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Dramatic Intensity

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From Victim to Victor or Vice Versa -- The Shift of Power in Relation to Dramatic Intensity

Dramatic curves exist in all novels just as they do in reality. The plot is spelled out, character orchestration commences and the story begins to unfold. The protagonist, antagonist and all supporting players battle each other for prominence, and at the same time, struggle with their own inner conflicts. Each small victory and loss shifts the power and control from those characters we love, to those we love to hate and vice versa. The most controversial usually have a deep seeded tragic event in their past that spurs their unacceptable behavior. Simply put, there's a reason for everything. As the stories twist and turn and facts are revealed about the characters, we are able to sympathize with them rather than judge. Why does Humbert lust after a 12- year old girl? (*Lolita*). Why does a mother allow her husband to turn her daughter into her son? (*The Sand Child*). Why does a father rape his own child? (*The Bluest Eye*). Why does a peasant woman murder the Mayor in cold blood? (*God Dies by the Nile*). How can God be a failure and want to abandon the human race? (*God Resigns at the Summit Meeting and Night*). How can a mother desert her newborn child on the street? (*Zeina*). Why does a successful, upwardly mobile, happily married man commit suicide? (*The German Mujahid*). How can a young boy kill his own father? (*Night*). All of these actions are appalling, but if we understand the character's history, mindset and circumstances, we can be less disparaging. All of their internal demons influence their choices, with which we may or may not agree, and develop into power struggles

which increase the dramatic intensity, intensify the risks and rewards, and contribute to the climax and potential solution.

The relationship among a character's introspection, motives, decisions and actions drive the drama and his/her thought process is only revealed to the reader. What we know about his/her concept of morality, enables us to better understand the decision to act. In the case of *Lolita*, the manifest content is that Humbert is a child molester. However, through his introspection, he reveals his deep rooted emptiness resulting from his near but failed attempts to make love with Annabel, followed by the shock of her death. The fact that he carries that loss into adulthood unresolved, explains why he is aroused by a 12-year old child. "But that mimosa grove-- the haze of stars, the tingle, the flame, the honeydew, and the ache remained with me, and that little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted me ever since-- until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another" (Nabokov 15). We may feel empathy towards this tortured man because Lolita simply revived his stifled feelings of longing and desire and became the substitute for Annabel.

Nabokov's protagonist is presented as tragic, raw, emotionally abandoned and flawed. Initially he is powerless to his misfortune, but gains dominance over Lolita. He is coherent enough to recognize that it is inappropriate for a man of his age to be sexually attracted to a child, but falls prey to his desire. His charm and sense of humor are defense mechanisms used to cover his inadequacies. On page 71, Humbert refers to himself as "Humbert the Cubus" , short for incubus, meaning devil. Consciously he is aware that his thoughts are wrong and creates his own conflict of desire vs. decision. It is this inner conflict that propels the drama forward. Will he or won't he? Will he fulfill some unrealized lifelong fantasy to experience his "lost childhood love" or will sensibility and societal morality prevail? "I shall probably have another breakdown

if I stay any longer in this house under the strain of this intolerable temptation, by the side of my darling -- my darling --my life and my bride" (Nabokov 47). Another form of defense is to cast blame upon Lolita, as the little vixen who is also a willing participant. He will become empowered over Lo while he convinces himself and perhaps the reader that there is no wrongdoing. Nabokov distracts us from this harsh reality by adding flowery language and creating intense visuals of the beauty in nature as well as in their scenic adventure across the United States. The beauty of romance disguises the horrific crime.

In the Patience Stone, we are introduced to a conventional and law abiding Muslim woman who is nursing her dying husband. In keeping with Muslim tradition, she has committed herself to her husband and takes a back seat with regard to her own thoughts, needs, desires, dreams, etc. She spent her entire life internalizing her feelings and thoughts because it wasn't her right to voice an opinion. Women are not equal to men and pale in comparison when it comes to control and power. In fact, had she disclosed anything she knew in her conscience, she would have been killed. "You will forgive me, one day, for all that I've done...if you had known you would have killed me straightaway!" (Rahimi 70). It is only when her husband lies dying, in a comatose state, unable to speak or react, that she gains the courage to finally look him directly in his face and speak. However, the following passage demonstrates her continuing battle between strength and courage and her docile submissiveness. "What does he want from you?" She looks up. "What does he want from me?" Her voice drops. "You would say, *He wants to punish you!*" He's keeping you alive so you can see what I'm capable of doing with you, to you. He is making me into a demon...a demon for you, against you!" (Rahimi 67). The contrasting phrases "with you, to you" and "for you, against you" represent the shift in power from the husband to the wife. This gradual transformation and the dramatic intensity run parallel with her guardedly

growing confidence. Her stories are not forthcoming, but rather delivered in spurts during her daily visits. She continues her almost mechanical execution of medical care and during her moments of self-examination, denounces her shocking and unacceptable behavior. Does she feel a false sense of security? Or, is he that near to death that she is harmlessly confessing to a corpse? This psychological cleansing "process" frees her, as well as the countless other women before her, from their prison of guilt, hostility and resentment. "And the voice coming out of my throat is a voice buried for thousands of years" (Rahimi 134).

