

Betwixt the Page and the Canvas: A Study of the Image of the Desert in Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis* and Gazbia Sirry's *Compositions from the Desert*

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Introduction

Despite the omnipresence of the desert in the Egyptian landscape, it is the Nile that occupies the major portion of Egyptian perception of the spatial attributes of their homeland. It is no surprise, then, that whereas the Nile is the central leitmotif in Egyptian literary and popular discourse, there is almost no reference to the desert. It is simply as if it does not exist; an insignificant, meaningless expanse of land! Indeed, in his encyclopedic study entitled, *Egypt's Identity: A Study in the Genius of the Place* (first published in 1975-84), Jamal Hamdan justifies such an attitude when he refers to the exceptional geographic position of Egypt as “both in and out of the desert. It is an oasis that is anti-desert. It is rather a quasi-oasis for it neither depends on ground water nor on rain. It can neither distance itself from the desert or the sea. It is water without rain, an entity that brings together the irreconcilable opposites of aridity and life” (1). Accordingly, Egypt cannot be considered a typical desert country characterized by aridity and a nomadic lifestyle. The Nile plays a major role in forging the Egyptian conception of the desert by subduing its intimidating presence.

To examine the various significations of the desert in Egyptian culture, this study focuses on comparing the representation of the desert in two different media: the verbal and the visual. The works to be examined are: Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis* (2006) and Gazbia Sirry's *Compositions from the Desert* (1974-1981). Depicting the desert is not, however, the only criterion for the selection of those two specific texts. The difference in their respective styles represents an additional challenge that has motivated this endeavor. While Taher's verbal depiction of the desert relies on a naturalistic mode, Sirry's paintings of the desert follow the highly non-representational aspect of Abstract Art.

Sunset Oasis, awarded the Arab Booker Prize (2007), is one of Bahaa Taher's (1935-2022) most prominent works. The novel attests to Bahaa Taher's preoccupation with the image of the desert that pervades most of his oeuvres. Generally, the desert stands as an emblem of the East in opposition to the West. However, while sometimes it is implicitly presented, at other times it asserts itself more boldly, as in his short story entitled "The King Came" (1985). Eventually, this long obsession with the desert has been culminated in *Sunset Oasis*, whose events take place in Siwa Oasis after the Urabi Revolution, and the subsequent British occupation of Egypt in 1882. As a punishment for his sympathy with the Urabi Revolution, the British administration transferred the officer, Mahmoud Abdel Zaher, to the Siwa Oasis to work there as the residing sheriff. Accompanied by Catherine, his Irish wife, this defeated hero battles with his own shortcomings and personal redemption against the backdrop of a harsh desert landscape. The events are narrated from the point of view of multiple narrators from Mahmoud to Catherine, to Sheikh Saber, to Sheikh Yahia and finally to Alexander the Great; a diversity of narratological voices that contributes to the colorful and multifarious image of the oasis and the encroaching desert.

As prominent as the award-winning *Sunset Oasis*, the Desert Collection, which consists of several pictures of the Egyptian desert, painted from 1974 to 1981, marks a transitional stage in the artistic career of Gazbia Sirry (1925-2021). In the early stages of her artistic journey, the artist focused on depicting motifs and patterns of popular life. She was interested in people, especially the lives of the marginalized, and moved away from the depiction of the surrounding landscape. Consequently, her work was mainly inspired by popular heritage and a figurative style of drawing that focuses on depicting people and houses in Cairo. Gradually, Sirry's attraction to the city began to diminish, and this coincided with her growing fascination with the abstract, non-figurative style of painting. In fact, this period of Gazbia Sirry's artistic journey represents a revolutionary stage on the cultural and artistic level, as she "moved on from accumulation of forms to peace and tranquility, painting vast desert spaces and using the pyramid form – the triangle – in a strict geometrical division of surfaces. It is as though the artist is holding a dialogue between the movement of sand and surfaces, a dialogue, declaring with its tranquility, the birth of something new." (Bassiouni 45). Consequently, she left the city and its houses behind her and moved with her brush to the infinite desert surrounding Cairo.

This paper attempts to explore the specificity of emotional and mental conceptualization of the desert in Egyptian culture as represented in the selected verbal and visual media. Guided by critical studies that were concerned with theories of representation, initiated by the famous art

theoretician Ernst Gombrich, and significantly developed by W. J. T. Mitchell's introduction of the imagetext theory, the study will also examine the interplay between the visual and verbal depictions and how they contribute to the construction of a particular Egyptian conception of the desert.

Visual and Verbal Images

It has become commonplace to note that we live today in an era during which the culture and authority of images dominate traditional patterns of communication. Hence, the need has emerged for new theories that investigate the interplay between visual culture and print culture. In that respect, E. H. Gombrich's theory stands as one of the earliest and groundbreaking studies in the area of pictorial representation. Gombrich emphasizes the semiotic immediacy of the visual in opposition to the verbal image that relies on acquired knowledge and coded conventions (20). Hence, whereas images pertain more to the natural, the written text is more of a cultural product. The reliance of visual representation on direct simulation of reality makes it at odds with the written text whose relation to the target meaning is arbitrary; a fact which implies that the relationship between image and text is a relationship between two opposites.

While it is logical to acknowledge that the difference in media could affect the connotations of the cultural product, it is vital to refer to the possible interconnectedness between image and text, specifically in the postmodern period when the boundaries that separate various cultural and artistic artifacts have become remarkably fluid. This is specifically pertinent when we think of abstract paintings that are marked with an apparent absence of naturalistic representations. In such a case, the image, by defying literal representation, becomes closer to the metaphorical potential of the verbal text. In fact, W.J.T. Mitchell's picture theory (1995), which he encapsulates in the term 'imagetext', consolidates the frequent impossibility of a clearcut separation of word from image. Mitchell proposes the idea of "representation" as a general reference term under which linguistic and visual media could fall, so that the set fallacy of a contradictory relation between image and word be replaced by a complementary affinity. Hence, he explains in *Picture Theory*:

...We think, for instance, that the visual arts are inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely; that they bring these things as a gift to language. We suppose, on the other side, that arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives are in some sense *proper* to verbal communication, that language must bring these things as a gift to visual representation. But neither of these "gifts" are really the exclusive property of their donors: paintings

can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas; words can describe or embody static, spatial state of affairs, and achieve all of the effects of ekphrasis without any deformation of their 'natural' vocation. (160)

Without any violation of the basic function of the language, what Mitchell promotes in his picture theory, and what the research will rely on in comparing literary and visual text, is a kind of open approach that tackles the intricate relationship between the visual image and the verbal text according to the complementary view of the "imagetext" concept. Indeed, in the era of post-modernism, the convergence and mixing between artistic media as communicational signs, one of which is not superior to the other, has become closest to logic.

The dialectical relationship between image and text is also echoed in the cultural representation of the desert, whether at the level of the literary perspective represented by Bahaa Taher's novel or the visual perspective represented in the paintings of Gazbia Sirry. In general, the image of the desert fluctuates between being a source of serenity and a source of dread. It is the "grove of the soul" and the "cemetery of armies"; it is the cradle of heavenly religion and a stronghold for devils. The desert, in brief, is "Alexander of blood" and it is also "Alexander of Song" (Taher 121). This dialectic relation informs the present research whether when examining the relationship between the two different media or the mental construction of the desert. Thus, just as the study establishes the principle of the linguistic capacity of the picture and the iconography of the text, it also will attempt to point out the ambiguous and dialectical representation of the desert by investigating the dualities of place/space, feminine/masculine, and life/death in one frame. Considering this assumption, the study will move between the different dualities associated with the connotations of the desert in the selected works in an attempt to investigate the extent of the possibility of applying Mitchell's "imagetext" thesis to the representation of the desert in written and visual texts and the possibility of arriving at a cultural perception of the desert in Egypt.

