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The Loss of Male Power in Religious Fiction

In both novels, *The Innocence of the Devil* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the authors use many religious ideas and allusions to give their stories meaning in accordance to a particular religion and current events and problems happening within the religion’s sphere. Although they address different religions, they both hold similar features, religiously and contextually. Not only do they enrich their novels with allusions to Christianity and Islam, they also present ways the audience can notice the obvious likeness in the two religions. Nawal El Saadawi and Arthur Miller Jr. use natural imagery and metaphoric language to characterize the leadership roles of the Director and Abbot Dom Arkos as dominating and diminishing powers in their respective novels.

Miller uses blood and water as natural imagery to invent Dom Arkos as a disfigured power and to represent the body politic. The audience is first introduced to the abbot after having taken a bath and coming out with a bloody toe: “The Reverend Father Abbot being fresh out of his bath, and padding around in his study padding around in his bare feet… one great toe was bloody” (48-49). The symbolism within the image of “fresh out of his bath” indicates the purity and cleansing of water. Water represents washing away of sins as well as baptismal and holy waters.

Miller tarnishes this image used to create the abbot with the image of a bloody big toe. Blood, itself, represents many things; life, death, danger, passion, hurt or harm, and healing are just a few things blood may represent. In this case, Miller suggests the imagery of blood alludes to damage of the body politic. With a damaged big toe, Miller creates the idea of a damaged commonwealth in relation to the body politic. The big toe is also the toe that helps the body keep balance and stability. Without this toe, functioning can be problematic. Yet, the image presents the abbot “padding around his study” with his busted toe; as far as the audience is aware of, there is no further care, which invents the abbot as a headstrong leader who focuses on cleansing the self or head, rather than caring for the lower classes or feet.

El Saadawi uses placement imagery of the Director to create hierarchy and establish the Director’s position within the mental asylum. As Ganat arrives, nearly the entire cast of the book appear within the scene, in which the Director is also introduced: “The Director’s head looked out from the window of his office on the upper floor” (7-8). This placement of the Director above all other characters suggests he is the highest in the hierarchy. Having the Director on the upper floor, the head nurse at the front door with male nurses alongside her, and the patients huddled in the ground creates an image of the presumed hierarchy established at the very beginning of the novel.

This image of “the Director’s head looking out from the window” also paints the idea of just his head being shown. This can be related to the body politic as well. The Director only presenting his head out the window suggests him as the “head” of the asylum. The head nurse being at the opening of the building represents being the body of the body politic, and the patients crouching on the ground represents the legs and feet of the body politic.

Using these types of imagery, both authors similarly establish a dominate leader early in each novel by establishing hierarchy and the body politic. The abbot, as explained in Miller’s novel, maintains the leadership as the highest power within the abbey. Painting the picture of the clean body of the abbot with a bloody, busted toe establishes the body politic, since the knowledge of his leadership is known within his name. El Saadawi’s world is not easily known without a background to the mental hospital, so creation of placement imagery was necessary and powerful to implement the hierarchy within the asylum. Having the head of the Director’s body out of the window, along with other characters lined up specifically in order, creates the dimensions and statuses of the characters in her novel, with the Director being on top.

Miller uses emphatic and metaphoric dialogue to establish religious mindset and ideations and characterize the abbot. When asking Brother Francis about the pilgrim, the abbot demands a straight answer but is not liking the answers being given: “…though [Francis] could plainly see that his ruler stated it was merely because he wanted a *particular* answer” (57). By using italics to emphasize the word ‘particular’, Miller suggests a single answer that the abbot wants to hear. Only one way to think of things and limiting possible aspects characterizes the abbot and Christianity. During the dark ages, religion was held highly and math and sciences were suppressed; this occurs here as well. The abbot does not want any supernatural, mythical, or scientific reasoning for the pilgrim being there. There has to be either a logical reason like him being a random man or holy presence, but the abbot clearly did not want to hear that as a reason.

As well, Miller uses the word ‘ruler’ which can hold multiple meanings. Not only is abbot considered a ‘ruler’, but he previously gave Brother Francis beatings with a hickory ruler earlier. So, not only does his ruler, the abbot want a particular answer, but so does the abbot’s hickory ruler because Francis knows if he does not give the abbot the “correct” answer, he is likely to get punished as well.

El Saadawi uses metaphoric language to characterize the Director as a leader wanting answers and to be correct and in charge. Soon after being admitted, Ganat is prescribed as being insane by the Director: “But to the Director, this was a sign [Ganat] had lost her sanity” (16). By using the word ‘sign’, El Saadawi suggests that the Director has medical knowledge of symptoms of insanity, yet he is never addressed as a doctor or medical personnel. The word ‘sign’ not only correlates with diagnoses and symptoms, but doctors must sign off papers which legally diagnose a patient. Since the audience can assume he lacks this medical knowledge, El Saadawi uses this to characterize the Director as a direct and corrupt leader. By automatically assigning Ganat as having “lost her sanity” without much analysis or observation, the Director is not only abusing his power to diagnose and label patients, but also calls all the shots and displays his power within the asylum.

Together, the Director and the abbot are easily comparable when the topic of selective hearing and expressing their dictatorial power. Both authors invent their ruling powers, at times, as corrupt and prominent in their respective settings. While shifting language, by using metaphors and multiple meanings, Miller and El Saadawi establish and characterize their ruling characters quickly and effectively.