We feel her empowerment surge with each release of the demons within her. However, as her secrets intensify, so does the drama. Her revelation of her longing for tenderness in kissing or touching her husband demonstrates her helpless need for affection. "I can touch you...You never let me touch you, never! I have never kissed you. The first time I went to kiss you on the lips, you pushed me away. I wanted it to be like in those Indian films" (Rahimi 71). Her confessing the truth about the menstrual blood on her wedding night, her knowing that he was the infertile partner and her climatic admission that he did not father their two daughters allows us the insight of her ability to manipulate and gain control. She is not as weak as we may have initially thought, but she is trapped. Her struggle between her intense desire to be free and her duty to obey and respect her husband escalates every time she returns to the house. She physically separates herself from him but cannot do so mentally. When she continues to describe the details of her arranged liaisons with the girls' actual father, she is reeling with unrestraint and is almost giddy. The shift in power resembles that of a tennis match. Her shameful feelings of guilt from her unorthodox behavior morph into feelings of elation, but soon return to feelings of disgrace. Her journey to emancipation is a slow and gradual process. Along with the power struggle between the husband and wife, she has her own inner tug of war between confession and regret.

Once she has freed her conscience (or so we think) of her past indiscretions, the deep-rooted fear of her husband's punishment overtakes her completely. Her torment is so intense that she envisions her husband bolting up from death with the brute force to beat her. Did he, metaphorically "explode" like the patience stone following her final admission? Is she just imagining this beating because she was conditioned to believe that she is a demon and deserves punishment? Is this just a way of life for a Muslim woman who disobeys a man?

The practice of men beating women is a common thread among the Islamic cluster of our novels and we, as Western readers, may feel angry or uncomfortable because that behavior is totally unacceptable to us. We may feel biased in our opinion and sympathize with the wife's dilemma. In *God Dies By the Nile*, influential men routinely challenged those men less powerful with regard to dominance over women. "What can you do?! Is that a question for a man to ask?" responded Sheikh Zahran, even more heatedly. "Beat her. Don't you know that girls and women never do what they're told unless you beat them?" (Saadawi 27). "What do you do?" exclaimed Haj Ismail, now looking furious. "Is that a question for a man to ask? Beat her, my brother, beat her once and twice and thrice. Do you not know that girls and women are only convinced if they receive a good hiding?" (Saadawi 40-41). Perhaps this is the reason why Rahimi returns the power to the beast and the heroine is once again the victim. In *Zeina*, the powerful prey on the weak as well, women and children alike. Physical empowerment, violent sexual assaults and psychological imprisonment seem the norm. A woman's achieving her well-deserved liberation and meritorious feeling is not common practice and would be unrealistic. Saadawi stretches the imagination by giving voices to Eve, Isis, Mary and Bint Allah in *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*. These women are empowered and proclaim their value on this earth. Eve offers the reason why women are treated (or mistreated) as second class citizens and lack freedoms

bestowed to men. God failed to force obedience on her directly and had to resort to controlling her through her husband Adam. Her indispensable role in creation was overshadowed by her label as a defiant sinner (all because she sought knowledge.) "He appointed man as trustee, as a patron over women, over her morals, her humor, her virginity, her marital fidelity. He accorded her husband the authority to supervise her behavior and her faithfulness to him but deprived her of any authority or rights. He legitimized marital infidelity for men by allowing them to marry more than one woman or have slaves or concubines. And all this happened because I am Eve, the sinful, yet who committed no sin and is the main reason why humanity exists" (Saadawi 178). The women reiterate the historical biases and cruelties towards females, many of which continue to exist today. This enfranchisement is Saadawi's fantasy, while the more realistic scenario is the wife who is free from her husband's dominance only after he takes his final breath. Similarly, in the case of *The Sand Child's* Ahmed, she can only entertain her thoughts of her true identity following her father's death .