The Dialectics of Place and Space

Drawing a line between space and place depends on the various meanings and values we attribute to them. What I mean is that my sense of place or space is primarily a relative feeling that depends on the emotional perception and cognitive experiences that may differ from one person to another and from one culture to another. But does this mean that we cannot determine the difference between the meaning of place and space? In fact, Yi-Fu Tuan in his study of the poetics of space and place postulates that whereas space is largely linked to a sense of freedom

and limitlessness, place is linked to a sense of stability and limitation (52). Given the infinite horizon of the desert, and the difficulty of transforming it into what Henri Lefebvre calls a 'social space', it is conceivable to deem the desert space rather than a place. In his study entitled *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre defines the 'social space' (synonymous to Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of place) as a human product that denotes control and the imposition of hegemony over the environment surrounding a person (27). It is precisely the 'social' attribute that solidifies the assumption that the sense of space or place is a changeable conception, determined by the person and the perspective. Such a stance is clearly achieved when contemplating the different representations of the desert in the selected works. Taking Taher's novel as an example, the depictions of the desert change according to the shifts of the narrative voice from one character to the other. Similarly, the portrayal of the desert varies from one perspective to another in Gazbia Sirry's paintings. Eventually, such differences in the conception of the desert scene contribute to the duality of the space/place binary.

However, although space is usually seen as a source of freedom and meditation that could amount sometimes to self-discovery, it may also be a source of fear and dread. The lack of safe boundaries or distinctive signs may lead to a feeling of entire loss. Apparently, then, there is no compromise in the desert: either one finds or loses oneself in this barren and endless space! The idea of fear of space is supported by the association of the endless horizon of the desert with the image of the biblical diaspora. It seems that this dilemma is the main axis around which the events revolve in Bahaa Taher's novel. We find this intimidating image of the desert looming from the first page of the novel when Mahmoud narrates what his friends told him about the desert:

They told me of the numerous caravans that had gone astray in the desert and been swallowed up by the sands, of small caravans that had lost the path, and of a mighty Persian army that was defeated by the desert in ancient times and buried by the sand forever on its way to take the oasis long ago that the desert had engulfed and buried beneath its sands forever. They told me it was a lucky caravan which completed its journey before its supplies of water ran out and before the winds altered the features of the road, building dunes that had not existed before and burying the wells on which the caravans depended for watering the camels. Lucky too the caravan whose campsites were not attacked by wolves or hyenas and one or two of whose company were not stung by a scorpion or a snake. (Taher 14)

It is, precisely, because of this warning coincided with Mahmoud's suicidal urges that he has gone to Siwa. Indeed, the fatal emptiness of the desert mirrors his spiritual sterility. Mahmoud sees hell in the desert space, just like Alexander the Great, whose soul wanders in the darkness "like a blind fish that knows of the vast ocean only that it is swimming in black water beyond which follows more of the same" (117). Conversely, to Catherine, the desert is an exotic heaven that could signal a new life with her husband. In both cases, the space turns into a social space that interacts with the inner psychological space of the characters. As Lefebvre says: "All 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space they both enjoy and modify" (35).

The first verbal image of the desert is provided by Mahmoud:

The desert, comatose, stretched to the horizon – a calm sea of spreading sands, without movement or sound, It, the camels, and the humans recovering their strength after the storm. How deep the calm! Brigadier General Saeed told me, 'Believe me, in some ways, I envy you for going into the desert, paradise of prophets and poets. To it flee all those who would leave the world behind them to find themselves and in it the withered soul puts out new leaves and the spirit blooms.' What a good and simple man you are, Saeed! As though all that a man has lived through and has accumulated in his bosom could evaporate simply by virtue of his moving from soil to sand! (Taher 41)

The extract represents a dual representation of the desert as both a living and a dead entity by juxtaposing Mahmoud and Brigadier Saeed's views of the arid landscape. In spite of the more spacious and spiritual picture represented in the perspective of Brigadier Saeed, Mahmoud's desert is closer to the grave than a 'paradise of prophets'. But if we move to Catherine, we will find that she interacts with the desert space in a totally different way from Mahmoud's dark portrayal and more similar to Brigadier Saeed's Sufi perspective:

I studied everything written about the route and the wells, the dunes and the storms, but the books didn't tell me about the real desert. I didn't learn from them how the colors change above the sea of sand through the hours of the day, and I didn't find a word in them about the movement of shadows as they trace a thin gray cowl over the peak of a yellow hill or open up a dark door in its centre, and they didn't teach me how the small high clouds are reflected on as hurrying flocks of Gray birds, and they didn't speak to me of the dawn – above all the dawn- when it shifts from a thin white line on the horizon into a red blush that slowly pushes the darkness aside until with the first rays of the sun,

the sand blazes like a golden sea, at which moment a smell penetrates my nose that I have never known before, of the mixture of the dawn's dew, the sun and the sand. An erotic smell that not only steals into my nose, but to which all the pores of my body open. (Taher 59)

While Mahmoud's desert represents a motionless sea of sand, Catherine's desert is an extremely vibrant space that exudes a passion for life. The verbal image that she draws is submerged in a highly expressive colour palette, ranging from the gray to the gold, and finally to red blush. This multi-coloured depiction is coupled with a slow motion and is finally culminated with an erotic morning scent, charged with a lust for life. We are faced with two opposite paintings of death and life, and what is strange is that they are of the same space!

Apparently, the limitless expanse that desert represents an alarming formless void that calls for a need to tame it into an anthropocentric place, or an embodied form that gives a sense of mastery and control over such emptiness. In contrast to the desert, the oasis symbolizes the predominance of the anthropocentric role in the dialectic of space and place or nature and culture. The first thing the reader notices when the caravan arrives at the oasis are the walls and fences that transform the space into an anthropocentric spatial mass. The men of the village receive the caravan in "an open courtyard surrounded by walls" (Taher 61), Catherine refers to "the cultivated lands enclosed behind by walls" (63) and to "the incessant singing behind the walls" (66). These tangible walls are confronted by other invisible walls that express class and gender biases between the *zaggala* and the *agwad*, between Westerners and Easterners, men and women, and the people of the oasis and the Egyptians, making the oasis a repressed community beset by numerous metaphorical and psychological walls.

If the yellow color and its derivatives are dominant in the textual painting of the desert space, then the green color dominates in the textual painting of the oasis. But it is a green color accompanied by yellow and grey. These colors appear clearly when seeing the old city for the first time:

From the moment we had entered the oasis, my attention had been drawn to the large number of palm trees near the springs; indeed, I had even seen palm trees drowned in the lakes, only their tops showing. Now, however, suddenly, as we crested a hill, the whole horizon turned green before my eyes, a forest, too large for the eyes to take in at once of palm fronds interlocking in space, a dark green sea, thick and undulating, above

which the town, with its grey walls and yellowish-brown dwellings, rose like an island, atop a pyramid-shaped hill. (Taher 66-7)

The pyramid shape, houses, and walls define the anthropological space, while the green and yellow colors link the oasis to the natural environment, emphasizing the dialectical overlap between the duality of desert and oasis, or space and place. This is the overlap that characterizes the basic fabric of the entire novel, and on the basis of which the main characters are classified according to the extent of their harmony or distance from the cosmic and natural space represented by the desert. For example, the characters of Malika and Fiona are very close to uniting with the natural space, while Mahmoud, Catherine, and to some extent Sheikh Yahya suffer from duality and internal conflicts that prevent them from the possibility of that mystical unity in absolute terms. When we address the idea of duality, we must see how a central figure like Alexander the Great views the desert and the oasis. In the middle of the novel, Bahaa Taher surprises us with the voice of Alexander the Great as he recounts the events of the distant past when he marched with his army to the Siwa Oasis to visit the Oasis of Amun for his divine consecration. He also received warnings from the desert, but he insisted taming it, and the caravan faced the same difficulties that Mahmoud's caravan faced, including storms and dangers. When he reached the top of the plateau, he saw an unfamiliar sight:

