to the voiceless

Experiences of confinement

The prison narrative

Defy the law

Abuses determined by class as well as by gender oppression

The discussion of the social model raises the question of whether it contributes in a direct or indirect way to the incarceration of the women depicted in the text? While the author does not explicitly state that fact, the reader cannot overlook the socio-cultural and political aspects that constitute the backdrop against which those crimes take place. As Anastasia Valassopoulos notes, “there are crimes of the conscience which human laws fail to rectify.” (Valassopoulos 102). The semiotic square of the social model signifies that corners that Aziza and women like her found themselves imprisoned in, long before their actual imprisonment. All girls start their lives by following the prescribed guides laid out by the parents or the guardian figure who inscribe those rules and pays much attention to the girl’s observance of the guide, and corrects behavior when necessary. Some manage to stay in that corner and lead successful lives according to the standards they had set for themselves. That, however, is inextricable from the social circumstances they were raised in and the challenges that life placed in their way. Others might jump their way from the prescribed to the forbidden or could pass by the not prescribed and the not forbidden on the way. The text focuses on the cases of extreme dissidence, while softening the impact of the shocking behavior by looking at their stories through the sympathetic eyes of Aziza. The author Salwa Bakr this issues an outcry for help in an attempt to save more lives from being lost and sanity from being blown away.

In fact, one cannot escape the observance that a lot of women are doomed to misery, at either side of the social model. If they do what is prescribed, they are taken advantage of, their rights are taken away from them, and the stories of misery abound in that side of the square. Meanwhile, if they choose the not prescribed side, they have a chance of finding their own way and creating their happiness, and yet their endeavors will not be appreciated by a large segment of the society. The forbidden ensures a lifetime misery. As such, the ‘not forbidden’/ ‘not prescribed’ axes represent the relatively safe space that can lead to a normal life. The same dilemmas can hold true about men, except that they do not have to follow what is prescribed and their transgressions are better accepted in society, while always offered a second chance to making right what they got wrong in the first place, a chance that is rarely granted to women in the same position.

While the definition of what is prescribed and what is forbidden may differ from one society to the other, the underlying structure of being trapped in what is prescribed drives women to transgress to the forbidden. Both texts show the gravity of damage done to the lives that could be saved by correcting the moral integrity of the societal value system in the first place.

**The Submission/Resistance Square:**

Submission Resistance

Not-resistance Not-submission

The submission/resistance contradictions and the implied contrarieties of non-resistance and non-submission represent another layer of the meanings governing and shaping the lives of the women whose stories are depicted in The Golden Chariot and Orange is the New Black. As the incarceration experience in the two texts focuses on women, it is inevitable to discuss the issue of gender as part and parcel of the socio-economic and political circumstances in the two societies of Egypt in the 60s and 70s as well as the United States in recent times. In this context, it is useful to examine Foucault’s ideas on power and sexuality. For Foucault (1980), “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised’ (142). The notion of power in our context is the patriarchal power exercised over women; the power that is ascribed to one gender over the other for no reason other than the biological distinction. It is argued that such power is granted by God. If that claim is true, sadly, that power is not used for the intended purpose of providing protection or financial sustainability. Instead, it is used as a means for repression and ascribing oneself additional gains at the expense of the other. Some women have no option other than submission as they find the pain that comes with it to be more bearable than the unknown pain of resistance. In the West, people are more familiar with those stories of submission as they reinforce the stereotype that Islam oppresses women. The texts under discussion in this article show the examples of women who went to the extreme polarity of resistance.

As Foucault explored the idea of power, he explained that “The production of knowledge is always bound up with historically specific regimes of power and, therefore, every society produces its own truths which have a normalizing and regulatory function” (McNay 25). This is another level of power that instigated Salwa Bakr’s text resists as it challenges those stereotypes of submission of the Muslim women propagated in Western societies. While those stories of submission can be true, the danger lies in creating a false truth stating that submission is the prescribed principle for women in Islam. McNay rightly notes that “whereas feminists have recognized the need to show that women are more than passive victims of domination through the rediscovery and revaluation of their experiences and history, Foucault’s understanding of individuals as docile bodies has the effect of pushing women back into this position of passivity and silence” (McNay 46). In this light, Bakr’s text shifts the discussion away from

It is worth looking synchronously at the two squares of submission/resistance and prescribed/forbidden contradictions. The above discussion shows that the social model in patriarchal societies prescribe submission as the desired choice over resistance. Similarly, western societies prescribe texts of submission as worthy of attention and publication over texts of resistance. In both cases, power is used to propagate the powerful entity’s ideas that work for its own benefit at the expense of the less powerful; the submissive. McCay rightly notes that “whilst the body is worked upon by gender constructions, it is also inscribed by other formations: class, race, the system of commodity fetishism. These formations may, to varying degrees, be internally gendered but they also work across gender distinctions, breaking down the absolute polarity between the male and the female body” (McNay 36).

The patterns of resistance we have seen in both texts are failure patterns, rather than stories of successful resistance. The roles of submission did not mesh with the characters’ self-identification. However, as resistance is not prescribed in their society, they are not educated on the right ways of refusing exploits of power, and what follows is that they destroy their lives in the process. Although Bakr creates sympathy for her characters, the reader cannot help but question why the characters made those choices. In such an act of wondering that the reader is led to think about the socio-economic circumstances that represent the stage on which those transgressions occurred. In fact, the stories depicted involve resistance not only to the powerful forces that subjugated them but also against the society’s alleged sense of justice and prescribed social values. As such, the focus is not on their failure but the causes of that failure as those women struggle to reconcile their rejection of the abusive power and the right way to challenge such abuse without causing harm to their own exploited selves. In fact, the majority of women in patriarchal and racially prejudiced societies fall between the two contrarieties of non-resistance and non-submission as they juggle their daily struggles with the desire to avoid major disruptions in their lives, a disruption they cannot afford to have. “Upholders of the women’s movement are in my view not those who climb onto podiums in conferences to demand changing personal statute laws, nor those who look for a women’s society to go to in the evening as an aid to good digestion. Rather, they are the millions of women who go out to work every day to save their families from poverty and hunger … Those are the upholders of the women’s movement who contribute to the advancement of society, and confronting life, not shying away from its difficulties, and the inherited values that put a brake on their female creative energies.” (El-Enany 380)

“In this way, Foucault gets round the problematic tendency to posit resistance as an ‘extra-social’ force. From this understanding of resistance, it follows that the sexed body is to be understood not only as the primary target of the techniques of disciplinary power, but also as the point where these techniques are resisted and thwarted.” (McNay 39)

Hunan lives are not opposing ends of s spectrum

They exist and operate between the various degrees of power and powerlessness

Implicitly call attention to the destructive situation

Contradictory impulses

Untangle

Struggling to reconcile

Power and truth

Conceptions if automnomy, domination and freedom

Relativist conceptions of

Provide an important counter to problematic tendencies in feminist discourse

What constitutes oppression and freedom

Challenge the image of women as passive victims

Sentimentalizes motherhood and sisterhood

Recognizes the need to

Suspicious of the normalizing force

Struggling with the question of

Contradictions and enabling aspects of masculinity

Introspection

Active individuals capable of intervening and and transforming their social environments

Capable of challenging the structure of domination

Leads to an impoverished understanding of the individual

This is an overstatement of the efficacy of disciplinary power

Institutions of justice , the law operates

Does law regulate the exercise of power on the institutional and individual levels?