In *Zeina*, Bodour's enduring spirit is admirable. The victim of societal prejudice, she is forced to abandon her newborn daughter, who bears the same piercing eyes as her murdered lover, Nessim. She lives painstakingly with this secret and it is exacerbated every time she sees Zeina or hears her sing. Although she has endeavored to build a successful writing career, she remains overshadowed by her inferior and jealous husband as well as her fantastical, superior self and the heroine of her novel, Badreya. Her empty days are measured as "a hundred years" and her dreams are haunted by sorrow. "[God] burned her in hell forever and ever for one moment of pleasure and joy. He deprived her of her child forever just because the police killed the baby's father before he could sign the marriage contract. She was skeptical of God's justice and consequently of His existence. She lost her faith during her sleep and was exhausted by all

the buried sorrows in her heart" (Saadawi 2272). There is one character, however, in *Zeina* who is a closer representation of a more modern, Western woman and stands above the powerless women of our Islamic cluster. Bodour's best friend, Safi, is a successful writer, three times divorced and lives alone. She changed her religion at will and followed that of each husband, first a Marxist, followed by an Islamist and then a liberal. When she caught each with another woman, she did not tolerate it but divorced. She comes across as confident, independent, a loyal friend and a wise advisor. She has propitiously conquered her impediments and personal dramas, transcending from victim to victor. "Loneliness is much nicer than a hateful companion. Like you, I feared loneliness and accepted humiliation. I was a prisoner to that fear until I came to know loneliness and found it to be beautiful and inspiring" (Saadawi 1253). She also admits to her attraction to women and freely shares a joke with Bodour about the stupidity of men. "A matter of fact, men don't attract me. In my adolescence, I was in love with a woman. Now at this advanced state of my life, my adolescence is coming back to me" (Saadawi 1327). "...'But how is it darling, that you didn't know that this was a penis?' His wife burst out, saying loudly, 'Do you call that a penis? A penis is as long as my arm here.'" (Saadawi 1347). Perhaps Safi's purpose is to positively influence and enlighten Bodour in the hope that she may eventually save herself.

Naturally, our personal experiences and moral ideals prejudice our inclination or disapproval of certain characters. It may also be shocking to discover feelings of compassion towards a despicable character or animosity towards a seemingly helpless victim. At the same time, the narrator's perspective greatly influences the dramatic intensity. *Night* is a genuine memoir told in first person narrative by the author. Wiesel's memories are so vivid, intrinsically detailed and appeal to all sensory perception (sight, sound, smell, touch), he recreates the past,

which in itself is powerful enough. There is no suggestion of anything romantic (*Lolita*), or enchanting as a journey through nature towards self-realization (*Soul Mountain*). The story is succinct. Knowing for fact that the author prevails inspires us to forge ahead. However, the narration is so compelling, it's possible to actually entertain doubts. As a result, the dramatic climax isn't simply Wiesel's survival, but rather the agonizing battle between the absolute limit to his physical and mental endurance vs. his eventual emancipation.

The details of *The Patience Stone* unfold from the wife's point of view in a recursive narrative, and the husband is unable to deliver his message or reveal his own internal struggles. We don't know the reasons, other than cultural practices, that led to his past actions. He was once a powerful man, but then reduced to a debilitated victim. Under what circumstances did he become helpless? In his mind, he may have acted with valor. If he weren't comatose, would he demonstrate a better appreciation for his wife's devotion and appear thankful for a "second chance"? He was once a man of great stature. He was labeled a hero, so at some point he was celebrated for doing good. "At the time, I didn't even question your absence. It seemed so normal! You were at the front. You were fighting for freedom, for Allah! And that made everything okay. It gave me hope, made me proud." "To all of us you were just a title: the Hero! And, like every hero, far away. Engagement to a hero was a lovely thing, for a seventeen-year-old girl" (Rahimi 58). Perhaps his allegiance to his duties overshadowed his relationship with his wife. This is not unrealistic. How many men today place their careers first and are insensitive to their wife's emotional needs? The reader's perspective plays a major role in determining the source of strength within this couple and our organic feeling of empathy is influenced by our own identity. While female readers may relate to the nurturing, subservient wife who endures a lifetime of censorship and sacrifice while remaining completely dedicated to her dying husband,

male readers may sympathize with the husband and deem the wife the villain due to her adulterous activity, deceit with regard to the children and her having sex with another man a room away from her husband's deathbed. They could say the husband dedicated his life fighting for freedom and while defending his mother's "honor", was fatally injured. However, did he really risk his life defending a woman's dignity or his own pompous ego? His life had its own dramatic curve, unknown to us. However, in his wife's imagination, he remained the victor.

