# On Mares in Miral Al-Tahawy's *The Tent*

Shahd ALSHAMMARI*

**Abstract**:
*Arab Bedouin communities have long been a subject of analysis by Oriental scholars. There has been a great tendency to exoticize the Bedouin man, and particularly the Bedouin woman. A custom often overlooked and misunderstood is the significance of the ideology of "asil" or "pure blood." It was as important to keep the family's blood line "pure" as it was to maintain the horse's, or mare's, breeding. When Bedouin women occupy the same space as the mare, is this utter objectification of their bodies, or perhaps, is there a huge value placed on the woman? The mare's significance has also been present in some works of literature.* The Tent*, by Miral al-Tahawy, presents us with a protagonist, Fatima, who loses her mare to a foreign Orientalist in exchange for her education. With the mare's loss comes Fatima's loss of self, identity, and eventual descent into madness. The mare is significant to Bedouin culture, and it is this contact with the colonizer that threatens the culture and the psyche. This paper will combine both cultural ideologies, as well as attempt a literary examination of the above mentioned work. It aims to present a new approach at looking at the significance of the mare in Bedouin culture and literature, as well as the invasion of colonialism, which does not "save" Bedouin women, but rather steals the culture.*

**Key words:** *Bedouin, literature, mares, cultural ideology, women*

The title of this paper may appear ambiguously misleading. The focus is in fact, horses and women, but it is not the predictable relationship and kinship that Western writers have romanticized in the past, nor will it consider horse riders who happen to be women. My scholarly interest is concerned with drawing connections, finding parallelism, and similarities in a global framework. I am concerned with similarities, rather than differences between women worldwide, between humans and animals, and between cultures and across national frontiers. Minorities are significant, and one group that has been overlooked is the Bedouin. The aim of this

* Assistant Professor PhD, Department of Language and Literature, Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait. shahdalshammari@gmail.com

paper, then, is to raise more culturally specific questions and highlight certain ideologies that remain unknown to the West, to anthropologists, and scholars of Comparative Literature. Arab Bedouin communities have long been a subject of analysis by Oriental scholars and anthropologists. There has been a great tendency to exoticize Bedouin men, and particularly Bedouin women. A custom often overlooked and misunderstood is the significance of the ideology of *"asil"* or "pure blood." Arab Bedouin tribes believed that it was as important to keep the family's bloodline "pure" as it was to maintain the mare's breeding. Inbreeding was frowned upon, controlled, and regulated, just like young women's lives were maintained. Young women were referred to as "mares" because they carried within them the capacity to give birth to new life, to either keep the bloodline "noble" or to taint it.

This paper aims to raise some questions that are yet to be answered. What is the relationship between women and mares in the Bedouin context? What are the implications and consequences of the metaphor usage? What type of metonymy can we elucidate by considering the correlation between Bedouin women and mares? In order to examine and attempt to answer these questions, I will explain Bedouin culture and ideology, position Bedouin women in their specific environment, and later discuss a Bedouin novel entitled *The Tent*, since Miral Al-Tahawy, an Egyptian Bedouin author, has managed to exemplify the inextricability of the two subjects: Bedouin women and mares.

At a first glance, there is a huge danger behind Bedouin men relating women to mares. This is not a simplistic notion, nor would it be fair to end the discussion at the idea of demeaning women's sense of subjectivity and identity. We cannot dismiss the subject as simply being yet another way that women are oppressed in the East, supposedly unlike their Western counterparts. The issue at hand is far more complex and thought-provoking. Yet, despite its allure, despite its problematic state, there has been no scholarly work devoted to the question of Bedouin women and their correlation with mares – whether linguistically, culturally, or ideologically. The most notable scholar, for me, and whose work has been indispensable throughout my vexed interest in Bedouin culture, is Lila Abu-Lughod. Abu-Lughod is a cultural anthropologist particularly interested in Egyptian Bedouin societies, which are not too different from Kuwaiti Bedouin societies and culture. The commonality shared is reflected

in the great value placed on honour, shame, nobility and purity of blood, as well as the love for horses and mares. Abu-Lughod explains the concept of *asil*: "Blood is the authenticator of origin or pedigree and as such is critical to Bedouin identity and their differentiation from Egyptians, who are said to lack roots or nobility of origin…Underlying this concern is the belief that a person's nature and worth are closely related to the worthiness of his or her stock" (45). Notice the use of such terms as: "pedigree" "nature" "worth" and "stock." Bedouin identity and *asil*, as well as vocabulary, are very closely tied to nature, the desert, and, by theory of extension, it comes as no surprise that Bedouin women are referred to as mares.