Legal, social freedom understood in one dimensional manner

Unless there is A ubiquitous form of social control, a multidimensional understanding of crimes need to be adopted

The reform of criminal law

To exercise their rights, their power and their liberty

Feminists need to develop tools able to deal with difference in non-essentalizing ways

Are those crimes a manifestation of the women’s submission to the predestined miserable life of women in that society or are those acts of resistance against the society’s alleged sense of order and justice?

“Because the nature of women’s imprisonment rests, in part, upon gender inequalities, the concept of legitimacy must be broadened to explore how agency, choice and resistance are influenced by identity.” (Bosworth)

Those are the options available for women when they are faced with an oppressive situation. I will explore which characters chose which paths. And what is the definition of resistance and submission. Is resistance always refers to the act of fighting back to the extent of committing violent crimes? Or does it also refer to the meaning of resisting the urge of going to the end and fighting smart instead of fighting hard? Where do the characters fall within those four terms?

How are women in orange in the new black work with those terms, while considering the different social and cultural circumstances depicted in the two texts?

“To be an ‘agent’, or to have ‘agency’ denotes the ability to negotiate power. It requires a certain self image as active and participatory with others’ (Mahoney and Yngvesson 1992: 45).” (Bosworth)

“The notion of woman as doer, fighter, and survivor is firmly established.” (El-Enany 379)

There’s a saying in Arabic that goes like there: “for every action there is a reaction, that equals it in force and opposite to it in direction”­­­

“In Foucault’s eyes, power is not a hierarchical relationship, controlled by the dominant class, rather it is capillary and multidirectional. Although in his later work on the history of sexuality, Foucault claimed that power inevitably invoked resistance, there is little sense of opposition in his depiction of the prison (Fouault 1980b:53).” (Bosworth)

Looking at this square is intriguing. What is the definition of the words resistance and submission. According to Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, the word resistance is defined as

[uncountable, singular] dislike of or opposition to a plan, an idea, etc.; the act of refusing to obey

* *As with all new ideas it met with resistance.*
* **resistance to somebody/something***There has been a lot of resistance to this new law.*
* *Resistance to change has nearly destroyed the industry.*

“oppression calls for resistance, and Bakr’s women are, to be sure, first class resisters, with varied means of fight back, ranging from the destruction of the male enemy through violent crime, as happens in her episodic novel, The Golden Chariot, to escapism, which takes the form of madness common in a good number of her short stories. But most of her female protagonists resist, and indeed triumph through a much less extreme courses of action: their malleability, adaptability, and sheer survivability make a mockery of male power and demonstrate time and again which gender is the real life force, if not the one with the upper hand in social structures. Bakr’s men, on the other hand, are not all oppressors; many of them are as much victims of the social system as women are.” (El-Enany 377)

“Another female archetypal image in Bakr’s work in her first collection is that of a woman as a lonely fighter, a lonely survivor of the death (or divorce) of a husband, son, daughter. Such a woman in Bakr’s world will suffer alone in silent, mundane, everyday heroism, unnoticeable even to herself, while undertaking tirelessly the duties attendant on survival, which can range from bringing up and providing for father-abandoned children, to slowly withering away alone as a woman without means or beauty, and therefore socially unqualified to attract the other sex.” (El-Enany 380-381)

“Her women’s lonely suffering is always presented with an ironic undertone, which transforms a testimony to their superior strength, their ability to outlive their abandonment by men.” (El-Enany 381)

“This rebellion is not against a particular repressive male individual but against something much greater—the monolith of countless centuries of repressive patriarchy that decide automatically and unquestionably for a woman what she can do and what she cannot, regardless of fairness, equality, reason or any other sensible consideration.” (El-Enany 398)

There’s a saying in Arabic that goes like there: “for every action there is a reaction, that equals it in force and opposite to it in direction”­­­

in his later work on the history of sexuality, Foucault claimed that power inevitably invoked resistance, (Fouault 1980b:53)

In patriarchal societies, resistance has a negative connotation. In fact, for all oppressors resistance is an act of transgression and has a negative connotation for all whose interests remain in the status quo and in keeping the oppressed in silence. While resistance can set things right, more often than not it can go wrong and it can involve the loss of lives. The stories of the women in both texts act as the souls lost in the act of resistance in the hopes that other women would not be put in similar situation. For oppressors submission is the right thing to do, submission is a beautiful thing and otherwise if the oppressed refuses then they are mean and they are to blame.

Thinking about this square and how it aligns with the first one. It becomes clear that submission is prescribed and resistance is forbidden.

Those are the options available for women when they are faced with an oppressive situation. I will explore which characters chose which paths. And what is the definition of resistance and submission. Is resistance always refers to the act of fighting back to the extent of committing violent crimes? Or does it also refer to the meaning of resisting the urge of going to the end and fighting smart instead of fighting hard? Where do the characters fall within those four terms?

Where do these types of women fit in the square? Is it the non submission ? the reason why the term fits so well with that archetype is that those women are resisting but neither in the visible and often times pretentious way of calling for women’s rights while doing nothing to help, nor in the violent way of taking revenge. Non submission is a form of subtle resistance that the majority of women fall into, but publishers prefer to invest in stories that show an extreme of submission or resistance.

In fact, the majority of women lie at the Not resistance/not-submission axis, and those are the women we rarely hear their stories as they are neither sheer resistance nor sheer submission, the type of extremes that the current market is interested in. In fact, while Aziza rebelliously resisted her stepfather’s deception by committing the crime and ending his life, the trauma of the experience has led her to cross the borders of sanity.