In *The German Mujahid*, brothers Rachel and Malrich are faced with a similar dilemma when they learn of their father's former Nazi activity. Each brother, however, reacts differently and the dramatic intensity leads them down opposing paths. Rachel had power but lost it. Malrich had none but found the strength within himself. "You can't get justice for a crime by committing another crime, or by committing suicide...But the most important thing you need to learn is this: we are not responsible for the crimes of our parents" (Sansal 67). Perhaps this is easier said than done.

Rachel, who was once a successful, upwardly mobile, happily married man lost it all, body, mind and spirit to his insufferable guilt. In his self-destructive travels through Europe and his reliving his father's wretched past, Rachel becomes overwhelmed. At the end of his physical and emotional journey, he is reduced to a pitiable shell of a human being, devastated and dominated by guilt. Why hadn't his father ever taken responsibility for his crimes? In trying to find reason in madness, he loses himself and his grasp on reality. He becomes obsessed with the injustice and actually metamorphoses into a concentration camp-like victim and dies by way of his father's hand. "I was in a strange position. Excruciatingly painful. Utterly devastating. I was inside the skin inside the skeletal monotony of the concentration camp prisoner waiting for the end, and I was inside my father's skin, jealous of his vocation which brought about that end.

In me, these two extremes had come together for the worse. Like the jaws of a vise" (Sansal 124). "He looked like a walking corpse, he was all hunched and confused like an old man, and Rachel had always been sharp, well turned-out, always plugged-in. He was wearing these creepy striped pyjamas I'd never seen before and he had his head shaved like some convict. The house was upside down, the whole place was filthy, it reeked, the blinds were closed. It was like a cell in solitary" (Sansal 209). Can we understand his reaction? Is it in any way a responsible or honorable choice to make?

Malrich, on the other hand, who had previously leaned towards a troubled existence and never accomplished any particular goal, feels empowered by what he has learned. Rather than fall victim to his father's past, he tempestuously vows to prevent this behavior from occurring again. His eyes are open wide to the events on the estate and he can't help but draw parallels between the actions of the Nazis and the jihadists. He feels a sense of duty to protect his neighbors, and rather than fall victim to the guilt of his father's crimes, he chooses to rise up and fight. Naturally he cannot do it alone, but in keeping a sound mind, he has available options. Would we be able to channel our anger into something positive? Do we have the strength and courage to make a difference when we are clearly the underdog? Just as Rachel is haunted by the victims of the Nazis, Malrich is haunted by Nadia's revolting murder. "Yea, well fuck you, and you too, Emir! You want genocide? Well bring it on! Me and my mates, we'll be only too happy to roast some Nazi jihadist fuckers, and we'll invite all the kids on the estate to the barbeque" (Sansal 189). "Jihadists have taken over our estate and are making our lives hell. It's not an extermination camp yet, but it's pretty much *ein Konzentrationslager*, as they said during the Third Reich. Gradually, people are forgetting that they live in France, half an hour from Paris, and we're finding out that the principles France talks about on the world stage are really

just political bullshit" (Sansal 191). The power shift here lies in the dramatic choices each brother makes, which either meet with or shatter our expectations.

Ahmed in *The Sand Child* is a lost soul trapped in a foreign identity. Although her father acted in what he felt was her best interest, he held the power to suffocate her. She is afforded privileges granted only to males (freedom of movement, education, etc.), but the emotional and psychological constraints outweigh them. From Ahmed's point of view, she is imprisoned in her solitude and haunted by fear of being discovered. Bound by her father's will, she is restricted from acting upon natural impulses and is denied a healthy place within society. Her own sisters don't even know the truth and although subservient, they at least have a clear vision of their identity and function (mother, sister, wife, etc.) Ahmed, sadly, is caught somewhere in the middle. The lack of honesty in her life stifles her ability to achieve joy or to embrace herself as a whole person. It is only after her father's death that she allows herself to entertain the thoughts of living as whom she really is. The shift in power is a slow and mentally laborious process.

In *Lolita*, Humbert's narrative is eloquently delivered through his romantic journal entries. His thoughts are so beautifully expressed and fantastical that they deter from the fact that Lolita is just a child. Humbert infers Lolita's behavior to be that of an adult or someone much older than twelve, quite promiscuous and manipulative. Does she "flaunt" her sexuality and perhaps play at seducing Humbert? Why does she flirt mercilessly with boys or other men? Why does she speak the way she does? None of this is respectable behavior for a pre-teenage girl so she must know what she's doing and Humbert simply takes the bait. Knowingly or not, she is the one in control and his thoughts are essentially harmless. His actualization of these desires are what jolts the reader back into reality. "As she was in the act of getting back into the car, an expression of pain flitted across Lo's face. It flitted again, more meaningfully, as she

settled down beside me. No doubt she produced it that second time for my benefit. Foolishly, I asked her what was the matter. 'Nothing, you brute,' she replied. 'You what?' I asked. She was silent...." ".....This was an orphan. This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning" (Nabokov 140). While we hear only his "voice", we can assume Lolita's point of view from her painful grimace. He is in fact, the powerful monster and she is the victim.

