

## Ritual and Myth in Dalia Basiouny's *The Magic of Borolus*

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y's *The Magic of Borolus* by Amal Aly Mazhar *Arab Stages*,

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In the aftermath of the January 25, 2011 Revolution, the Egyptian theatrical scene witnessed a new wave of “independent” artists, such as Dalia Basiouny, a promising young Egyptian dramaturg /director/dramatist/actress. In an interview, she described herself as an “artist”-“I think of myself as an Artist [artist and activist], a term coined by Kayhan Irani—my role as an artist and as a citizen combined. For me, art and expression are an integral part of the revolutionary process, not just in mobilizing, but reflecting.”<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, I contend that her play *The Magic of Borolos*, which she performed and directed in March 2013, as part of the “Independent Egyptian theatre,” the alternative to the state-subsidized theatre, aims at achieving this effect. Her plays both interrogate and deconstruct a stereotyped negative female identity, and mount a critique of a society which resists change, as some critics suggest, urging it to fight dogmatism. What this paper proposes is that the dramatist's performance of ritual and myth are utilized as weapons to resist societal dogmatism and assert female solidarity in the pursuit of empowerment. This is done in order to create a counter-narrative to subvert, not only male domination and hegemony, but a whole societal code which resists change. As Basiouny points out in the introduction to the play: “This is an Egyptian play which makes use of ritual to reach an alternative consciousness.”<sup>[2]</sup> This paper considers whether the rituals she utilizes in the play indicate an “empty formality” or “deep commitment” according to the division suggested by Shepherd and Wallis.<sup>[3]</sup> It will further question (and seek to refute) the view put forward by Morgan and Brask, who contend that “one major function of rituals in traditional societies is the symbolic validation of the extant social order given sanction in myth.”<sup>[4]</sup>

*Magic of Borolos*, a multi-layered dramatic text or a “mosaic of intertexts” in the words of Julia Kristeva, is inspired by different sources, specifically Egyptian myth, popular and folkloric songs and rituals, some genuine and others are invented by the dramatist. The influence of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is unmistakable as Basiouny herself has admitted.<sup>[5]</sup> However, she has reworked this material to endow it with an Egyptian flavor which expresses her message and vision, and gives the play its own distinct presence.

The undeniable connection between dramatic performance and ritual, song and dance has persisted throughout the ages. What I wish to postulate here is that ritual, myth, and folkloric songs in *Magic of Borolos* are utilized not only for the purpose of spectacle or mere entertainment (definitely a legitimate and even essential component in dramatic performance) nor for any specifically religious purpose, but, as Schechner suggests, for both “efficacy” and “entertainment”<sup>[6]</sup> or for “deep commitment” as a tool of resisting and subverting dogmatism. Jan Kott's words in his analysis of ritual and myth in *The Bacchae* apply equally well to this play: “myth and rite... reach deep into the structure of performance.”<sup>[7]</sup> Basiouny is well aware of the fact that drama “has its origin in ancient primal ritual” and that “drama is powerful because as a form it is linked to the make-up of the species, an expression of human nature.”<sup>[8]</sup> I wish to postulate that ritual and myth, as expressions of human nature at a specific time and within a

specific culture, here the modern Egyptian, are used by the author to rebut the kind of dogmatism that manifested in the hysterical McCarthyian accusations launched at women in Miller's play, where it is claimed that they practice pagan "witchcraft" merely because they dare to be different or seek change and empowerment. The major issues addressed in the play are first, the importance of educating your women in a predominantly rural patriarchal society that still prioritizes the education of males over that of females, who are primarily perceived for serving males and child breeding; second, the empowering of females by the acquisition of knowledge, preparing them to occupying top posts like that of mayor, as one female character aspires to; third, the development of women's financial independence; and finally, the encouragement of female self-expression which is by necessity "different" from that of men.