Where do these types of women fit in the square? Is it the non submission ? the reason why the term fits so well with that archetype is that those women are resisting but neither in the visible and often times pretentious way of calling for women’s rights while doing nothing to help, nor in the violent way of taking revenge. Non submission is a form of subtle resistance that the majority of women fall into, but publishers prefer to invest in stories that show an extreme of submission or resistance.

Interestingly, in The Golden Chariot the story of Aziza and most women start with submission that they eventually cannot take any more and leads them to reach the forbidden and transgress. In Orange is the New Black, the protagonist starts with the transgression, until she realizes the misleading excitenement of it, and decides to stop and lead a submissive, law-abiding life.

“set in a women’s prison, was however to bring in a new factor: women, pushed to the limit, are also capable of protest by violence, and in some of the episodes of this novel, Bakr combines in some of the characters madness and violent crime, such that a woman’s mental breakdown is accompanied by a lashing out against society or those male individuals embodying its oppressive values.” (El-Enany 387)

“This rebellion is not against a particular repressive male individual but against something much greater—the monolith of countless centuries of repressive patriarchy that decide automatically and unquestionably for a woman what she can do and what she cannot, regardless of fairness, equality, reason or any other sensible consideration.” (El-Enany 398)

“If it is accepted that prisoners are always in some manner engaged in the negotiation of power inside—however limited their role may be—then it is necessary to consider how prisoners manage to retain a sense of themselves as agents, despite the restrictions they face.” (Bosworth)

Privilege/entitlement prejudice/restriction/restricted rights

Not prejudice Not privilege

In the two texts, if we sketch this Greimas square of Privilege/prejudice in the two texts, it becomes clear that in Golden, the main character Aziza is narrating from a non-privilege perspective, while Piper in Orange is narrating from a standpoint of privilege. While both come from different backgrounds, the privilege of Kerman is evident in the amount of narration done in regards to her own story with all of the details, feelings, and other people involved in her life, whether those are her supportive group of family and friends, or the supposed friends who drove her to get involved in the drug dealing. While as a reader of The Golden, I did not get the sense that Aziza is the protagonist as the number of pages in narration of her story are more or less the same as those used for the narration of the stories of the other inmates. If anything, it is her role that she took upon herself to help those women by taking them with her in the Golden chariot more than anything that makes her a protagonist.

Orange clearly touches on privilege, but does golden chariot touch on that? While it is not directly addressed in the text as we do not see a comparison/contrast between the non-privileged as opposed to the privileged character as we see in Orange. In fact, it is possible that Salwa Bakr while showing the contrast of the privilege/lack thereof of the women outside the prison and those inside, she chose to make the prison a safe space for the women who, having been exposed to so much injustice, oppression create a bond amongst themselves in prison where they are equal, a space where there is empathy, and a reincarnation for lost familial and friendship relations outside.

In fact, the golden chariot is a dream of the lack of privilege on earth that Aziza is hoping to aspire in heaven, and yet she is not selfish as to wish it for herself only, but she has assigned herself the role of the manager who takes decisions on who else is approved to ascend with her to heaven in the Golden chariot.

It is interesting that kerman notices that she herself is experiencing racist thoughts when she was worrying that the black woman would attack her. Being in a position of privilege more often than not leads to one’s prejudice against those who lack that same privilege.

“The episode pointedly reveals what Piper doesn’t know about herself—that the civility and niceness she experiences “inside” as her innate character, herself, utterly depends upon the civil, racial, and economic privileges and protections that exist “outside” of that self. He subjective experience of explosive violence shatters that illusion, unmasking civility as privilege by depicting the consequences of its loss.” (McHugh 22). This draws the similarity of the characters depicted in The Golden Chariot, where an outsider to the circumstances the characters lived in can easily categorize those women as non-deserving of sympathy and well-deserving of their fate.

Looking at this square invokes the victim/villain square and brings to mind how the interplay of victimhood and lack of privilege is unmistakably clear. In fact, this seems to be Salwa Bakr’s implied message in her text. Similarly, Kerman’s implied message shows how everyone is showing the privilege in Piper’s story that foregrounds the stories of her less privileged inmates. surprised that a white woman from the upper middle class like Piper is in prison. She even manages to get away sometimes with things that her other inmates cannot do as in the episode of expanding her number of visitors.

“Piper’s backstory of a good life to which she wants to return deliberately emulates the “outside” of its intended viewers; it contrasts sharply with Taystee’s outside, where freedom is grim that she returns to prison because its provisions and resources provide the only version of a “good life” available to her.” (McHugh 23). Similarly, Aziza does not dream of her life outside prison, but instead resorts to imagination to create a life for herself and for the other deserving women, a life that she believes cannot be realized on earth.

What the society inscribes of a promise of success and happiness if the rules prescribed by society are followed is in the stories of these women an illusory happiness that in fact is tragic.

Aziza represents the innocent, who knows nothing about the outside world, the obedient daughter to an abusive step father, she transforms at a moment and decides to kill him when he leaves her to another girl and the trauma of the incident and her incarceration transform her to the border of insanity as she disconnects with life on earth and focuses her dreams and thoughts about how to ascend to heaven and who she can choose to go with her.

Piper, on the other hand, represents the transgressor at a young age, the one who fully experiences the world and gets involved in drug smuggling, and experience with being a lesbian and then she is done with that life of excitement and danger and decides to abide by the law and stop the track of this life. However, as the federal agents learn about her crimes and she is convicted to 15 months in prison, she starts to get more in touch with the life of Americans from different backgrounds, a life that she would not have otherwise experienced or known of. In contrast to Aziza who starts a mental journey of ascending to heaven, Piper embarks on an opposite journey of descending to earth and experience the life of millions of unprivileged Americans.

Victim Villain

Not victim

Not villain

“In *Structural Semantics* Greimas reduces Propp’s seven dramatis personae to six “actants,” his designation of basic narrative roles. He models the actants or grammatical syntactic categories, and he articulates them within three relational categories: subject vs. object, sender vs. receiver, and helper vs. opponent.” (Schleifer, Davis and Mergler 72). Interestingly, the women in The Golden Chariot Aziza and the other women experience a shift in their roles from object to subject, from receiver to sender and from helper to opponent. This raises the question of whether their roles also shifted from victim to villain. How can we define the contradictory terms Victim/Villain? Is it easy to say in clear terms who the victim in a story of life is versus the villain? Or can it sometimes become such a complex question that has to be left unanswered?

Salwa Bakr shows how those women were grinded under the harsh economic circumstances as shown by the story of Umm Ragab. Aziza angry at how she wastes her life for minimal pennies: “Umm Ragab, you’re in for something so trivial. Three years for stealing a wallet nobody would look twice at with a measly ninety pounds in it—that’s thirty pounds for each year of your life in prison” (Bakr 5). It still would be a simplification of such life stories to just blame the socio-economic circumstances as well as the patriarchal values instilled in men and women in society.