Beautiful language falls by the wayside, however, when the subject is as gruesome as life in the Nazi concentration camps. Due to the reality and recognition of this heinous event, Both Sansal and Wiesel don't have to rely on a heightened sense of dramatic story-telling to get their points across. *The German Mujahid* reveals the details through Rachel's and Malrich's diary entries, based on what they learn from their father's belongings and their travels. Sansal creates a fictional storyline that draws parallels between the war camp prisoners and the estate residents. History repeats itself in that he equates the Nazis with modern day jihadists and exposes their misuse of power. Torture and murder are symbols of depravity. "Allah's Terminator" doesn't like the way the young girl, Nadia dresses or behaves. He feels she is disrespectful, so he ties her up with barbed wire and burns her face and body with a blowtorch. He feels he acted on behalf of Allah and is, therefore, justified. His behavior will be rewarded and will earn him a ticket to paradise (Sansal 57). In most cases, people who are ruled by fear, will not openly object and face the possible consequences. "What were they talking about? What were they thinking about? About Nadia? About what might happen to them? They probably weren't thinking about anything. They looked like concentration camp prisoners waiting for time to pass.... They looked so crushed, so sheepish, it disgusted me" (Sansal 59). The similarities are startling. The Germans, under Hitler's rule, were led to believe that Jews

were less than they, subhuman so to speak and should be eliminated. The jihadists, in their religious fanaticism, believe those who are disbelievers or disrespectful to Allah must be punished or destroyed. Because the jihadists are motivated by religion, is their behavior any less revolting?

In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus Christ is characterized as a pathetic outsider, spat upon and detested by all who know of him because he, as the cross-maker, had a hand in the murder of those believed to be prophets. He is a weak human tormented and tested by God. This portrayal conflicts the image of a pure and humble, kind and compassionate leader that the Catholic Church instills in its believers. Kazantzakis presents the human side of Jesus so that we can better understand his inner turmoil during the earlier part of his life. He is a victim of his haunted dreams from God, but Kazantzakis hints at his redemption when the Abbot, on his deathbed recognizes Jesus' true identity. "Suddenly the Abbot stirred. Exerting all his strength, he raised his head--and at once the eyes popped out of this head, his mouth dropped open, his nostrils sniffed the air, twitching insatiably. The son of Mary put his hand to his heart, lips and forehead in the sign of greeting. The Abbot's lips moved. 'You've come...you've come...you've come...' he murmured, so imperceptibly that the son of Mary did not hear. But a smile of unspeakable bliss spread over the Abbot's severe, embittered face and straightway his eyes closed..." (Kazantzakis 138). Similar to the wife in *The Patience Stone*, and Bodour in *Zeina*, Jesus must first release his demons in order to gain strength. For the first time he vocalizes his evil torment. "There's a devil inside me which cries, 'You're not the son of the Carpenter, you're the son of King David! You are not a man, you are the son of man whom Daniel prophesied. And still more: the son of God! And still more: God!'" (Kazantzakis 147). These dreams clash with Jesus' human feelings of lust and arrogance. How can he possibly think he is worthy

enough to be the son of God or better yet, God Himself? Once he vocalizes his strife, his heart becomes light and there is hope in his purpose. Power shifts from evil to good and the dramatic tone from dark to light as the metaphoric snakes are released from his heart. Rabbi Simeon then remembers a miraculous moment from Jesus' childhood and the tone of the story recovers.

"Once when you were a boy you took some clay and fashioned a bird. While you caressed it and talked to it, it seemed to me that this bird of clay grew wings and flew out of your grasp. It's possible that this clay bird is the soul of man, Jesus, my child--the soul of man in your hands" (Kazantzakis 153).