Miller characterizes the abbot as an ignorant ruler by using metaphoric language to display the abbot’s agency. After taking away Brother Francis’s privilege of taking his vows after the starvation and hardships of his Lenten fasting, the abbot further refuses Francis from taking his vows for another seven years, “he said absently” (72). This repetition of this awful order presents the abbot’s relentless and uncontrolled power. By ‘absently’ ordering Francis he cannot take his vows, this characterizes the abbot as a ruler who knows he can do whatever he wants. This, Miller suggests, is a display of the abbot’s agency which is initiated by his power. The word ‘absently’ means without thought or care or much direction. Just throwing his power and leadership around at whoever is near enough to take it, the abbot’s power gives him agency which allows the ‘absentness’ and corruptness he directs onto those below him.

El Saadawi fashions the Director as a leader whose goals and wants are for self-satisfaction rather than the good of the whole body politic by using natural imagery. Late at night, the Director goes into Ganat’s room; “Her body vanished in the dark together with that of the Director” (51). Using his power to manipulate and rape her, the Director is characterized not only as corrupt and sinful, he is also ‘darkness’. The image of darkness combining with the Director and violently being put together with Ganat through the Director’s sexual force not only implies rape, but also characterizes the Director as a deceitful, dishonest, and sneaky leader.

Both leadership figures are characterized very similarly when observing their manipulative and corrupt power to threaten and break their followers. Miller and El Saadawi create rulers that use power for self-satisfaction and personal achievement. By implementing descriptions of how the abbot governs his people, Miller suggests a ruler who throws his power at whomever is within distance. El Saadawi creates a character like the abbot within the Director with powerful imagery, suggesting the Director throws his power onto his subjects, but in a more physical, violent way.

Miller begins to characterize the abbot as a declining power later in the novel using variant language. When addressing Brother Francis he has been requested to see monsignor Aguerra, Dom Arkos’s tone and language changes from a demanding, superior leader to a begging, respective chief: “The postulator wants to see you at once. Please stifle your imagination, and be certain about what you say. Please try not to think” (89). Using the word please, Miller suggests a decline in the abbot’s power as ruler of the abbey. The word ‘please’ indicates a request in a softer, respectful manner. A ‘please’ request may also be declined as well since the want is not asked in a directly hash way. Changing this way of ordering, Miller fashions the abbot as a slowly falling power since his orders have become requests rather than forceful demands.

Describing the Director’s appearance and comparing him to the decaying mental facility, El Saadawi uses physical, metaphorical imagery and symbolism to characterize the Director as a declining power. “His hair started to fall off his head, and the plaster on the walls started to fall off too” (105). The physical description of the Director indicates an aging leader which, metaphorically, means he is slowly decaying and losing his power. Continuing this notion of aging and losing power as each strand of hair falls out, the Director also gets compared to the decaying, yellow insane asylum. This falling apart of the building indicates his slow decay of this power. The building crumbling around him represents the dying of his power, through a natural sense.

Both authors vary how decay of power is represented, but strongly develop the indication that further downfall is to come. El Saadawi’s image indicates a more physical decrease in power, rather than a subtle one like Miller’s abbot, yet they easily portray the breaking down of power. This point, although similar, also is different in nature of how the loss of power is illustrated.

Finally, Miller characterizes the abbot as having little power over Brother Francis as an older man using metaphor. Growing old and nearing the last years of his life, Brother Francis is called to the abbot: “Dom Arkos, now withered by age and close to dotage, summoned Brother Francis into his presence and wheezed” (96). Using the word ‘summons’ as metaphoric language, Miller suggests the abbot has very little power left, which is emphasized by the natural imagery of the abbot’s appearance. The word ‘summons’ holds much less value than ‘command’ or ‘order’, and also contains less duty than ‘please’. The idea of a summons or ‘call to’ someone seems light for a ruler, which suggests the abbot has very little power remaining.

El Saadawi uses natural imagery of the Director to characterize his loss of power by, again, connecting him to the hospital building’s structure. “His hair had fallen out except for one strand above his ears. His lips were parted in a smile exposing jagged yellow teeth” (171). Returning to the discussion about the Director’s hair symbolizing his losing of power in correlation to the building falling apart, there is an obvious notion that the Director’s power is running “thin” as his hair has become. This one strand of hair symbolizes the little power he has left, which he completely loses in the following scene as Narguiss overthrows him and stands up to his faulty rule.

Furthermore, the use of ‘yellow’ to describe the Director’s image as well as metaphorically hold much importance. The asylum’s outer walls were described very early in the book as decaying and yellow. This symbolism of ‘yellow’ indicates sickness, disease, ailment, and foreshadowing death. Having the aging Director decline in power with loss of hair and yellow teeth not only indicates loss of power, but loss of health and leadership within the hospital.

Both characters are similarly represented as rulers who have lost their power due to corrupt ways and abandonment of their followers. This loss of power is not only shown in their presence but in their images as well. Not only does their mannerisms change, but their appearances suggest further decay of the bold, rash leadership they held in the beginning of their novels.

Both El Saadawi and Miller establish their characters with grand imagery and metaphoric language to invent them as tough leaders with an ultimate downfall in the end. Due to the characters’ careless and manipulative power, they symbolically age and lose their power rightfully. *Innocence of the Devil* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* highlight not only religious ideals of Christianity and Islam, but use it to display dutiful restructuring of abusive power within a sacred setting.