The complexity of the personas depicted in The Golden Chariot, the depth of the situations narrated, and the honesty with which the characters speak their minds leave the reader but in awe in an attempt to process the richness of meanings depicted and questions raised. “When women are empowered to assume that they will find growth fostering pockets in the world, they become fully functional and are able to experience themselves as effective, or able to make an impact on other people. It is also precisely this kind of empowerment that enables women to leave disempowering relationships. Women who are not empowered in this way become vulnerable to persons and situations through which they may achieve a false and transitory sense of power. In some cases, this ephemeral sense of power is achieved through antisocial acts. In her studies of moral decision making, Gilligan found that moral and social integration went hand in hand, and that both were contingent upon the women’s sense of self-worth “ (Sommers 123).

The story of Hinna in The Golden Chariot best embodies Sommers ideas. Hinna told Aziza about “her husband’s insatiable appetite for the opposite sex, which she had discovered that day, long ago when she was married off to him. The insane urge which impelled him to have sex with her on their wedding night no less than nine times, despite the terrible pain that she suffered” (Bakr 39). Hinna is married at a very young age and is taught to depend on her husband for financial sustainability. She lives with him for forty-five years, a life full of helplessness, fear, and a devoted pleaser for the husband, not knowing her rights to pleasure and happiness as an equal partner in marriage. After those long years of enduring pain, feelings of humiliation and disdain, the husband threatens he will marry another woman. Fear takes grip of Hinna and she starts suspecting all his acts of coming late and showing more disdain for her than ever before. Being in a state of helplessness and having nowhere else to go if he marries another woman and kicks her out of the house, she decides to bring his life to an end in the hopes to bring her suffering to an end as well. It is clear that her fear and her actions spring from a place of lack of knowledge and having no access to resources that could be of help. If she was empowered in the first place, she would not have had to endure those long years of insult and pain, and she would have been able to make a right move of resistance instead of resorting to the choice of murder when she was past the age of sixty. In this story, she is the villain for committing murder, and yet other villains ion top of whom is her husband who has been committing acts of aggression against her for forty five years is the victim. Her family that did not teach her the importance of self-respect and self-worth, and that did not let her continue her education past the primary stage is not the villain. The government that did not provide resources to protect women from domestic aggression is not the villain. The society that places a wife’s needs as secondary to her husband’s is not a villain. The depiction of the details of Hinna’s suffering in the text is a cry for help to redefine the meanings of victim and villain for the consequences of oppression are so grave that can turn an innocent sole into a merciless killer. Does the judicial system define and criminalize sexual violence and oppression in domestic households?

It is illuminating to look at this square simultaneously with the previous two squares of the social model that shows the prescribed versus the forbidden and the square of submission versus resistance. It becomes clear that the social model prescribes submission and prescribes being a victim. When one rejects that prescribed norm and the soul aches for resistance and the taking off the victim robe, it is a reaction that is looked down upon to say the least and can lead to incarceration when the acts go too far to be an act of aggression eventually directed against the aggressor.

Foucault makes a distinction between the law enforced by the state and the ethics and morality set by all religions for man to establish better relations with himself and with others. (1985: 29-30).

“For these women, lawbreaking was an outgrowth of a complex interaction of relationships, feelings and situations, of being denied the essential components of empowerment that might have led to a sense of effectiveness in an inherently disempowering world.” (Sommers 124)

Societies where the more powerful repress the less privileged

“Beginning with the subject, we can represent this scheme with Greimas’s actants from which the sender and receiver are excluded

Subject Anti-subject

W (hero) -W (opponent/villain)

I/W (object/heroine [sought-for person])

I – W (helper) Not subject

Not anti-subject

Figure 5 (Schleifer, Davis and Mergler 76)

“Ascribing the desire for the golden chariot to mad Aziza allows Bakr to present a sympathetic view of the women without risking that an overly sentimental or cloyingly noble forgining tone pervade the novel.” (Al-Nowaihi 12)

Aziza

piper

not piper not aziza

The non aziza can include all the women who are exposed to sexual abuse and experience the extreme pain of a cheating partner, but continue to be obedient and continue to be silent. It can also include those who manage to leave the relationship and the lucky ones would be those who manage to overcome the psychological effects of such a ruining relationship.

The non piper are all the women who lack privilege in their lives, and also all the similarly privileged women who remain in their bubble throughout all of their lives and miss the opportunity of meeting other women whose lives could be way tougher

**Orange is the New Black**

“Examining lawbreaking through the subjective lens of the women’s own stories allows both for the incorporation of issues such as race, ethnicity, class, and historical period into an understanding of lawbreaking, and for the clarification of misleading ‘objective’ facts. Ultimately, the psychological and social rift can be bridged, leading to a clearer understanding of highly complex issues.” (Sommers 125)

In Orange is the New Black, “Kerman renders well the drudgery of imprisonment, the friendships, the rituals, and she even confronts serious issues related to how prisons warehouse drug addicts and the mentally ill, and how so many women get caught up in the system because of racism and poverty, low-level drug involvement, and the sexual and physical abuse that makes them vulnerable to all of the above.” (Paige 149-150)

“Kerman’s Orange is the New Black, streamed on Nteflix, tells a women-in-prison narrative initially focused on a privileged white woman of thirty-four, Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling), incarcerated for carrying drug money for her lesbian lover eleven years earlier as a Smith College undergrad. Piper lives an affluent life in New York City, has a business with her best friend, and is engaged to be married when the feds show up; she receives fifteen-month sentence. Initially focused on Piper and her travails adjusting to prison life, the series introduces its audience to the other inmates she encounters, including Red (Kate Mulgrew), Dayanara Diaz (Dascha Polanto), Suzanne aka “Crazy Eyes” (Uzo Aduba), Sophia Burset (Laverne Cox), and Poussey Washington (Samira Wiley). As the series progresses, it depicts their backstories of familial and material deprivation, stress, and sometimes abuse that led to their incarceration; these backstories dramatically contrast with Piper’s privileged life.”