My heart quickened as I looked around me. Everything is new and unfamiliar to my eyes. I saw below me in the middle of the desert, I saw a green sea of palms, and another large sun, exactly like the sun in the sky, shining from a spring at the foot of the temple, and yet others flashing among the blue lakes that dotted the sands. In front of the entrance to the temple with its decorations of brightly colored paintings, I saw the priestesses of Amun, the breeze moving their diaphanous robes so that they undulated about their slender, dancing bodies like white wings, as though they were about to fly away, high in the air, towards that sun, to which they waved their arms in supplication. They were singing a low song whose words I could not understand, but their voices, quavering as they chanted, had the ring to my ears not of a prayer of entreaty but of a lover's whispered plea. (Taher 123-24)

The similarity of the "imagetext" of the desert and the oasis in both extracts is evident. Inspiring awe in the eyes of the viewer, the oasis appears suddenly as a green sea in the middle of the desert. However, while the pyramid structure of houses dominates the view in the first picture, the spotlight in the second picture falls on the Temple of Amun. The temple, the sun, and the priestesses with their white wings represent the harmonious and reconciled position between

space and place that Alexander yearned for. As he himself explains, he hoped that Amun would help him reconcile the contradictory selves within him, or as he puts it, the state of “Alexander against Alexander” (127). However, despite Alexander failure to achieve reconciliation, the basic feature of the textual painting of the desert in the novel remains closer to harmony between space and place than to dissonance, and the result is a reinforcement of Jamal Hamdan’s statement that Egypt is “the master of middle solutions” (34).

As previously pointed out, the overlap between pictorial and linguistic representation appears clearly in Gazbia Sirry’s desert paintings, which by virtue of its abstract form, can “make arguments, and signify abstract ideas” (Mitchell 160). In fact, postmodernist art is usually deemed as an “eruption of language into the field of the visual arts” (Owens 126-7). In adherence with this view, the first picture entitled testifies to the imposition of the verbal language.

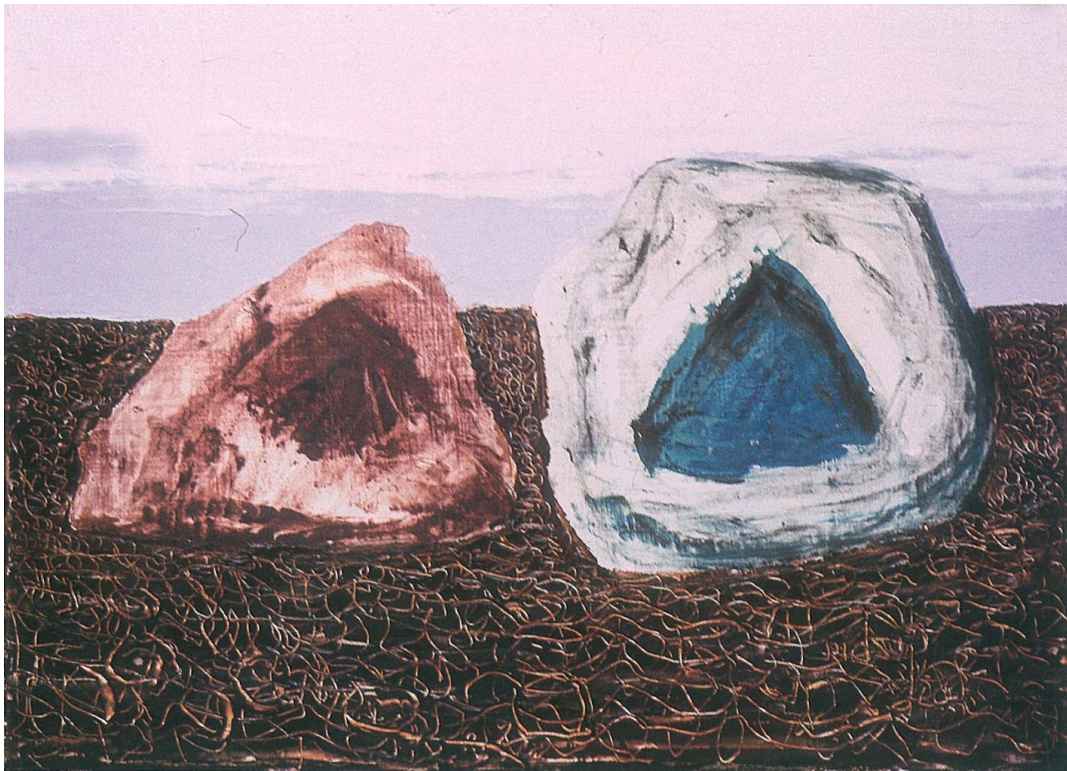


Figure 1. Gazbia Sirry, Composition from the Desert (1974). Illus. in Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 64.

The abstract style, in addition to the vague title of Sirry’s desert collection invites a delving into the signification of the visual signs. Naturally, this endeavor calls for an engagement with the verbal language when deciphering the imparted message. The first point to be observed when analyzing the painting is that the desert is at the outskirts of the city and the Nile valley. The strong presence of the valley is apparent in foreground of the picture with the substitution

of the yellow color of the sand with the brown color of the soil. This impression is reinforced by the small circular lines that resemble waves, in addition to the blue pyramidal formation inside the white rock. Clearly, water is a dominant motif in the representation of the desert in Sirry's painting. Although Aimé Azar affirms that the painter's shift of focus to the sea and the desert had helped her achieve "the liberation from human society" (10), it is clear that the artist did not stray far from the city when she took refuge in the desert. Unlike Bahaa Taher, who penetrated the Western Desert to the Siwa Oasis, Gazbia Sirry decided to be close to the valley and chose to depict the Giza Desert. Despite the expressionistic style adopted by the artist, this fact is confirmed by the strong presence of the pyramidal shape in most, perhaps almost all, her desert paintings.

Generally, the painting lacks the mystical dimension of Taher's desert in *Sunset Oasis*. This is most probably due to the color scheme that could, as affirmed by Perry Nodelman, "evoke a code of signification and speak either satisfyingly or disturbingly of matters beyond meaning or intention" (59). Accordingly, the brown color seems to envelop the painting, casting an earthly rootedness that conflicts with the purity of the pale blue color in the background. Thus, instead of the mystical desert that enchanted the nineteenth century Orientalist painters and that established a sort of romantic depiction of this landscape, Gazbia Sirry's representation of the desert is more of a solid and earthly depiction. This lack of a romanticized portrayal does not impede the overbearing presence of the natural space as exemplified by the two immense rocks that dominate the foreground of the picture. The pyramidal shape, iconic of cultural space, is represented as a fetus inside the white rock. Indeed, such an encircling position could be regarded as an affirmation of the fusion between natural space and cultural place. However, this fusion remains disputed by the close vicinity of the urban and cultural space in addition to the lack of a mystic representation of the desert.

Another important factor that stresses the local signification of the painting is that despite the abstract tendency in the representation of the natural landscape, the painting does not go beyond the framework of cultural time and place. This is particularly clear when we consider the historical context of the painting. Composed less than a year after the 1973 Egyptian victory over the Israeli forces, it is conceivable that the deciphering of the pictorial signs could carry an extra semantic association. The brown color, for instance, could be iconic of the typical complexion of the Egyptian soldier invoking, not only national, but religious connotations by summoning the famous 'Hadith' referring to Egyptians as the best soldiers on earth. Another sign to be decoded could be the rock formations with its conventional association with the

concepts of strength and solidarity. The same applies to the pyramid forms, emblematic of the greatness of the Egyptian civilization. The striking blue shade of the pyramid represents a coming together between the earthly (brown color) and the sublime (blue color), the cultural and the natural. It seems as if the place, with its human and anthropological meaning, does not conflict with nature, but on the contrary, has a positive connotation. If walls and bloody conflicts are among the dominant characteristics of the oasis as a place in Bahaa Taher's novel, then the pyramid - as a human achievement linked to the Nile Valley and the Egyptian desert - is the basic theme denoting place in Sirry's conception of the desert.