The play is built on two circular moon rituals which include dancing and singing, performed exclusively by women, each ritual bearing different connotations and meanings. Significantly, the only other ritual, performed by men, is a sophist ritual where men stand in two rows facing one another. It is my contention that the women characters follow a certain strategy in these rituals, using them as a tool of against male dogmatism. The play opens with a circle of women gathered at midnight in an imaginary village by the mysterious Borolos Lake (in the northeast of Egypt) which is seen as a microcosm of all Egypt. The stage directions state "a magical moon ritual. A number of women appear amidst the fog and an enchanted atmosphere, to perform a moon ritual by chanting folkloric songs and performing a circular dance to celebrate, not only the rebirth of the moon every 28 days, but their own regeneration as well."<sup>[9]</sup> The identification between the women and the moon, with the moon's "rebirth" and the women's regeneration every 28 days, signifies an endless cycle of rebirth. The leader of the circular ritual, Om Sa'ada (whose name significantly means Mother of Happiness), explains "All humans are affected by the gravity and the rays of the moon, but only women and the moon share this cycle every 28 days—13 times a year."<sup>[10]</sup> However, far from consolidating the popular belief of the connection between women's "lunacy" and a full moon, Basiouny manipulates the ritual to subvert this negative, traditional stereotyping of women to endow it with the positive meaning, by making the moon ritual indicate not only the celebration of the cycle of regeneration, but of the celebration of life itself. For these women, the circular ritual is their unique way of self-expression, celebrating their own regeneration. This same ritual, however, is interpreted in negative terms by those who wish to perpetuate women's inferior status. Two characters, Abu Fahim and his wife Somaya, who fear that this ritual's liberating force could empower the women and possibly threaten their son's interests as a medical doctor, claim that "the women head towards the lake, to sing and dance, stark naked, so that the jinni would appear and do unthinkable, obnoxious things to them, and ultimately cause havoc to our town."<sup>[11]</sup> The accusation of practicing illegal, pagan witchcraft launched at those women adds an extra menacing momentum to the accusation of subverting the established political /social order. Ritual as a form of resistance is significantly spelled out by one of the female characters engaged in this ritual, who taunts her detractors at the end of her testimony in the final trial scene when she challenges them: "Do songs and dance frighten you that much?"<sup>[12]</sup> The trickster dervish, who makes his living only by perpetuating the state of women's ignorance, complains that "When the women go to their enlightened mentor (*abla*), they stop coming to my shrine"<sup>[13]</sup> and concludes, echoing the Salem witchcraft prosecutors: "that's why we have to burn them alive."<sup>[14]</sup> The significance of the circular ritual performed by the women is corroborated by the view that circles commonly represent unity, wholeness, and infinity and that circles have often be seen as protective symbols, shielding those within them from supernatural dangers and influences. This positive meaning of the circle expands to connote communal female solidarity and an energizing therapeutic experience.

The women, having performed the moon ritual of dancing and chanting, then engage in a game or a play-within-a-play called “My world” (actually a variation on the popular Egyptian quiz game *‘Arosty*), where they indulge in dreams they wish to achieve such as “healthy children,” “free independent women,” “people loving and caring for each other,” or “no one going on voluntary exile to earn his living.” Having expressed their dreams in this enchanted ambiance, the chorus of women chant, “How lovely our circle has been/but as for tonight, it has come to an end”[\[15\]](#) implying their intention to pursue such performances in the future. They exit in a state of exhilaration—a vital step toward their more constructive work of attaining knowledge, then empowerment.

When the moon ritual is performed for the second time in Act 1, scene 13, however, it has much more sinister connotations. The scene starts on a positive note: “The women use a lot of cloth to cover up the light of the moon, to signify the eclipse of the moon. They sing a number of traditional, folkloric songs during the eclipse of the moon.” Om Sa’ada, the leader of the ritual, rather than feeling pessimistic by the eclipse of the moon, dissipates the women’s fear when they sing to the moon: “the folkloric song “Heavenly Nymphs/the moon is strangled/clap for him/so that its light comes back to it.” When one woman exclaims “I’m frightened, mentor!” Om Sa’ada explains the phenomenon scientifically: “the moon goes dark because the earth comes between it and the sun/... People in the past thought that the eclipse of the moon means the destruction of our planet.” Furthermore, she connects this information with the great discoveries made by ancient Egyptians: “Our great ancient Egyptian ancestors were highly advanced and knowledgeable in astronomy; they used this knowledge in agriculture... and also to build their houses in a good, healthy way.” The ritual leader is thus portrayed as representing the circle of knowledge, making the ritual as a prelude to knowledge. However, the scene ends on a more sinister note, since the total eclipse of the moon seems to suggest again women’s disempowerment since they so fully identify with the moon. The scene ends with the cry of one frightened young girl, Reem, who looks around and feels herself alone: “Help! Help! The moon is totally eclipsed now.”[\[16\]](#)

Later, however, Reem comes to a more comprehensive understanding of the circle’s connotations: “The circle of light means many things. It’s the circle of knowledge and wisdom. When people learn something and keep it to themselves, the circle doesn’t grow. But if one of us learns something new, and passes it to another, the circle grows and knowledge increase.”[\[17\]](#) The yearned-for circle of knowledge and enlightenment supports women’s quest to break the long-standing tradition of women’s illiteracy, especially in rural places, where this is a particularly formidable problem. Loza, one of the female characters, enchanted by the moon ritual and the magical ambiance, urges other women to join them “next moon –so that the circle of light will become bigger.”[\[18\]](#) Om Sa’ada, as the leader of this circle of light, is quite conscious of the magical significance of the circle “the circle collects energy, has no edges or angles which leak out energy. When the energy increases, it changes into a spiral which moves upwards.” She significantly concludes: “the circle never ends, nor do our songs.” In her praise of the insights of the ancient Egyptians, she seeks to enhance national sentiments: “they knew a lot about energy and used it to build the pyramids, to cure people and perform mummification...you’ll always notice in their paintings a quarter of a circle from which emanates 16 sun rays.”[\[19\]](#) When Baheya, (an iconic name often given to Egypt, specifically in folkloric songs) asks “What circle? What does Om Sa’ada teach you?” Loza answers: “Sundays and Tuesdays she teaches reading and math. Mondays and Wednesdays she teaches herbal medication.”[\[20\]](#)