(McHugh 17-18)

“they lived in another America that is hidden from most whites, one where there is an institutional pipeline between ghettoized communities and the prison system.” (Paige 146)

“The title, Orange is the New Black, appropriates a fashion colloquialism to describe mandated prison attire, producing a double meaning. Its use of the color black articulates an implicit transaction between two radically different systems of class and appearance-based compulsion: the fashion system’s compulsory consumption, for which black serves as a color standard, and the criminal justice system and its compulsory system of incarceration, in which people of color are overrepresented. In the ironic association that the title articulates between these two systems, taste and race emerge as the rationalizations for class privilege on the one hand, and for the criminalization of poverty and skin color on the other hand. Where the fashion system personalizes and individuates affluence and privilege through the appearance-based standard of “good taste,” the criminal justice system personalizes and individuates social problems through the appearance-based standard of race. Both systems use appearance, coded through the title as “black,” to obfuscate class and its effects. The series’ central narrative arc reveals their fundamental connection by showing Piper Chapman’s transition from the privilege of the former to the restricted rights of the latter” (McHugh 21).

Privilege/entitlement prejudice/restriction/restricted rights

Not prejudice Not privilege

“Orange’s inmates and their lives are arrested, both legally and figuratively. As convicted criminals, their citizenship claims—freedom of speech, assembly, privacy, protection from invasive search and seizure, as well as personal choice and independence—are suspended. Along with these civil constraints, there are nearly absolute constraints on the inmates’ consumption. In prison, significantly, the requisite commodity supports of postfeminism and neoliberal citizenship are precluded: no malls, no fashion (save shower things made of duck tape), no money (inmates cannot touch cash), no shopping, and no makeup (though Alex has eyeliner tatts and transwoman Sohpia can be seen applying Vaseline mixed with Kool-Aid to her lips). The genre, setting, and realist style necessitate motivated and politically productive constraints on representation, notably in its denial of popular culture’s well-worn recourse to empowerment through commodity feminism for its female characters.” (McHugh 22)

“The episode pointedly reveals what Piper doesn’t know about herself—that the civility and niceness she experiences “inside” as her innate character, her self, utterly depends upon the civil, racial, and economic privileges and protections that exist “outside” of that self. He subjective experience of explosive violence shatters that illusion, unmasking civility as privilege by depicting the consequences of its loss.” (McHugh 22)

“Piper’s backstory of a good life to which she wants to return deliberately emulates the “outside” of its intended viewers; it contrasts sharply with Taystee’s outside, where freedom is grim that she returns to prison because its provisions and resources provide the only version of a “good life” available to her.” (McHugh 23)­

“Top and Orange each, in very different ways, disallow the neoliberal, postfeminist framework of personal choice, freedom, and independence through their generic interventions. Both series and their paratexts emphasize female collectivities over individuation (and both sequences exclude men from their credit images). “ (McHugh 24)

“In conclusion, Top of the Lake and Orange is the New Black use the genre conventions of the police procedural and women in prison to intervene in postfeminist representational paradigms and values that, in televisual and online worlds, pointedly disregard material, social, political, and gender inequality.” (McHugh 24)

**Discussion**

The greimas squares makes the reader observe the interrelations between texts, and thus reconstruct a portrait of the intertextuality

IN choosing the two texts, my first intention in doing this research project and using Greimas’s semiotic model of analysis was to reach the differences among those socities and the causes, motives and cultural factors that lead to crime and women incarceration. It was to my surprise, that using the Greimas semitic square I started seeing more similarties than differences, which dwindled to a supplementary status in comparison to the big picture of social, economic and gender injustices that compose the main idea in the two texts.

“Formed through their life experiences and their socioeconomic status, prisoners connect their sense of self within the prison to broader social constructions of race, gender and class.” (Bosworth)

This statement is true of the stories of women in Orange is the New Black, as we read about diverse groups of women simulating communities in the American society. That topic is not really addressed in The Golden Chariot, where most of the women’s stories already belong to the working-class group, as injustices and corruption in the judiciary system could be even more deeply rooted that even if a woman of a higher social class were to commit a crime, she would be able through the usage of her money, power, and hiring of lawyers who find loop holes in the system, to find a way out. Further, the availability of resources and support normally leads a person to lead a non-transgressing life, unlike when one is faced with oppression and deprivation.

**The Two texts:**

“feminists have drawn extensively on the poststructuralist argument that rather than having a fixed core or essence, subjectivity is constructed through language and is, therefore, an open-ended, contradictory and culturally specific amalgam of different subject positions. This argument has been used in various ways by feminists—[articularly socialist feminists—to criticize the etendency amongst certain radical feminists to construct women as a global sisterhood linked by invariant, universal feminine characteristics, i.e. essentialism.” (McNay)

“Indeed, it is only for a few privileged, white western women that sexism is the main form of oppression. Dominant new-wave feminism, however, takes white women’s experiences as the norm and generalizes them in the assumption of a universal and shared oppression between women. Black and other women of ethnic minorities have different histories and experiences in relation to slavery, forced labor, enforced migration, plantation, colonialism, imperialism, etc. (Ramazanoglu 1989: 125-9). Indeed, as Carby (1982) has shown, power relationships between white and black women in Britain have their roots in colonial relationship. It is here, then, that the question of difference can be seen to intersect with the problem of power. For power differences between women can be so great that apparently similar struggles against men can be, in practice, fundamentally different.” (McNay 64)

“feminist anthropologists have shown how certain sets of analytical distinctions such as nature/culture, domestic/public, which are premised on the cross-cultural homogeneity of such categories, are problematic and potentially distorting because they are essentially ‘western’ concepts. The universal subordination of women cannot be assumed, nor can it be read off straightforwardly form symbolic and cultural representations. Rather, what have to be considered are the questions of what women actually do in a particular society, their access to resources, the amount of economic and political autonomy they have and how these factors are articulated within specific definitions of femininity.” (McNay 65)

“to be a female social subject is not always to be a woman” (McNay 66)

Women’s experiences are controlled by cultural constructed images of feminine behavior

Rooted in the demands of emancipatory politics

Rediscover and reevaluate the experiences of women

Power as prohibitory and repressive

“while she (salwa bakr) is careful not to idealise the Nasser era, it is the enormous social changes that took place from the time of Sadat onwards that re most deplored in her work. The politica of the two eras are never far from the surface in her work, and are inextricably interwoven with her main concern—the politics of gender and the status of women in society. The plight of women in her work is part of a larger social illness, and the cure she is seeking is one for the entire social body, so to speak, and not just for the female part of it.” (El-Enany 376)

Intertextuality of the two texts

Intertextuality between the two texts and semiotic syncretism

While women in the US have their own gender issues and discrimination against women, when compared to the Egyptian society, the injustices are more subtle and less blatant. However, an issue like the gender pay gap does not exist in Egypt.