Generally, the presence of 'social space', is strongly sensed in the painting despite Sirry's decision to move away from the city to the desert. Her past preoccupation with urban places has left its mark on her desert collection. In other words, the concept of place which is usually associated with an anthropocentric presence is dominant in the visual representation of the desert. On the other hand, place and space witness a degree of merging in the written representation of the desert in Bahaa Taher's novel, in a way that prioritizes the spiritual and cosmic values of external space.



Figure 2 Gazbia Sirry, Composition from the Desert (1974). Illus. in Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 65.

Such an assumption is confirmed when we turn to the second painting in the group. The pyramid clearly takes center stage in the foreground of the painting and does not appear as a fetus inside the rock mass as in the previous painting. Interestingly, Sirry adds two squares, one in the background and the other in the foreground, representing the houses, which had captured the artist's attention in the early stages of her career, avowing to the fact that the painter seems to be groping for an implicit presence of the human factor, even though the painting focuses on depicting a landscape devoid of people and, hence, supporting Charles Harrison's view in his article "The Effects of Landscape" that "there is a tendency for specifically human content to appear at the level of the latent" in most paintings that depict the landscape or natural scenes (222).

Admittedly, the most important aspect that distinguishes this painting from its predecessor is the artist's choice of hot colors. The painting is divided into two basic colors: red for the background, symbolizing the heat of the desert sun, and yellow for the foreground, symbolizing the desert sand. It has to be pointed out at this point that colors communicate and could actually be regarded as "the mother tongue of the subconscious". Similarly, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the pioneer of the abstract expressionist school, emphasizes in his analysis of the meanings of colors the close relationship between colors and the spiritual impact on the recipient. According to him, "the psychic power of color takes hold, causing an emotional vibration" (41), and hence a "triangle filled in with yellow, a circle painted blue, a green square, another triangle in green ... are different forms that have separate distinctive effects." (46). Speaking of examples of these chromatic effects, Kandinsky affirms that the bright yellow is an earthly color that "hurts the eye after a while, as a shrill trumpet note may disturb the ear" while the red color "attracts and stimulates like the flame eternally craved for by all men" (40).

The choice of saturn red and the sharp yellow shade makes the painting eloquently vibrant to the extent that the viewer can almost feel the heat of the desert with his fingertips. When we take into account what we indicated in the previous paragraph about the meanings and connotations of colors, we can easily conclude that the desert in this picture—as is the case in most of the paintings of the collection—is far from Bahaa Taher's Sufi desert. The hot and sensuous aspect of the desert is evident in the chromatic scheme of the painting. As for the other colors used in the painting, such as the brown color of the pyramid and the blue color of the front square, they support the sensuous depiction of the place. The dark shade of blue does not suggest the spiritual serenity that is usually associated with this color. Rather, it is used to

refer to water, especially when we associate it with the brown color (the color of silt and valley soil) and the winding lines on the desert floor that resemble waves. Thus, for the second time, we find that the Nile Valley imposes its presence to define the desert space.

Apparently, water is present as a prominent element in both the written and the visual images. However, whereas it is the sea that prevails in Taher's novel, the river is the dominant theme in Sirry's depictions. Thus, in Taher's novel the desert is compared to a "calm sea," and a "golden sea," and the oasis is referred to as a "dark green sea". As for Sirry, the Nile is implicitly present in most of her desert paintings. This observation recalls Jamal Hamdan's statement that, although Egypt is surrounded by the emptiness of the desert, it is connected to the river to a great degree, making the Nile "Egypt's first and perhaps only geography." (39). If it is possible to assume the existence of a cultural perception of the image of the desert in Egypt, then it could be surmised that the overwhelming presence of the Nile (water) tempers the mental perception of the desert as a harsh and arid entity; a fact which makes Egypt "in the desert and not of it." (1).

It is significant to examine here the difference in aquatic metaphors and how this influences the dialectic of space and place in the two works. The sea, like the desert, is a formidable space that cannot be easily controlled by humans, unlike rivers that nourish and help in the establishment of human dwellings. It is a matter of fact that where there is fresh water, there are humans who turn space into a place. The awesome infinite expanse of the desert as a boundless space that is almost impossible to fathom or contain is the remarkable trait of its verbal depiction and is effectively linked to the wilderness of the seascape. On the other hand, the anthropocentric representation of the desert is evident in the pictorial representation and is further underlined by implicit reference to the river. To recuperate, space occupies the largest position in the novel, while place takes the lead in the paintings. Thus, based on the previous examination of the written and visual images of the desert and their connection to the dialectic of space and place, we can say that words embody fixed spatial situations and that paintings express abstract ideas, so the text becomes an image and the painting a language, which confirms the validity of Mitchell's 'imagetext' thesis.

The Dialectics of the Feminine/ Masculine

Given the long-held conception of the interconnectedness between women and the natural world, it is conceivable how a whole body of scholarship has been constructed based on this connection. A sub-theory of ecocriticism, ecofeminism was founded in the 1970s as part of the

environmental movement. According to Karen Warren, a pioneer of ecofeminism, there is a close connection between the oppression of women and human exploitation of nature. The critic emphasizes that recognizing the links between women and nature represents the tool through which we can reach liberation from male control, which is synonymous according to ecological criticism with anthropocentrism (3). Human interaction with the natural environment has been based on considering it a mere background harnessed to serve human culture, thus ignoring a pivotal fact, which is that humans are an integral part of their natural surroundings. It is interesting to note that if we replace the words "human" and "natural" with "masculine" and "feminine", we will notice the validity of the meaning, which confirms the assumption on which ecofeminism was based.

In an age during which gender fluidity is promoted, I believe it is necessary to point out that regardless of the huge body of feminist scholarship on the arbitrary nature of gender identity, there remains certain associations that provide an overall differentiation between the concepts of femininity and masculinity. Of course, those concepts converge according to various historical and local factors and are determined by power relations as maintained by Michele Foucault in his famous theory of 'biopower', however we still associate the feminine with values like nurture, beauty and tenderness and the masculine with strength, competitiveness, and egoism. A case in point is the fact that the prominent Dutch psychologist, Geert Hofstede (1928 -2020) has included in his influential cultural dimensions theory the 'Masculinity/Femininity dimension as one of the four factors to examine cross-cultural relations. According to him masculinity is seen as a trait that promotes ambition, wealth, egoism, and differentiated gender roles, while femininity is associated with nurturing, collectivism, solidarity and overlapping gender roles (30). It is important to point out that those definitions are not biologically determined but are more of values that are socially acquired and that could apply to whole communities. Thus, if a country, for example, adopts welfare socialism and provides for the poor and weak and has respect for collective responsibilities it could be deemed a 'feminine' state, on the other hand, if it promotes materialism, competitiveness, and autonomy, it could be considered a 'masculine' state.

Based on the above remarks, it becomes obvious that the feminine/masculine duality would be one of the pivotal dyads projected on this complex landscape. It ensues, for instance, that since it is basically at odds with the fertility associated with the conception of 'mother nature', the arid and harsh atmosphere of the desert fosters a connection with the concept of masculinity. However, feminine associations could still be detected. Suffice to refer to the fact that the word

‘sahara’ in addition to most of its derivatives are feminine nouns in Arabic language. It is perhaps the mystic and the virgin-like and untrodden aspect of the desert scene that connects it with the feminine archetype. The desert, then, could embrace either the feminine or the masculine archetypal significations, depending on the standpoint of the viewer.