Further to humanizing iconic religious figures, in *God Resigns At the Summit Meeting*, Saadawi transposes the characteristics and reputations of Satan and God. While traditionally they battle each other for supremacy, good vs. evil, they are also conflicted with doubts within themselves. The twist is that God has abandoned his people, allowed evil and suffering to prevail and has punished those who have shown him the most reverence and loyalty. Satan, who is believed to be the root of all evil, is portrayed as the scapegoat for all of God's careless faults and raises very logical questions that challenge the basis of religion. "But most important of all, in all three Books, you have depicted me as the enemy of all people, as being responsible for all the evil in the world. How can I be responsible when you are the one who possesses all the power, the arms, the knowledge, the media, the heavens and the earth, everything?" (Saadawi 166). This same feeling of betrayal besieges the concentration camp victims in both *Night* and *The German Mujahid*, and even the most dedicated lose faith, as expressed by a very devout and old Rabbi: "It's over. God is no longer with us...I'm a simple creature of flesh and bone. I suffer hell in my soul and my flesh. I also have eyes and I see what is being done here. Where is God's mercy? Where's God? How can I believe, how can anyone believe in this God of Mercy?"

(Wiesel 77). They are not only victimized by the evils of men but also by the absence of their God, which makes them powerless and insignificant in both body and soul. "In a few hours, they will be smoke rising into God's heaven, the deaf, blind, cruel God to whom they have been praying all their lives. How is it possible to believe in such a God? A cat, a rat, a cold-blooded snake affords humanity more warmth" (Sansal 204).

Other religious leaders such as Moses, Abraham, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad are disillusioned by God's actions as well, but have banded together in a stronghold to question Him. Rather than perpetuate their victimization by God's wrath and mixed messages, they gain strength in numbers to challenge his power. Saadawi's inclusion of more current world leaders such as Clinton, Bush, Sadat, Farouk, etc. further escalates the drama of her story because she transitions from faith-based myths to identifiable facts. Just as the Prophets did, why can't today's leaders join forces for the common good of mankind? The reader becomes a part of the power struggle between intellect and emotion, logic and belief. If the message is the same, why does one religion try to dominate all the others and destroy their followers? How does religion result in more evil than good? Again, if under the guise of "religion", are the crimes any less atrocious? The irony is that both God and Satan want to resign from their posts. Both are disenchanted by the state of the universe and their roles within it. Even God, the most powerful, unburdens himself of his mistakes and confesses to feeling isolated and lonely. He has no true identity other than something imagined, and the root of all evil is man's misinterpretation of religion. "The time has come for the world to continue its existence, to continue progressing without a God and without a Satan also, without this most harmful separation between the body and the spirit." "If the God of the heavens is a dictator, then rulers on earth themselves cannot be

other than dictators" (Saadawi 200). Here the shift in power from God and Satan (good and evil) to human beings and their conscience, is offered as a means to a solution.

Feelings of isolation and suffering are a commonality among the protagonists in most of the novels: Ahmed in *The Sand Child*, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Humbert in *Lolita*, the wife in *The Patience Stone*, Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Zakeya in *God Dies By The Nile*, Bodour and Mageeda in *Zeina*, Rachel and Malrich in *The German Mujahid*, Xingjian in *Soul Mountain* and most of the characters in *God Resigns At the Summit Meeting* and *Night*. All are victims of someone or something more powerful than they and although they try, not all achieve victory in the end. American culture likes happy endings, plain and simple. We want the underdog to win, the criminal to be punished and the guy to get the girl. We favor tidy endings that leave us feeling satisfied. Unfortunately, the most effective novels don't fit this mold, but instead, leave the reader emotionally charged or wanting more. On the surface, *The Bluest Eye* does not deliver its protagonist a life lived happily ever after. An entire community casts aside this innocent child because she does not possess beauty. That is Pecola's biggest flaw and plagues her perception of self worth. She is victim to the stigma attached to looks and feels blue eyes will be her saving grace. She is powerless to her parents, the other children as well as societal prejudice. She struggles to attain the impossible and thinks beauty begets love. Although our little heroine believes she finally gets what she so desperately wants, the end of the story leaves her broken. However, who is to say that she did not emerge victorious in her quest for beauty? She is oblivious to reality so perhaps mind over matter allows her to prevail. Is our culture's obsession with beauty that out of control? Morrison's message reads loud and clear.

Is survival considered a happy ending in *Night*? One may think. However, after being reduced to a "thing" with no particular identity and given absolutely no human right, bearing

witness to the atrocities of cruel, sadistic madmen as well as desperate, deprived victims, can our hero achieve real happiness or will he be forever haunted by these horrific memories?