“The episode pointedly reveals what Piper doesn’t know about herself—that the civility and niceness she experiences “inside” as her innate character, her self, utterly depends upon the civil, racial, and economic privileges and protections that exist “outside” of that self. He subjective experience of explosive violence shatters that illusion, unmasking civility as privilege by depicting the consequences of its loss.” (McHugh 22) . This also applies to The Golden Chariot, as those unprivileged women wouldnot have had to commit crimes if the social order was just and secured their rights. This gets us to the question in the golden chariot of whether those women deserve sympathy or are they criminals not to be sympathized with? The quest to find perpetrators, which is the message Salwa Bakr is trying to convey.

Privilege is discussed in Orange, whereas it is not discussed in The Golden.

Interestingly, in both texts, there is no mention of religion

The universals in the two texts

In both prisons, women need to work,

In both prisons, women form support systems for each other. While there are some fights, the humanistic aspect of the support gains more focus. For example, in Orange is the new Black we read a whole chapter about the mother daughter relationships, and how they are formed naturally in prison between women who are not related biologically. In the Golden Chariot we even see a transformation of a southern Egyptian woman whose upbringing, conditioning and fear of violating those rules lead her to be harsh on her daughter. However, with the change of that environment, in prison, her basic instincts for motherhood and mercy are revived and treats this other character with more kindness that she did to her actual daughter outside prison.

Family relationships

“Umm el-Khayr is unaware of the irony in this, but the suggestion is that the indifference and cruelty of Aida’s mother is not a result of any innate pathology, but of the op­­pressive conditions of her world in Upper Egypt, and similarly that Umm el-Khayr can afford to be as loving and sympathetic as she is because she is outside of that wolrd and its pressures. IN fact, it is the prison’s ability to disrupt the status quo and function beyond societal impositions and regulations that allows an alternative familial model to flourish among these women: one that is more respectful of each member’s needs and is based on negotiation rather than manipulation, and compassion rather than rigid adherence to prior rules. Indeed, of all the normative institutions that Bakr is determined to strip bare, the family gets a major share of criticism.” (Al-Nowaihi 17)

“If it is accepted that prisoners are always in some manner engaged in the negotiation of power inside—however limited their role may be—then it is necessary to consider how prisoners manage to retain a sense of themselves as agents, despite the restrictions they face.” (Bosworth)

In Orange, some women have assumed the role of helpers guiding new inmates, as the women who told Kamran that they will make her bed, and almost gave her the order of sleeping on top of the made bed, as well as others who guided her to her role of service outside the prison. It is as if they are assuming the role of managers inside the prison.

In both texts, is there a transformation? It is evident that Kerman Piper is changing. She is learning a lot, learning about the lives of underpriviledged women who, in real life, there was a very slight chance she could have met them. She is learning to help, learning to adapt to hardship, which also in her real life she never really experienced.

On the other hand, we are not seeing such a transformation in the Golden Chariot. However, we see Aziza increasing the number of chosen passengers in the chariot as she learns more about the stories of those women and changes her opinion about some of them by time, when she sees the beauty of their non-criminal personalities.

IN fact the biggest transformation occurs at the moment of committing the cri me, which drastically changes their lives forever. It is the moment that those women decide that they no longer are going to abide by what is presecribed by society and are going to let their own selves be the judges and the executors of what they see should happen.

The figurative level of the two texts

The symbolism in the golden chariot

What is the symbolism of orange is the new black,

The chariot is not an ordinary car, it is rare in the material it is made of ‘gold’ as well as in how it operates ‘it ascends to heaven’. While patriarchy is a key ailment in Egyptian society, the equivalent of it is ‘privilege’ in the US. Privilege however is a complex notion that elements of patriarchy and race unfold within it. In fact, the main character’s insanity that drove her to accept working as a drug smuggler early on in her life helped her see the importance of integrity in life, which drove her back to her sanity. Further, the experience of incarceration added much sanity to her life experience, especially in regards to the stories of other women to whom she started to get connected to and empathize with. So while Aziza’s imprisonment led her to insanity to disconnect from the world, Orange’s protagonists’s imprisonment was in fact her gateway to sanity to reconnect with the world and meet with women who were not in her circles in the real world, as they lacked the level of privilege she enjoyed. “Ascribing the desire for the golden chariot to mad Aziza allows Bakr to present a sympathetic view of the women without risking that an overly sentimental or cloyingly noble forgining tone pervade the novel.” (Al-Nowaihi 12)

The relationship between the deep structure and the figurative level of narrativity

There is humor in both texts

“The humor resulting from these often clashing perspectives on the women allows us to sympathize without suspending our critical faculties, to understand without necessarily accepting, and to evaluate without harshly judging.” (Al-Nowaihi 12)

Interestingly, Greimas’s semiotic theory lays bare the structural bones of the two texts. When we think of the main semantic values that define both texts, and provide a square portrait of the defining features of its characters, its is easy to notice that with the different semantic values of the squares discussed, with their contradictions and contrarieties, there is one truth that connects to all of them and that is the gender inequalities and the socio-economic injustices that lead to lost lives. This is not to say that incarcerated women cannot start their life all over again, but what is lost is priceless. It can involve lives lost, as in the case of Aziza who killed her step father, who has raised her since she was a little girl. The loss can be the loss of abstract values as trust, love, family. In fact, one of the biggest losses is TIME. In Orange, women introduced themselves to each other by their name and sentence, so that the defining feature of the individual becomes how much time she has lost, which in turn determines the gravity of her situation. The protagonist of Orange has a sentence of 15 months. The privilege is not only apparent in how her whiteness opens doors for her inside prison, and allows her for example to extend her list of visitors, but also in the amount of support her friends and family are showing her. That support might be the dream of other unprivileged women whose communities look down upon them, and leads to their forever tarnished reputation.

It is as if the square put together to create one portrait, which finally comes out as that of the ugly face of gender and socio-economic injustices. I see that is the bottom line of the two texts that is weaved through the stories of women dovetailed to create that portrait and make society see the ugly truth for what it is.

**Differences in the two texts**

The transgressions of the women towards the forbidden is the focus of both texts.­

So in the two texts we are watching women’s stories on the forbidden/not prescribed axis, looking at non-conforming women, who are “criminals” or “Aggressors” as opposed to the “victimized” model presented in the majority of stories about Middle Eastern women.

“they are cast as egnder issues that the state does not want to have to deal with; nevertheless, through committing the crimes, Bakr’s protagonists reveal that they have already construed their acts as a ‘gender issue’ and take the law into their own hands.” (Valassopoulos 103)

Obviously the organge is the new black disucsses a different aspect of social injustice that is not discussed in the goldne chariot. The racial divide in the American community is not exactly a problem that we saw in the Egyptian society in the 70s, the time of the novel. However, the white/black divide is becoming a problem that we see nowadays in terms of the widening privilege of the rich and powerful at the expense of the power and helpless.