Regarding Taher’s novel, it is noticeable that the close relationship between the natural landscape and the feminine is centered upon three main characters in succession: Maleeka (Sheikh Yahya's niece), Fiona (Catherine's sister who came to the oasis to recover from tuberculosis and died there), and Ni'mat al-Samra (the slave girl who was Mahmoud’s first love and who suddenly disappeared). If we agree that the quality of femininity transcends gender, we can include other characters, some of whom are borderline figures hovering between the poles of femininity and masculinity, such as Mahmoud, Catherine, and Sheikh Yahya. This dichotomy between the natural feminine and the anthropological masculine forces is curtailed in the character of Alexander the Great, who admits to having dual personalities: “Alexander the Song” and “Alexander the Blood”. Accordingly, "Song" could be a reference to the feminine, ecocentric values of harmony and concord, and "blood" could be an expression of the masculine, anthropocentric values of conflict and oppression. In fact, “blood” is a main feature of the tribal society of the oasis that is based on the conflict between the two ethnic sects of Easterners and Westerners on the one hand, and the oppression of women and *zajala* (land laborers), while, on the other hand, “song” is a characteristic of the surrounding landscape with its serenity and balance. Regardless of the tragic ending of the novel and despite his recognition of the barren and frightening image of the desert, Bahaa Taher relies in his holistic representation of the desert on the Sufi and spiritual image with the final product being an image of the desert that it is “the paradise of prophets and poets” (41).

Maleeka is the character closest to the desert and nature. In a way, she represents the wild and spontaneous spirit of the desert that is resistant to human taming. While her mother sees that a devil is possessing her, her uncle, Sheikh Yahya, believes that she is “this oasis’s only blessing” (Taher 82). She comes to her uncle’s garden and helps him plant and prune the plants, she scoops up the mud and shapes it into the shape of birds and animals, she runs in disguise to the ruins of the kings and the mountain of the dead and wanders inside the caves without fear! Maleeka defies the stale traditions of the oasis that imprison widows and leaves the house after the death of her old husband, whom she was forced to marry despite the huge age gap between them. Fate saves her from the helpless man who abused her, but the traditions of society do not have mercy on her! According to the traditions of the oasis a widow must remain a prisoner of

the house and is called a 'ghoul'. She does not change her clothes, bathe, or adorn herself for four months until she is cleansed of the evil spirit that brought death to her husband. Eventually, Maleeka is killed for challenging the traditions of society when she goes out of her house.

The cultural (masculine) violation of nature (feminine) is verified by the loss of the three previously mentioned characters who are associated with the untainted aspect of the desert. Apparently, Bahaa Taher focuses on the virginal aspect of the feminine to emphasize the human violation of the land. This assumption is supported by the fact that the reader does not get to know these characters directly, but rather through the point of view of other characters. They are therefore characters who do not even have the right to express themselves. The writer Bahaa Taher confirmed to me in a personal interview that he tried more than once to make Malika talk about herself, but she refused.

The three characters are variations of a basic theme that not only simultaneously reflect the different colors and shapes of the desert, but they are all connected to the land in one way or another. Maleeka sculpts statues from clay and mud and cultivates the land, and 'Dusky Ni'ma' is said to have "got her name of her smooth, clear, golden-brown skin, which was like the color of the Nile in flood" (Taher 93), and Fiona tells stories connected to the green valleys and blue lakes. It is worth mentioning here that the image of the three girls is clearly intertwined, and this appears in Mahmoud's last dreams, which bring together Maleeka, Fiona, and Ni'ma in one character. But despite the overlap and similarity between them, each linguistic portrait represents a specific aspect of the desert. Malika represents the free spirit of the desert that does not accept walls or restrictions. If we want to compare her to a specific element of the desert to understand the features of her personality, we can actually link her to the winds and sandstorms that blow suddenly and express latent energy and which as described by Jamal Hamdan can "acquire a tremendous sculptural ability" and whose role "in shaping the Western Desert is equivalent to the role of the Nile in shaping the valley" (290). Indeed, Maleeka could be considered as the only dynamic entity in the stagnant world of the oasis. She is distinguished by a latent energy and strength that makes her challenge the most stubborn tribal traditions. Finally, she shares with the winds the talent for sculpture and creativity in addition to her virginal and innocent spirit.

As for *Dusky Ni'ma*, as is evident from her nickname, she summons the Nile and the brown soil of the valley. Mahmoud's father bought her from the *Slavers'* market when she was a little girl to help his mother in the house, then the father gave her to Mahmoud when he grew up.

Ni'ma was Mahmoud's friend, lover, and beloved. She captivated his heart with her story and her ability to physically please him:

... But when she drew close to me I'd smell the penetrating scent of Egyptian jasmine that seemed to spring from the very pores of her skin. The opening in the front of her cheap cotton *gallabia*, which she wore over her naked body, revealed her hairless, golden-brown skin, the like of whose smoothness I have never known since, and all my sleepiness would fly from my eyes and I'd hurry to finish the meal. Then I'd take her, as though kidnapping her, to my room and the night of passion would continue till it was almost dawn, when I would at last put my head on her thigh so that she could tell stories, as she had done since we were children, and fall asleep. (Taher 95)

The affinity between Ni'ma and the land is not the only analogy established here, a more striking one is the relation between her and Mahmoud which echoes the anthropocentric exploitation of nature. Not to mention Ni'ma's status as a concubine, the sensuous and sexual references to the 'scent', 'the naked body', 'the golden-brown skin' culminating in 'take' and 'kidnapping' is an almost direct confirmation of the image of the human ravishing of the land. Generally, and as evident in the above citation, Ni'ma conjures up associations with the earthly and fertile valley.

Unlike the free-spirited Maleeka or the voluptuous Ni'ma, Fiona is depicted as pure and angelic. Her heavenly bearing is embodied in her affinity with the lakes and green valleys. This association is affirmed not only by her physique but also by her evoking of the Irish folktales. The natural landscape of the green valleys and blue lakes is in harmony with Sheikh Yahya's description of her: "Few are born with God-given of tolerance and purity of soul. It is a gift from the Giver, for which take no credit. They are few because He, glory be to Him, has not wished that we be angels" (Taher 259). Thus, the geography of the Egyptian landscape is represented in the linguistic paintings of the three girls between the desert and its winds (Malika), the Nile and its silt (Ni'ma), and the oasis and its lake and greenery (Fiona), forming a system consisting of the following color palette: yellow, brown, green, and blue. As we explained previously, the three elements represent the image of the desert as a garden of the soul and a desert of melody, and each element is subjected to oppression in one way or another by the anthropocentric tendencies of the 'Alexander the Blood' figures, thirsty for power and control.

A case in point is the sterility of the romantic relationships in the novel; there is no fulfilled relationship: Ni'ma disappears when Mahmoud rebukes her after she asks him if he loves her, Fiona loves Michael but he leaves her and marries Catherine and then dies, Malika is forced by her mother to marry the old and sexually impotent Ma'bad, the relationship between Catherine and Mahmoud is barren and finally Mahmoud loves Fiona but the novel ends with their death. Can we conclude from this that the marriage between the concepts of femininity and masculinity is colored by the barrenness and sterility of the desert? What weighs in favor of the sterile nature of the relationship between the feminine and the masculine is Mahmoud and Catherine's childless marriage. This sterility is effectively embodied by the metaphor of walls and closed doors surrounding the community in the oasis. Providing an example of a verbal painting, Catherine observes:

I happened to glance at the children playing. How comfortable to be a child! How comfortable to be ignorant! The boys had dug channels in the ground and were pouring into them, and putting small green twigs along the length of them so that they could irrigate gardens like those of their fathers. But the most important thing, though, was that they were not forgetting to build high walls of sands around their gardens. They had been taught about walls since they were little. The girls were playing on their own far from the boys. More walls! ... Their mothers? They travel on the road only in groups going to funerals or weddings, and all that one can see of them is their wide blue cloaks-dump lumps, moving slowly and silently like a warning of ill tidings, so that I want to scream when I see them, 'Where are the people?' (Taher 166).

This paragraph goes beyond the concept of verbal image to include the concept adopted by Murray Krieger in his book, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, according to which language turns into a "silent moment" (53), during which the borderline separating language and picture is shattered, and an "imagetext" is constructed with the wall as a basic leitmotif. The image embodies examples of the societal oppression of the concept of femininity, whether on the literal level, which is represented in the exclusion of women and their isolation within walls of stones or even cloth, or on the environmental feminist level, which is represented in the walls that children build around the orchards.