The Sand Child fails to deliver a happy ending. Although there are plenty of promising opportunities for Ahmed/Zahra, (the introduction of her mysterious pen-pal--whose identity remained a mystery--or was he the blind man?; when she expressed her desire for a baby, or when she decided to live as her true self) none seem to lead her to redemption. Following the dismal conclusions offered by the various narrators, the one consolation of *The Sand Child* is that the true ending is unknown. It is the reader's choice to create the final scene. *In God Dies* By *The Nile*, the ending can be construed as good prevails over evil. Although it's not pleasant for protagonist Zakeya, justice is served as she swings that hoe overhead. Considering all of the tragedies she suffered though out her lifetime, the battles that she lost and her continued victimization, we applaud her final act. Similar to the patience stone, she is full of sorrow and suffering and eventually explodes! We know all along that the Mayor is the driving force behind the murder, corruption and evil. When his most fragile victim is left with only herself to sacrifice, she becomes empowered and is able to emancipate herself from the source of her suffering. She, too feels isolated after being abandoned by Allah's supreme grace so chooses to take matters into her own hands.

To the contrary, celebrating Bodour's triumph in *Zeina* is premature, as her fate turns out far less victorious. She finally musters up the courage and leaves a loveless marriage to her cold and sinister husband. In a perfect world, Bodour's emancipation would be a means for her to finally live honestly, embrace Zeina as her daughter and enjoy the fruits of her laborious novel. Unfortunately, however, Saadawi hurls us back to hardcore reality as Bodour's inauspicious husband strikes one last blow by stealing her novel and publishing it as his own.

"She saw the novel carrying the name of her husband. It was the same novel she had written with her own blood, sweat and sleepless nights. The same novel, every word, every letter, every comma, every full stop, every dash. Her own novel was published everywhere under the name of the great writer, Zakariah al-Khartiti" (Saadawi 4184). Once again, power shifts. Intensity builds, and hope comes crashing down.

Our wondering how some of the characters can be so oblivious adds to the dramatic tension of the story as well. Why don't they stop and **think**? As an outsider, we can recognize that not much of what we learn makes sense, but the characters are so overwhelmed by their agonizing internal struggles, exacerbated by blind faith, they are forced into submission. "There bathe yourselves with clean water from the Nile, and while you wash continue to recite the testimony. Once dressed you should do your prayers. Start with the four ordained prostrations, then follow them with the four Sunna prostrations. After that you are to repeat the hold verse of the Seat ten times. On the following day, before dawn, Zeinab is to take another bath with clean water from the Nile, meanwhile repeating the testimony three times. Then do her prayer at the crack of dawn. Once this is over she is to open the door of your house before sunrise, stand on the threshold facing its direction and recite the first verse of the Koran ten times" (Saadawi 115). These instructions seem ridiculous and confusing--almost a disguise for what follows: "In front of her she will see a big iron gate. She is to walk towards it, open it and walk in. She must never walk out of it again until the owner of the house orders her to do so. He is a noble and great man, born of a noble and great father, and he belongs to a good and devout family blessed by Allah and His Prophet" (Saadawi 115-116). The reader is aware that this is just a trick to get Zeinab into the Mayor's hands, but the women are so blinded by their devotion to Allah and their desperation to cure Zakeya's "sickness", they fall prey to Haj Ismail's plan.

Saadawi uses scenes such as the Zakeya's deranged and violent hallucinations and the women's harrowing experience with the modern and frenzied atmosphere of Cairo to demonstrate feelings of disorientation. The scenes are overwhelming for both the characters and the reader and disallow clear thinking for both. This way, we can better understand their naiveté as they wander aimlessly, powerless victims without Allah's protection.

"It went on and on as she tugged at her hair with all her might, tore her garment to shreds and dug her nails into the flesh of her body as though she wanted to tear herself apart." "Now they were all screaming at the top of their voices, Zakeya and Om Saber, Nafoussa and Zeinab, Sheikh Metwalli and all the men and women of Kafr El Teen who were gathered around. Their voices joined in a high-pitched wail, as long as the length of their lives, reaching back to those moments in time when they had been born, and beaten and bitten and burnt under the soles of their feet, and in the walls of their stomach, since the bitterness flowed with their bile, and death snatched their sons and their daughters, one after the other in a line" (Saadawi 96).

"My head's whirling around Zeinab," she said. "Don't leave me. Hold on to my hand. I don't know whether it's my head that's going round all the time, or things around me." "Their mouths were gaping in astonishment , and their eyes darted here and there or went round and round with the same frenzied movement as the bustling crowds" (Saadawi 108).