Why are there no such obvious differences in the semiotic squares in the two texts? Although they depicts two different worlds at two different time frames. A possible answer to this question is that the semiotic square focuses on the bone structure of the text, more than on the flesh and skin color that could start to reveal some differences. In fact, looking at the details, the differences between The Golden Chariot and Orange is the new black, become obvious. The more prominent differences are

Gender dynamics in times of crisis

**Is greimas’s square useful?**

“Although one might object to the occasional inconsistencies and to the simplification and consequent insensitivity to subtleties that Greimas’s categorizations inevitably lead to, one might also argue that such a system’s abstracting can actually imply and thus reveal variations and depths that the system and the narrative seem to conceal. “ (Mosher 489)

. “Culler considers at length “Greimas and Structural Semantics” in his classic *Structuralist Poetics* from 1975. Culler duplicitously leads his reader to consider the role of structural semantics: “one might expect semantics to be the branch of linguistics which literary critics would find most useful” (75). The remainder of the chapter intricately dismisses any such potential in the case of Greimas’s structural semantics. Semantics have failed, according to Culler, because any successful theory “must use concepts which can be defined in terms of empirical techniques or operations and it must account for intuitively attested facts about meaning” (76). Greimas’s semantics miss the mark by either using an “explicit metalanguage” that is incapable of accounting for all semantic effects or else his rigorously scientific veneer reveals a machinery incapable of sustaining objective, repeatable results. Among his many examples, a line by John Donne particularly strikes me: “For I am every dead/thing” (qtd. In Culler 86). Culler uses this example to demonstrate the difficulty in plotting a dead-live, or animate-inan9imate opposition, since in this case the subject insists on being both at the same time; a semiotic square would therefore fail to describe the coexistence of these two contrary terms. I would prefer to focus instead on the actant of the sentence, “I,” which given the first example I have provided, would similarly correspond to the “subject. I might suppose this subject to have a corresponding object, which I will describe as the “thing.” In this way, I could plot an actantial square that relates I to thing, not-I to not-thing.” (Corso 75)

I do believe that Greimas’s square is useful as semantics research does not necessarily need mathematical equations that as Culler describes need to produce objective results every time it is repeated. In fact, the study of meaning derives its depth from the various possibilities offered by the interpretation of meaning and how that is shaped by different factors that in fact need to produce different results based on the change of the surrounding contexts, circumstances, and even interpretation of the listener/reader.

“Jameson talks of the square throughout his career but is perhaps best known for using the square in his 1974 *Prison-House of Language*, and again in 1981 in *The Political Unconscious.* In the earlier work, Jameson explains the merits of the square: “so the first merit of Greimas’s mechanism is to enjoin upon us the obligation to articulate any apparently static fee-standing concept or term into that binary opposition which it structurally presupposes and which forms the very basis for its intelligibility.”” (Corso 76)

, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history,

The square makes visible social dilemmas and contradictions

“visual semiotics (or the semiology of images) is often no more than a catalogue of our perplexities and incorrect facts.” (Greimas , Collins and Perron). What are the images that I can construct from reading the two texts and conceptualizing the core semantic values of the contradictory terms . Also, what about the image of the golden chariot and the image of the orange is the new black. The emphasis in both texts on color is significant. Are those images languages delivering a message?” (Greimas , Collins and Perron)

# Works Cited

Al-Nowaihi, Magda. "Reenvisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr's "The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven"." *The Arab Studies Journal* 7/8.2 (2000): 8-24.

Bosworth, Mary. *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons* . New York : Routledge , 2017.

Carlen, Pat. "Women, Crime, Feminism, and Realism." *Social Justice* (1990): 106-123.

Duvall, John. "Using Greimas's Narrative Semiotics: Signification in Faulkner's "The Old People"." *College Literature* 9.3 (1982): 192-206.

El-Enany, Rasheed. "The Madness of Non-Conformity: Women versus Scoiety in the Fiction of Salwa Bakr." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37.3 (2006): 376-415.

Hendricks, William. "Circling the Square: On Greimas's Semiotics." *Semiotica* 75.1/2 (1989): 95-122.

McHugh, Kathleen. "Giving Credit to Paratexts and Parafeminism in Top of the Lake and Orange is the New Black." *Film Quarterly* 68.3 (2015): 17-25.

Mosher, Harold. "Greimas, Bremond, and the "Miller's Tale"." *Style* 31.3 (1997): 480-499.

Paige, Alexis. "Seeing Orange." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 16.1 (2014): 143-152.

Perron, Paul. "Introduction: A. J. Greimas." *New Literary History* 20.3 (1989): 523-538.

Scheffler, Judith. "Women's Prison Writing: An Unexplored Tradition in Literature." *The Prison Journal* 64.1 (1984): 57-67.

Schleifer, Ronald, Robert Con Davis and Nancy Mergler. "Sturtcures of Meaning: The Logic of Narrative and the Constitution of Literary Genres." *Culture and Cognition: The Boundaries of Literary and Scientific Inquiry*. London: Cornell University Press, 1992. 64-95.

Seymour-Jorn, Caroline. *Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing* . Syracuse : Syracuse University Press , 2011.

Sommers, Evelyn Kathleen. *Voices from Within: Women who Have Broken the Law*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

Wang, Hong. "Greimas's Semiotic Square and Its Application in the Anti-corruption Campaign in Mainland China." *The American Journal of Semiotics* 23.4 (2007): 337-351.

Notes

“The genre of women’s prison literature has received scant attention from scholars and researchers. Much remains to be said about this tradition, that differs in many ways from the more celebrated tradition of writing by male prisoners. It seems clear, though, that the reader must not approach these works with the expectation of reading manifestos or inspirational poems that use prison as a state of mind in order to inspire a nebulous posterity. The works are not, generally, theoretical or cerebral; they are practical, empirical records of events, attitudes, persons, and physical surroundings which impress the writers and which they feel necessary to communicate to a specific audience. Because of their realistic rendering of the prison experience in various places and times, works in the tradition of women’s prison literature present a rich storehouse of unexplored primary source material for researchers in the varied disciplines that are currently engaged in the study of women and society.” (Scheffler 65)

the semiotic square creates an image, a photograph, composed of meanings and their contradictions that upon reflecting on, or contemplating start to “speak to us” revealing more depths to situation delineated in the square, which in fact, can summarize the life of person in a single shot.