This idea of blood, then, is inerasable and remains intact ideologically and culturally. Purity and impurity, breeding and inbreeding are all concepts that have become a way of life for Bedouins, ideas that have been carried from the past to the present, and that have thrived despite modernization and globalization. To preserve identity and *asil*, the Bedouins must be wary of inbreeding. Given the association of women with nature and the symbolic link to mares, we must consider this problematic position of Bedouin women on the hierarchy and social order in the Bedouin context. This very association with nature places women in two conflicting spaces. They are valued for their ability to reproduce, and since having many children is not only a social requirement, but also a political one, women do occupy a certain terrain of agency. Political strength is measured in numbers, tribes are only powerful when there are many members who represent and defend it. As such, women carry within them the capacity to strengthen the tribe. Their role is to satisfy the community's needs and demands – they are the suppliers. I would argue to look beyond the stereotypical image of Arab women, or in this case, Bedouin women as oppressed. There are endless possibilities and a plethora of ways that Bedouin women are, in fact, resilient and significant in Bedouin society, carrying within them a certain agency.

The significance of the mare in Bedouin culture, and for Bedouin men, resonates with the significance of Bedouin women in Bedouin society and culture. This leads us to the inevitable question: what is this very intimate relationship between the Bedouin and his or her mare? Given the very harsh circumstances of desert life, the most incessantly loyal companion of the Bedouin is the mare. The foundation of the relationship is greatly built on love, friendship, and a sense of merging with the mare. The

mare and her owner form a life-long bond, a companionship built on shared histories. The mare and her human share an unspoken commitment, an unquestionable one. Neither would abandon the other. Most mares are in fact named after females, and tribal members would identify each mare by her name, followed by the owner's. For example, "Falha of Alshammari." There is a certain personalization of the mare, a reflection on her characteristics and qualities. As a result, when Bedouins write poetry, many of their poems describe the beauty of the mare and the love exchanged between the horse owner and the mare. Similarly, they are fond of love, writing about love, the romance of the desert, the connection between man and nature, and their love for women, of course.

Love in all its forms is a major theme in Bedouin oral poetry. Although the environment is a harsh one, Bedouins are tender, passionate, and very much in love with their surroundings. The stereotype usually only stresses the aggressiveness of the Bedouins, their raidings, wars, and killings, portraying them as inhumane and blood-thirsty. This image does not accurately present the Bedouins to the Western audience, or to those who have no special interest in learning and understanding Bedouin history and culture. One of the most important and non-negotiable codes of honour includes not harming women, children, the unarmed, or elders during tribal wars. Animals are neither harmed nor tortured, and there are no unnecessary killings. Even more noteworthy is that the Bedouin man, during battle, calls out the name of his sweetheart, sister, or mare. It is as though the battle is fought with their support, but also, for these significant others, those closest to the heart, and the Bedouin's loyal companions. The relationship between human and animal was not a simple one, of oppressor and oppressed, but rather an intimate one relying heavily on coexistence and companionship.

I would like to examine the depiction of this human-animal relationship in one example of Bedouin literature. In Miral Al-Tahawy's *The Tent*, the protagonist, Fatima, is the daughter of the Sheikh of the tribe and owns a beautiful mare named Khayra. Fatima and Khayra are both purebreds, they are both of noble *asil*. Fatima's life is extremely difficult and she only finds consolation in her intimate friendship with Khayra. Her mother is a madwoman confined to the tent, her grandmother is a tyrant, her father is emotionally unavailable, and her sisters are preoccupied with their own lives and the burdens of marriage. Al-Tahawy's novel deals with

Bedouin identity, especially Bedouin women's sense of self, by examining a network of relationships between women. Even Khayra is a female. As Fatima grows up, her relationship with her beloved mare grows too, becoming her only real and meaningful relationship. Her connection to Khayra is very special; as Fatima's emotional and mental state deteriorates, so does Khayra's physical health.

As mentioned earlier, bloodline is extremely important both for the nobility and purity of a Bedouin family, as well as for horses. Donna Landry's *Noble Brutes* explains Eastern ideologies concerning pure-breed horses and how these ideologies were so intrinsic to Eastern culture. The emphasis placed on Eastern horses' nobility is synonymous with Bedouin *asl.* At the same time, such nobility of heritage carried certain burdening expectations. Landry explains: "Once Eastern bloodstock became better known in Britain, these characteristics of intelligent loyalty and willingness to serve, apprehended as purity of lineage, became part of popular discourse about those superior equines, horses of 'quality'" (2009: 137). Given that Eastern horses carried such significant qualities, they were also expected to behave in a certain manner, similarly to Bedouin women. The following passage exemplifies this very specific, yet very constraining identity, expressed by Fatima's father:

> And if the King of Egypt himself came to ask for your hand in marriage, I'd chase him away like a dog. Fatim comes from a long line of noble folk… She's a pure Adnanian filly… isn't that right, my little princess?'
> I touched his face. 'I'll stay with you. I won't marry anyone else.' (Al-Tahawy 2000: 32-3)