Oppression, marginalization, and exploitation serve as the foundation for the verbal representation of the environmental feminist scene of the desert. But what about the visual representation of this concept in Gazbia Sirry's paintings? When translating the masculine/feminine binary into geometric shapes, we find that while triangles and squares

could invoke masculinity (anthropocentric centrality), the circle could symbolize femininity (natural centrality). Gaston Bachelard, in his renowned book *The Poetics of Space*, argues that existence is circular and that the most distinctive feature of this circularity is the sense of completeness and introspection. He further asserts that the circularity of existence implies a center and that this circularity is framed by the circularity of the sky (232-241). Thus, the entire cosmos is composed of circles within circles, with one of the most significant of which, being the woman's womb, reinforcing the connection between femininity and the circle. Bachelard affirms the same idea, albeit indirectly, when he states: 'everything round invites a caress' (236). Considering those comments. It could be confidently asserted that the feminine element is dominant in Sirry's depictions, especially in her later works. It is true that in the previously examined paintings (Figures 1 and 2), geometric shapes like squares and triangles, as well as horizontal lines dividing the canvas in two, seem to prevail. However, there remains the undulating lines symbolizing water that enjoy an obvious presence in those pictures.



Figure 3. Gazbia Sirry, *Composition from the Desert* (1975). Illus. in *Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 67.

Now, turning to Sirry's 1975 *Composition from the Desert* (Figure 3) and her *Mother Desert* (Figure 4), we will find that the dominant lines are fluid and curved, suggesting a predominance of the feminine aspect in the scene which is straightforwardly expressed in the choice of the title: *Mother Desert*. Whereas the curled (feminine) lines at the background of the first painting seem to hesitantly feel their way among the pyramidal shapes with their sharp lines (masculine), they completely encircle the scene in the second painting (Figure 4), echoing the motherly aura of the configuration of the landscape. Actually, the whole landscape takes the curvy form of a woman's body with special focus on the depiction of the womb, signifying containment, and motherhood. This feeling is further emphasized by the artist's choice of warm colors like light brown and orange. Another significant detail is the pointed lines of the triangular form in the first painting which transforms into a roundish hill in the second, verifying Charles Harrison's assumption that if a painting "resembles cliffs, it also at least in part establishes a relationship of resemblance to mounds and folds and furrows of flesh, and specifically to the human vulva" (221). The result is a work of art that is dominated by warmth, fertility, and a connection to the earth.

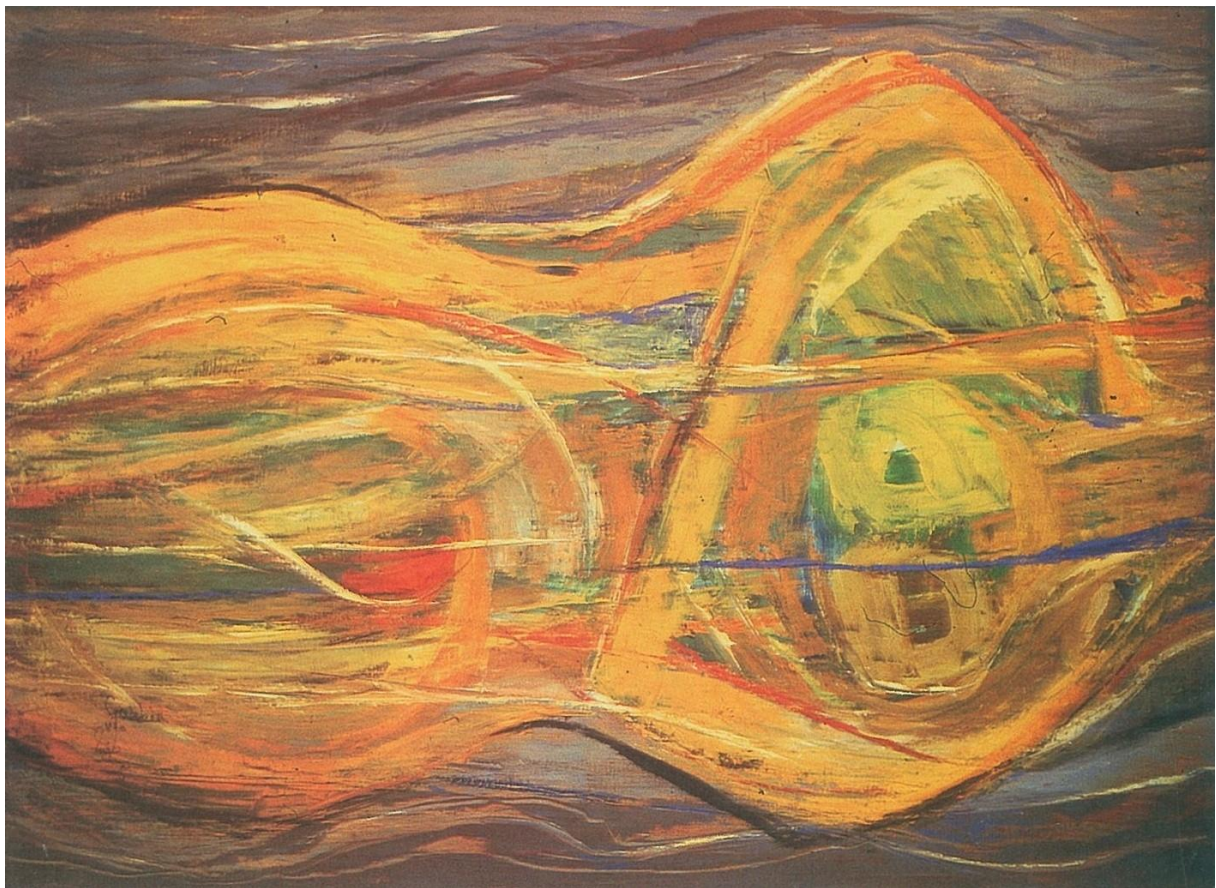


Figure 4. Gazbia Sirry, *Mother Desert* (1975). Illus. in *Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 68.

The variant semantic shades of femininity could be perceived in Sirry's paintings, echoing the meanings discussed previously in the course of examining the verbal images in the novel and specifically that of Maleeka and Ni'ma. Thus, the blue and purple colors of the painting in Figure 3 could reflect the purity and virginal aspect of Maleeka while the winds, represented by the spiral lines in the background, could symbolize her free and rebellious spirit. Indeed, the flowing lines, prevalent throughout the entire desert series, reflect Maleeka's freedom and love of life. As for *Mother Desert* (Figure 4), it is obvious that it reflects the maternal and sexual shade of femininity as embodied by Ni'ma. The choice of orange and brown colors expresses a mood of sensuality, warmth and containment which are, in their own turn, in association with Ni'ma's verbal portrait.

The fact that the "representation of nature as a kind of female body is, after all, ideologically normative" (Harrison 222) is further illustrated in Sirry's subsequent paintings. The similarity between the contours of nature and a woman's body is clear in Figure 5, *Composition from the Desert* (1978), and Figure 6, *The Desert* (1976). In *Composition from the Desert* (1978), the lemon yellow, and the dark brown mixed with a tinge of blue endow the picture with a thriving opulence associated with the Nile and its banks. Indeed, the Nile, with its wine-dark color, is represented as a female body with flowing lines full of movement (reflecting the spirit of the dark-skinned Ni'ma). On the other hand, in *The Desert*, the dominant colors are the different shades of orange and light brown, invoking a warmth amounting to the passionate heat of a sunny horizon. As Kandinsky explains, the lines and forms represent an additional crucial signifier in pictures. He states that this "unavoidable influence and mutual relation between form and colour causes us to observe the effect, which form has on colour. The form, even if entirely abstract and resembling a geometric figure, has its inner harmony and is a spiritual being with characteristics identical to it" (46). I believe this 'mutual relation' is truly obvious in Sirry's work and specifically in those two paintings where the sand dunes resemble the breasts of voluptuous females. It is an instance when both color and form unite to endorse the feminine presence of the desert scene. Interestingly, Bahaa Taher painted the same scene in words when he wrote, through the voice of Catherine: "Despite this, as we cross these flat reaches of yellow sand, we are surprised by vast lakes of white sand or by round dunes like little shrines of jutting breasts on the desert's bosom" (60).