Significantly, the only other ritual performed, by a small group of men in Act 2, scene 1, is a sophist, spiritual ritual of religious chanting and stylized movements. It is worth noting that while the rituals

performed by the women take a circular form, the ritual performed by men takes the form of two rows facing one another. Far from being a ritual which ends up by the performers falling in a trance, this ritual is a means to seek ultimate truth. Saleh, the leader of this ritual, conscious of the women's quest for change and empowerment, bravely defends them against ungrounded accusations of witchcraft and sorcery: "What's this junk you're talking about? Witchcraft and silly tales indeed! These women have always lived among us. We've never noticed anything fishy about them. Nothing of the sort."[\[21\]](#) The sophist ritual, performed by men of high spirituality and clairvoyance, enables them to perceive the truth about the stigmatized women to reach an alternative consciousness.

The play significantly also invokes the Egyptian Goddess Isis in order to enhance notions of regeneration and resistance to dogmatism. Rebirth and regeneration are traditionally associated with this mythical figure of Isis, particularly in the Isis/Osiris myth, when Isis reassembled her mutilated husband's corpse after gathering it from different provinces of Egypt. In the play "a video is shown where Goddess Isis appears on the surface of Borolos Lake." The goddess of regeneration addresses the women, saying "I'm your mother Isis, goddess of wisdom, stamina and strength... I see myself in you, in your image/As you see your face in mine." In clear, decisive terms, she exhorts them "when you feel that everything's gone dark/when you find no outlet/Do as I've done/I plunged in the well of light inside me/ Dipped myself in the sacred lake inside me/ cleansed my soul from their ignorance and sins/and gave birth to myself from within myself." She advises them to "dip yourself in the sacred lake inside you/Set yourselves free from their narrow world/Grow yourselves two wings/And soar high in a world of light."[\[22\]](#) In the trial scene which closes the play, Isis' testimony against the ungrounded accusations of witchcraft, asserts the inevitable belief that "after the dark comes the light/After the dark, comes the light." This gains momentum with the blending of the modern popular poem "Who dare imprison Egypt? / Who dare imprison Egypt? / No one has ever done or ever will." The use of the mythical figure Isis, symbolic of the ritual of rebirth and regeneration, comes as a culmination with her words, in the true vein of a phoenix, urging the women "to give birth to yourselves by yourselves," thus adding continuity and infinity which closely links it to the circular rituals implying the same.[\[23\]](#)

Like Miller in *The Crucible*, Basiouny depicts a society stigmatizing those who dare seek change, especially those who seek the empowerment of women. Loza, dreams of a time when change overtakes society, when women assume top posts. Om Sa'ada, who attained knowledge and university education, is the symbol of a woman who, with the help of her enlightened father, broke a long-standing tradition of females in rural societies who have been denied such education. She is thus the role model for other village women, who regard her as the most fit to occupy new posts in a predominantly patriarchal society that resists such notion. One of the female characters says: "imagine if our mayor is someone like Om Sa'ada. What a lovely notion! She'd make an excellent mayor."[\[24\]](#)

In *Magic of Borolos*, rituals and myth-based material are incorporated into the theatrical-aesthetic context. Far from being utilized as an empty formality, these rituals and myth-based material prove a deep commitment to bring about socio-political change, specifically to fight dogmatism and break the taboos connected with women's empowerment, as well as revolutionizing the mindset of a whole society. *The Magic*, though a mosaic of texts, drawn from different sources, nevertheless retains its own distinctive features which allow the dramatist to express her own vision as an independent female dramatist in quest of change and an alternative consciousness in the wake of the Egyptian revolution.

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[2] Basiouny, Dalia. *Magic of Borolos* (2010). Manuscript in Arabic, p. 2.

[3] Shepherd, Simon and Mick Wallis. *Drama/Theatre/Performance* (London: Routledge, 2004), 118.

[4] Morgan, William and Per Brask, "Towards a Conceptual Understanding of the Transformation from ritual to Theatre." *Anthropologica*, 30:2 (1998), 225.

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[6] Schechner, Richard, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1998), 119.

[7] Kott, Jan. (1998) "The Eating of the Gods, or *The Bacchae*," in John Drakakis and Naom Conn Leiber, eds. *Tragedy*, (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman. 1998), 272.

[8] Shepherd and Wallis, *Drama*, 59.

[9] Basiouny, 2.

[10] Basiouny, 6.

[11] Basiouny, 15.

[12] Basiouny, 57.

[13] *Ibid.*, 36

[\[14\]](#) Basiouny, 37.

[\[15\]](#) Basiouny, 6.

[\[16\]](#) Basiouny, 33.

[\[17\]](#) Basiouny, 19.

[\[18\]](#) Basiouny, 10.

[\[19\]](#) Basiouny, 20.

[\[20\]](#) Basiouny, 10.

[\[21\]](#) Basiouny, 34.

[\[22\]](#) Basiouny, 38.

[\[23\]](#) Basiouny, 61.

[\[24\]](#) Basiouny, 11.

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