Fatima's father expresses Bedouin ideology clearly, linking his daughter's identity to his own noble heritage. He places great value on her worth, which can be very constraining, and poses many intricate issues of use-value and exchange-value. She is rendered an object, specifically a "filly", to be either kept or sold. Just as the horse's bloodline is examined and is crucial for its value to be established, women's value is derived from their linkage to purity and noble *asil* lines. There is both power and powerlessness within the framework which restricts women to an identity closely equated to pure mares. Horses are necessary for the survival of the Bedouin, in all respects. The horse functions also as a representative of the owner, mirroring the owner's actions, identity, and moral superiority. We

can also postulate that the mare or the filly carries more of the burden, more value, being closely associated with female space and the feminine. The mare is tied to the maternal, to the ability to procreate and add more not only to the individual, but also to the collective, to the tribe's power and status in relation to other tribes. This resonates clearly with the reproductive value placed on women. Fatima's father offers her an identity, security, and she responds with an unwavering loyalty – she will not "marry" anyone else. The concept of marriage is touched upon as it is a contract which will either contaminate the tribe's *asil* or preserve it. Fatima, like my aunt, and like many other Bedouin women of pure-blood, must be very careful in keeping the bloodline pure. That is a burden they must carry.

Khayra is a "pure filly" just like Fatima, a princess, and she is a part of Fatima's identity. Khayra, whose name literally translates as "goodness", is Fatima's stronger self, her noble self; her purity is untainted and remains strongly embedded in Khayra. Unsurprisingly, Khayra becomes an object of interest to the colonizer, the Orientalist scholar Anne, who studies Bedouin lifestyle and conducts various researches. Anne's fictional character is reminiscent of Lady Anne Blunt. As we know, Lady Anne Blunt was fascinated with the horses of Arabia. For instance, one apt example would be her reaction upon being acquainted with Prince Hamud's mares in Hail, Saudi Arabia. Lady Anne Blunt had confessed: "If I could have my choice I would take Hamud's mare. Next the brown, third the chestnut" (Winstone 159). Arabia's royal mares were not for sale and not up for negotiation. Lady Anne Blunt soon became aware of the infinite love and pride the Bedouins possessed regarding their mares and *asil.*

In *The Tent*, Fatima's relationship with Anne is extremely problematic and is one of the main factors that lead to her madness and physical disability. Upon first meeting Khayra, Anne is obsessed with the idea of buying Khayra and breeding her. Anne tries to purchase Khayra, but both Fatima and her father refuse to hand over such a noble filly. Fatima's father explains that, since Fatima is of noble origins, she has the right to keep or sell her filly. This ideology is reminiscent of my initial comparison between Fatima and Khayra – for they are one and the same.

Anne's obsession with possessing Khayra goes hand in hand with educating Fatima. Both Fatima and her double, Khayra, must undergo a process of objectification and moulding. Both are under Anne's commands

and are the object of her fascination and analysis. Through attempting to understand both Bedouin culture and breed Khayra, Anne's character symbolizes colonialism and imperialism, as well as the discourse of power and knowledge in rendering Eastern subjects invisible. I would argue that the Orient for the colonizer in *The Tent* is a plethora of symbols, subjects/objects: Bedouin culture, Fatima, and Khayra. All three are to be penetrated, objectified, and reduced to a form of knowledge. As such, Anne uses Fatima as an object, to be assimilated and moulded into the same, the very same image Anne has of herself and of what a Bedouin girl embodies. Fatima's only escape is insanity, outside the realms of reality. She is able to discern that she is equated with animals and her beloved Khayra. There is no room for her "true" self, if you will, for her own established identity. Fatima is only able to respond to the pressures and subjugation she endures inside her head. Only in her head does she speak, only in her head does she scream at Anne:

> I'd had enough…I was sick of it. I am not a frog in a crystal jar for you to gaze upon. I am Fatim, ya-Anee, flesh and blood… Khayra grew weary from all the young she bore…Every year she would produce a new breed. Are you fed up, Khayra, like me? Books and writing paper, pregnancy and labor (Al-Tahawy 2000: 107-8).

Fatima's split is evident. Like her beloved Khayra, she is fed up, exhausted, taken advantage of, used, abused, and silenced. Khayra's body, like Fatima's, is weary, yet she maintains and sustains her one function as a reproductive force – she grows tired and is bred by the Western colonizer, just like most Eastern and Arabian horses were imported to the British Isles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Miral Al-Tahawy's *The Tent*, the audience is able to develop a better understanding of the relationship between human and animal, Bedouins and horses, Bedouin women and their mares. Al-Tahawy's presentation of this very special relationship is valuable for a literary examination of Bedouin literature and of its common tropes. Bedouin literature, specifically, does not as of yet exist as a separate field of study. There is, however, much interdisciplinary work to be done and subjects that would interest feminist scholars, anthropologists, and literary critics.

**References**

Abu Lughod, L (1999). *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkley: University of California Press

Al-Tahawy, M. (2000) *The Tent*. Trans. Anthony Calderbank. Cairo: The American U in Cairo P

Landry, D. (2009) *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP

Winstone, H. (2005) *Lady Anne Blunt: A Biography*. UK: Barzan Publishing