There are interesting observations when comparing the ecofeminist representations in Sirry's paintings to Bahaa Taher's novel. The first observation is the dominance of the image of the mother and the concept of fertility in the visual representation of the desert, contrary to the

ecofeminist image of nature in the novel, which borders on the archetype of the virgin, violated, and exploited woman. Sirry's world is primarily a matriarchal world where women take center stage. Hence, it is difficult to find a place for Fiona, with her angelic nature, in Sirry's paintings. Fiona's portrait relies on a degree of spirituality and purity that might exist in Bahaa Taher's conception of the desert as a garden for the soul. The light blue shade of the sky and the lakes that is associated with Fiona is a shade that is rare in Sirry's collection which relies more on hot and intense colors.



Figure 5. Gazbia Sirry, Composition from the Desert (1978). Illus. in Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 72.

But what about the masculine/anthropological world in the paintings? Apparently, this world enjoys an obvious presence in most of the paintings of the collection, taking the form of pyramidal and square-like structures that express a practical sense of purpose in opposition to the spiritual mysticism of the circular (Feminine/nature). Such sharp lines emphasize the human element (the masculine). The pyramid, in specific, stands out as a symbol of human

achievement. It denotes solidity, and hierarchy, and with its vertical lines, it is closer to the idea of aspiration and the accompanying dynamic tendency towards competition and conflict; traits that are largely associated with the traditional meaning of masculinity.



Figure 6. Gazbia Sirry, *The Desert* (1976). Illus. in Gazbia Sirry: *Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 74.

But this masculine world is not as condemned in the paintings as it is in the novel. Generally, there is a juxtaposition between the pyramid symbolizing the masculine world, and the Nile as emblematic of the feminine world with the latter embracing the former. This is clearly shown in the paintings *Pyramids of Love* (Figure 7)) and *Exodus from the Pyramid* (Figure 8). Unlike the previous paintings, the human element has a strong presence in the two paintings. Despite the abstract tendency, the viewer can clearly recognize the lines that express the human body. The painting *Pyramids of Love* expresses, as is clear from the title and the intertwining of the lines, a cohesion between the masculine and feminine worlds. It seems that the Nile god Hapi, who combines male and female characteristics, is the main source of inspiration in this painting. This vision is confirmed by the longitudinal line that cuts the pyramid into two separate parts,

forming together one unit: the pyramid. This reconciliation between the Nile culture (female) and the pyramid culture (male) is evident when the two paintings are perceived as a single totality, regarding *Exodus from the Pyramid* as born out of the *Pyramids of Love*. It is as if the feminine nature has drawn strength from the civilized masculine world (the pyramid) and then emerging to dominate the scene. This is clearly evident in the clarity of the lines separating the figures and in the disappearance of the pyramid behind the group of women who appear as if they have just come out from the pyramid. The symmetry in the proportions between the size of the women and the pyramid emphasizes the strength of the feminine symbol. This emotion is endorsed by the choice of the hot orange color and the flowing lines in the desert background emphasizing the feminine presence. The painting expresses feminine strength that is clearly crystallized in the fusion between the masculine and the feminine worlds. Here I recall what I mentioned earlier, that the predominant pictorial pattern of female configuration is the ruling matriarch.

The Dialectics of Life (Storm)/Death (Stillness):

It is primarily the aridity of the desert landscape that construct an association between it and death. Absence is the master of this seemingly silent space with the winds and storms as the main source of movement in the desert, they blow suddenly and then calm down as if nothing happened! In a sense the desert is emblematic of human existence, hovering between life and death. However, the basic tone in the desert remains the state of silence and stillness. Despite the awe-inspiring silence that envelops the desert, it is strangely compared and associated with the sea. It is a sea of sand instead of water, sharing with the ocean an endless horizon and rapid shifts from calm to motion. I have previously alluded to the evocation of the sea in both the novel and the collection of desert paintings. To clarify this further, the final section of this study will focus on comparing the written and visual depictions of the desert landscape from various perspectives that represent the states of death-like stillness versus the lively motion to which the desert landscape is subjected, as exemplified in the selected works.

Although the viewer's first impression of the desert is that of a fixed and unchangeable landscape, the desert keeps under its wraps an intricate and throbbing nature. It is most probably the absolute silence that envelops this arid scene that makes it such a mysterious and awe-inspiring landscape, endorsed by Bahaa Taher in his novel, as a "garden of the soul" whose stillness invites a deep dive into the self. However, despite the mystic aura, this stillness is viewed differently. Hence, while Mahmoud views death and emptiness, Catherine considers the silent and static scene as a rebirth and a stimulus for living:

The desert stretches away before my eyes, and there is nothing in it but sand, dunes, rocks, and the mirage that shimmers in the distance. Searing heat by day and biting cold by night. From time to time, chains of grey mountains like the remnants of a single mountain transformed by a bolt of lightning into splintered rubble. ... As each day passes on the road, a deeper silence reigns over the caravan, and all the eyes are directed to the front gazing into the emptiness. What does each of them think about? I don't know, but the silence floods my mind with cries and images that awaken all the past. (Taher 37)



Figure 7. *Pyramids of Love* (1977). Illus. in Gazbia Sirry: *Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 69.

Mahmoud's inscribed painting of the desert is characterized by the dominance of monotony and emptiness. The silence here is the silence of graveyards and not the stillness that is at peace with the soul. Even when a different variety such as mountains appears to break the intensity of this inertia, they are represented as gray ruins. The mental image of the desert as a synonym for death and sterility is what dominates the overall aura of the textual painting. However, Mahmoud's last statement that silence is invaded by noise has an important significance, as it pinpoints the effect of the desert as a spiritual energy that calls for contemplation and self-discovery. Silence calls for noise and hence, the Battle of Alexandria and the defeat of the Egyptian army, along with Mahmoud's personal defeat before himself, are recalled.



Figure 8. Gazbia Sirry, *Exodus from the Pyramid* (1977). Illus. in *Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998), plate 70.

The first paintings in the Desert Collection, namely Figures 1 and 2, are the closest to Mahmoud's vision of the silent desert scene. There is an obvious minimization of mobility in the depiction of the desert in those two works. The lines are mostly straight with a horizontal dividing line that separates the canvas surface into two halves reflecting the desert and the sky or the Nile and the desert. In short, the two paintings represent variations on a single tune, visually translating the monotony and emptiness that Mahmoud conveys in the textual image.

But the sense of monotony and emptiness, as I previously noted, is just one of the many aspects of the desert. This is evident from Catherine's vision of the still desert, which she views as an energy linked to the idea of resurrection and birth. We have already explained at the beginning of the research how her description of the silent scene pulsates with lively movement.

I studied everything written about the route and the wells, the dunes and the storms, but the books didn't tell me about the real desert. I didn't learn from them how the colors

change above the sea of sand through the hours of the day, and I didn't find a word in them about *the movement* of shadows as they trace a thin gray cowl over the peak of a yellow hill or *open up* a dark door in its centre, and they didn't teach me how the small high clouds are reflected on *as hurrying flocks* of Gray birds, and they didn't speak to me of the dawn – above all the dawn- when it *shifts* from a thin white line on the horizon into a red blush that slowly *pushes* the darkness aside until with the first rays of the sun, the sand blazes like a golden sea, at which moment a smell *penetrates* my nose that I have never known before, of the mixture of the dawn's dew, the sun and the sand. An erotic smell that not only steals into my nose, but to which all the pores of my body open. (Taher 59).