So when we read that the two texts are about women prison, as a reader a certain expectation can surface and this the criminal aspect of their characters, but in both texts, the crimes do not take up much space and what does take up more space is their stories before the life changing moment when the crime is committed, as well as their current lives as inmates in prison. Why is there no elaboration on the moment of the crime in the two texts? It could be because the two authors’s focus was not so much on the crime as it is to the societal injustices that lead to such crimes. As such, their purpose was to focus on the road towards the solution that begins by adjusting the current systems, as focusing on the invidual crimes solves nothing.

“Classics of men’s prison literature emphasize transcendence and heroism. (See Gelfand, 1981; 185-203; Brombert, 1975: 15). Like Lovelace in his famous poem, the male prison writer may use incarceration as a foil to celebrate the more genuine and rewarding spiritual freedom he enjoys.” (Scheffler 57)

Serves to shed light on

and the states of disillusionment

Decoding the framed surface

Contemporary sites of contestation

Highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination

Forms an avenue of escape

To affirm and assert the complex subjectivities of their characters, and by extension, themselves

An indictment of the moral integrity

Oppressive spaces

The narrative goes beyond the space taking the reader on a journey that amounts to a dream

Means of survival

against society or those male individuals embodying its oppressive values.” (El-Enany 387)

It is interesting to explore the meanings of

“any discourse (indeed, any semiotic system) presupposes a semantic universe. In other words, it has, as a semantic framework, a certain view of the world and of human experience. Each element of the world and of human experience is perceived as related to other such elements because of their respective veridictory and thymic values. In other words, the various elements of human experience are classified in a twofold perspective: a) according to a certain view of what is real (being) or illusory (seeming): the veridictory modalities; b) according to a certain view of what is euphoric or dysphoric: the thymic category/. This a semantic universe is a certain perception of the elements of the wolrd and of human experience, interrelated according to a certain perception of reality and of what is euphoric. Conversly, this semantic universe establishes the view of the wolrd and human experience which is the framework in which the discourse will unfold.” **Invalid source specified.**

“It should be noted that the fundamental semantics (axiology) presupposed by a discourse is not made up of universals. In other words, the semiotic square is not a logical square which would establish the inetrrelations among certain terms according to a universal logic. Rather it is the way in which a culture (in a sociolectal semantic universe) or an individual (in an idiolectal semantic universe) perceives the relation among certain entities. This is why the square is called a *semiotic* (and not logical) square. Consequently, in different semantic universes, similar elements can be viewed as interrelated in different ways, although still according to the relational network that the semiotic square is.” **Invalid source specified.**

The standasrds of beauty that men are in pursuit of and the moral beauty that is overlooked

“The same can be seen in Boubat’s photography when, going beyond the technical constraints that make photography the height of iconicity, he seeks to make it speak in a new way. It can be seen in Mies Van der Rohe’s design, which sets aside its representative and communicate functions and, as a “surface,” gives rise instead to an “aesthetic” reading. Persuaded that these objects have a common language that they use in order to “speak” to us, but also-and especially-persuaded that we can construct a language that will allow us to “speak” about them, the semiotician seeks to establish an area of investigation wherein to inquire into the how and why of their presence.” (Greimas , Collins and Perron 636)

“The show, on the other hand, is praised for confronting these issues with a “light touch,” politically speaking. The aesthetic assumption that entertainment shouldn’t be “too preachy or grim” is one forged by white privilege. We are supposed to want to be entertained—not to be moved. While we expect prison itself to be grim, we’d rather it be served pulpy in our living rooms—with just enough verisimilitude so that we can acknowledge the “grinding unfairness,” congratulate ourselves for that acknowledgement, and continue to do nothing. (Paige 150)

Paradigmatic as in deep structure and syntagmatic as in surface structure

“Paradigms are deep in that they derive meaning from their unarticulated relationship to other (absent, but connoted) paradigms. The investigation and reduction of the simplest set of such planar relationships ultimately defines the primary role of the semiotic square, a concept to which I will return.” (Corso 74)

“For Ricoeur and Greimas, the explanatory capacity of semiotics can increase one’s ability to read and understand literary texts, and their dialogue explores just how this can occur by examining: (a) the relationship between deep structures and the figurative level of narrativity (Is the figurative simply a surface structure? Or is figurativity also found at the deep level of discourse?)” (Perron 528)

**Research questions**:

1. Is each position on a given square realised in the corresponding text? Generally speaking, only some of the possible positions show up in a text. Our masculine/feminine square is an abstract one; it does not describe a specific text.

“Greimas borrowed from Hjelmslev the concept of semantic universe (coexistence with the concept of culture), defined as the totality of significations prior to its articulation.” (Perron 525)

“The square may be used on a *semantic* ("static") level or a *syntactic* ("dynamic") level (distinguished by the changes in position of each object over time). In Greimasian semiotics, syntax is the sequencing or succession of semantic values. Syntactic use of the square describes the successive positions occupied by one or several objects.” (Louis Hébert, (Hébert)”

Relation of contraries, contradictories, of implications,

but aren’t they really such a generic form of structure? What is an example of a different structure?

How the individual values, referring to how the individual perceives a given relation in regard to the self (as versus the society/group).

“Notice that the square is a conceptual one. It captures the way our mind works in perceiving both the material and the semiotic worlds. It suggests how we organize thoughts at the cognition level.” (Wang 338)

“Greimas (1966: 255), in his discussion of Bernanos, at one point refers to vie and mort as ‘contradictory terms’ and also as ‘contradictory and complementary terms.’ This raises the issue of how the relations of contradiction and contrariety are to be defined. In ‘The interaction of semiotic constraints’ Greimas treats these as undefined concepts (p.49.” (Hendricks 112)

“The 1970s writers also have been witness to the econmonic deterioration experienced by Egypt since the late 1960s as a result of the wars with Israel and the Open Door eceonoic policy instituted by Sadat in the early 1970s (Booth 1991). The latter policy benefited the wealthy but also triggered inflation and consumerism that created additional economic hardship for the lower classes. Their stories and novels respond to the multiple ramifications of the troubled economy along with a host of other issues, the increasing influence of Islamic conservatism, the challenge to women’s authority posed by work outside the home, the struggle of working-class people to find appropriate housing, and the economic and public policy-driven dislocation of people from one part of the city or country to another” (Seymour-Jorn xix)

“set in a women’s prison, was however to bring in a new factor: women, pushed to the limit, are also capable of protest by violence, and in some of the episodes of this novel, Bakr combines in some of the characters’ madness and violent crime, such that a woman’s mental breakdown is accompanied by a lashing out