This same technique is used by Xingjian in *Soul Mountain*. "...dense heavy darkness enclosed a totality of primitive chaos; indistinguishable are sky and earth, trees and rocks, and needless to say the road; you can only stay transfixed, lean forward put out both arms to grope, to grope in this thick dark night; you hear it in motion, it is not the wind in motion but this darkness which is devoid of top bottom left right distance and sequence; you are wholly fused with this chaos, conscious only that you once possessed the outline of a body, but that this outline in your

consciousness is rapidly vanishing; a light emanates from your body, dim like a candle in your body, transcending the outline of your body and the outline of your body in your mind; you draw it into your arms, strive to guard this ball of light, this icy transparent consciousness..." (113). This breathy flow of language is a disassociation of the familiar, including Xingjian's deconstructed sense of self which travels freely through time and nature. He identifies himself as I, he, she and you. There is nothing definitive. What he knows to be his body form dissipates along with his surroundings. Nothing is recognized. The senses are confused and the result is a chaotic haze of existence. Given the fact that Xingjian has been blessed with a second chance at life, he searches for true understanding in its purest form. He is reborn. While he walks in the mountains in silent darkness, there are no distractions nor judgments. His mind is free. At times he seems to feel panic because things are not what his memories have determined and he lacks the ability to be in control. This can be either empowering or crippling and he must choose his course of action. One possibility is to do nothing and simply be. Similar to good actors who don't simply recite lines but tell a story as if living it for the first time, it is essential to stay in the moment and allow the freedom of being. Because the speeches are committed to memory and each scene is carefully blocked, the actor must release his expectations especially since he knows what happens next. We are similar to bad actors if we float effortlessly through a routine existence unaware of our surroundings and lose ourselves. If something unexpected occurs, do we embrace it or fight against it? If we embrace it we gain power. If we fight against it, we become victims. The specificity of the images Xingjian experiences along his travels endorse his renewed and heightened sensual awareness. No such thing is mundane or insignificant. Nothing is taken for granted and all is appreciated.

In *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*, the iconic Prophets (Abraham, Moses, Muhammad) Jesus Christ and Satan, along with Goddesses and the powerful women associated with religion (Eve, Mary, Allah's daughter) come together seeking answers from God. During their lives, they were silently obedient and faithfully executed all of God's commands, but now express their doubts and confusion in his messages. The exposition of the logical mind of these men/women of God, increases the drama. Their questions are perfectly sensible, especially in modern day, and are damaging to the original "word of God." As they alternate their queries, the flood gates open. Will God react with a vengeance and punish them with eternal damnation? How can they possibly question his absolute power and authority without being construed as heretics? Are there actual answers to their questions? Their points are very valid and provide for an introspective challenge to the readers' beliefs if they feel comfortable entertaining these ideas.

An open discussion of any sensitive topic will most likely bring about some level of discomfort. Is it better to ignore taboo ideas or explore them and possibly shed new light on a better understanding? There is power in numbers and if the majority engages in dialogue, the exchange of ideas will inspire progress. Saadawi exposes religious injustice and cruelty towards women. Nabokov and Morrison expose the impure thoughts and wicked actions towards children. Sansal and Wiesel recapitulate man's total disregard for human life. Ben Jelloun and Rahimi disclose societal prejudices. Kazantzakis challenges the authenticity of Christian beliefs. These censored themes perpetuate ignorance and apprehension if kept repressed. These crucial ideas expressed through literature are influenced by real world events. The fact that they were banned is confounding. John L. Hirsh from the International Peace Academy, in his speech at our recent leadership symposium, expressed the challenges facing diplomacy in 2012: understand new realities; develop more collaborative relations; understand others' needs and

demands; know the limits of others' power; play evenly on all three levels of the "chess board" (military, economy, transnational issues). It would seem as if these authors were alluding to these exact ideas in their writing.

Salman Rushdie, in his talk at the PEN event warned us of the crippling effect of censorship. His poignant words were striking: "Censors' lies replace the authors' truth." If only "beauty, morality and a damn good story", are all that the censors allow to be printed, "this will create a very boring world."

Literature is a reflection of the human condition. If all creativity, conflict and drama were removed from literature and art, why would they exist? What value would they hold? Who would be interested? Writers' original thoughts allow for the healthy exchange of ideas and information. Society is constantly evolving and if creativity is stifled, growth is stunted. Rushdie said it best (and I'm paraphrasing): Liberty and art have a right to exist. Art is not just entertainment, but at its very best, a revolution.

So whether in fiction or reality, the struggles for domination and the shifts in power between victims and victors run parallel to their dramatic intensity. The direction of which is most definitely not straight and narrow, but rather erratic and constantly changing. Most things are not as they seem and predictability rarely prevails. In addition to outside sources of contention, the protagonist, antagonist and all supporting characters are faced with their own inner turmoil as well. Sometimes this is a far greater obstacle which can only be conquered by one's own volition. Perhaps Xingjian's meritorious method of diffusing the situation, diluting the drama, deconstructing myths, disallowing preconceived notions and allowing oneself to simply be may clear the way for enlightenment. Clarity empowers the mind, body and spirit to triumph.

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