It seems to me that Catherine's textual painting is very close to the Orientalist desert paintings that reflect a state of idealism and fascination with the scene. Catherine's image is characterized by multiple viewing angles between light and shadow and the diversity and gradation in the use of colors, which gives a sense of vitality and warmth. The colors yellow and red dominate the painting in a way that recalls the painting in Figure 2. However, when compared to this painting, it should be noted that Catherine's painting is far vibrant and intricate than the unidimensional depiction of Sirry's painting. Perhaps, the closest visual image that expresses Catherine's desert is the painting entitled *The Desert* (Figure 6). The gradation of colors in the painting reflects some of the movement and diversity that Catherine perceives in the desert scene despite the apparent stillness. It is strange that this painting is the only three-dimensional painting in the group and is also the furthest from abstraction. The sun, as a symbol of life and passion, is one of the motifs that has a strong presence in both depictions. It follows that the choice of orange as the dominant color, endows it with a sensuality a sense of sensuality that is also reflected in Catherine's textual painting and further affirmed by her reaction after being exposed to the warmth of the scene. Another fundamental factor are the sand dunes, with their suggestive curves of a woman's body, that occupy the focal point of the visual context of the painting, recalling Catherine's comparison of the dunes to "little shrines of jutting breasts on the desert's bosom" (Taher 60). It is interesting to note at this point how the mood of the onlooker determines the connotation of the same landscape. The same dunes are depicted by Mahmoud in a way that reflects his despair of life: "Nothing but sand and distant brown hills like carvings of crouching beasts" (49).

The still portrait is just one facet of the desert, complemented by an extremely dynamic constitution as embodied in the sand storms; a fearful but undeniably living aspect of this

landscape that combines both life and death. The dynamic component is captured in a vibrant imagetext portrayed by Mahmoud at the beginning of their journey to the oasis:

It seemed to me that the winds were driving the camels over the sands like boats over water. The men's robes ballooned out behind them, and we all bent our heads to avoid the rushing air and the sand. Then the camels started to cry out, sometimes running and sometimes stopping, and on the far horizon a large oval clod appeared, like a spiral-shaped hill, which crept slowly towards us over the sand. ... One load of fabrics flew into the sky, scattering like colored sails escaping into space, and metal pots and pans tumbled against one another with a repeated ringing sound that could be heard through the roaring of the camels and the shouting of the men, while the spiralling hill crept quickly towards us, driving before it wisps of sand that penetrated our muffled faces like arrows. As the cloud got closer, the whistling of the dust devils was transformed into a thundering roar, and no one could hear any longer what the guide was screaming. (Taher 42).



Figure 9. Gazbia Sirry, *Houses in Desert* (1979). Illus. in *Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998) plate 79.

Violent movement is the master of the situation in this scene. The desert is in a state of majestic revolution, before which the human world shrinks. Silence is replaced by howling, screaming,

clanging, roaring and a resounding defeat, and stillness is replaced by the sight of camels running, with flying fabrics, staggering, falling and kneeling of travelers. Then, just as it had suddenly blown, the storm suddenly subsided and “the caravan continued on its way in the midst of complete quiet. The noise of the winds and the roaring of the camels disappeared, and the caravan made its way over soft, still sand, as though the desert had never known a storm” (Taher 44). The tremendous energy depicted in the textual painting lends majesty and mystery to the image of the desert, especially when it is followed by an image that represents the complete opposite of the previous state: tremendous anger followed by complete stillness!



Figure 10. Gazbia Sirry, *People in the Desert* (1981). Illus. in *Gazbia Sirry: Lust for Color* (Cairo: Amer University in Cairo, 1998) plate 82.

The paintings that express the storm in the collection are *Composition from the Desert* (Figure 3), *Houses in the Desert* (Figure 9), and *People in the Desert* (Figure 10). It is noteworthy that the image of the storm in the paintings does not inspire the awe that the written representation in the novel inspires. This feeling is aided by the prominence of the pyramidal shapes in the

foreground of the image, which gives a sense of stability and steadfastness in the face of the winds that are confined to the background of the image. There is another point that we must take into consideration, which is the choice of cool colors such as indigo and violet, especially in Figure 3, which contrast with the urgency of the moment and reduce the sense of awe. The prominent positioning of the houses in the painting entitled *Houses in the Desert* (Figure 9), is an obvious indication of the compelling presence of human life. The storm sweeps the picture but it seems to be in a separate area from the houses which, despite being at the edge of the painting, are the focal point, seemingly unaffected by the storm blowing behind them. The dividing line that Gazbia Sirry adds at the storm zone to give the feeling of sunlight penetrating from behind the clouds suggests that light is emanating from the houses. It is appropriate to note here that Gazbia Sirry's houses and people are an integrated entity, as she often draws houses in human form or vice versa.

In the last painting, *People in the Desert*, the artist replaced the houses with people, so we find them depicted as a single, overlapping mass at the left end of the painting. However, this time, the human mass takes up most of the picture, while the storm appears calmer and does not seem to affect the human group that leads the scene, and signs of reassurance appear on the faces. The green color helps to suggest a state of peace despite the lines that suggest the presence of wind in the scene. Human life is the active force factor for Gazbia Sirry in all the different aspects of the desert, whether still or dynamic, inhabited or empty, unlike Bahaa Taher's desert painting, which emphasizes the idea that the desert is infused with a mysterious spiritual energy that affects everyone who goes out into it.

Conclusion

The study attempted to identify the nature of the desert in Egyptian culture by comparing the written and visual representation in Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis* and the paintings of the Desert Collection by Gazbia Sirry. Based on the tenets of the theory of representation and "text-image" by J.W. Mitchell, the research celebrated the dialectical dualities, whether at the interdisciplinary or intellectual level. The study concluded that the relationship between the visual and written image is a largely intertwined relationship that supports the textuality of the image and the iconography of the word. In the process, it could be seen how the paintings were able to speak and the words to draw! The other question that has been pressing the researcher throughout this study is: To what extent does the desert influence or is influenced by the cultural character of Egypt? Is the image of the desert determined by Egyptian identity and specificity? By analyzing the dualities of space/place, feminine/masculine, and life/death, the study was

able to conclude that, regarding the relationship between space and place, the paintings' attachment to place, especially the Nile Valley and the city, overwhelms the sense of space, despite the abstract tendency adopted by Gazbia Sirry in the Desert collection. As for *Sunset Oasis*, it was surmised that the concept of space dominates the textual representation of the desert due to the predominance of the Sufi vision associated with the desert horizon. It has also been observed that the Nile (water) is omnipresent in both the written and visual texts, giving the desert a cultural and spatial specificity. When analyzing the duality of feminine and masculine in the textual and visual images, there was more than one observation that draws attention to the difference in the representation of environmental feminism in Bahaa Taher's novel and Gazbia Sirry's paintings. Whereas the image of the victimized virgin in an oppressive patriarchal society is dominant in the novel, the paintings reflect a matriarchal world in which women dominate the scene. Women/nature are far from weak in the paintings, and they contain the anthropocentric space and transcend it. In the novel, innocence and angelicity are the main features of the feminine/nature world, which confirms the Sufi conception of the desert. The connection to land and water in the depiction of feminine/nature portraiture is clear in the textual and visual image, which confirms the connection between the desert and the Nile Valley; between sand and mud. Finally, when comparing the moments of death/stillness and life/storm in the written and visual texts, it was clear that the mystical and mysterious nature of the desert as a latent energy controls the image of the desert in the novel, while the human and anthropocentric factor is more prominent in the paintings of the collection. Finally, it can be stated that the Nile occupies a large space in the Egyptian collective mind, so that the traveler to the desert, whether with his pen or brush, cannot leave it behind. It is the absent yet present entity that plays a major role in tempering the harsh image of the desert, making it closer to a yellow orchard than to a barren land. Finally, there is nothing more appropriate to emphasize the uniqueness of the image of the desert in Egyptian culture than to conclude this research as we began it with an excerpt from the encyclopedic book, *The Identity of Egypt*, that only in Egypt "can you literally put one foot on the black earth and the other on the sand of the desert." (Hamdan 6).

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