

*Review of The Slave Pens by Najwa Bin Shatwan
(Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2016)*

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION IN 2016, Najwa Bin Shatwan's *The Slave Pens* (Arabic: زرايب العبيد) has been garnering acclaim by literati across the Arabophone world. Shortlisted for the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction,¹ it had been hailed as one of the Libyan author's must-translate recent works. Originally penned in Arabic, for several years only an excerpt of the novel had been translated into English.² Before writing *The Slave Pens*, Bin Shatwan had published two novels, *Orange Content* (2008) and *The Horse Hairs* (2007), with the latter earning her the Sudanese al-Bagrawiya Festival prize. In 2009, Bin Shatwan was listed among the 39 best Arab authors under the age of 40 by the Beirut39 Project for her short story "The Pool and the Piano," which was featured in their anthology. Her short story "Return Ticket" has recently been featured in *Banthology: Stories from Unwanted Nations* (2018), an anthology of creative writing from the seven countries of the so-called Muslim Ban.

The Slave Pens resurrects the fading memory of slavery in early 20th-century Ottoman Libya. Via incessant flashbacks experienced by the narrators 'Atiqa and Ali, the novel enters the many lives of those displaced from more southern parts of Africa to end up at the service of those on the northern shores of the continent. It delves into the microhistories of the enslaved and pays special attention to that which pertains to the interiority of the black enslaved women of the period. Akin to the decimated memory of trans-Saharan slavery, Bin Shatwan recounts their stories of enslavement and its afterlife in fragments,

¹ <https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/2017-shortlist-announced>

² Sawad Hussein and Marcia Lynx Qualey, "An Excerpt from Najwa Bin Shatwan's International Prize for Arabic Fiction-shortlisted 'Slave Pens'", <https://arablit.org/2017/07/10/an-excerpt-from-najwa-bin-shatwans-international-prize-for-arabic-fiction-shortlisted-slave-pens/>. The novel has now been translated into English in its entirety and published as *The Slave Yards* (Syracuse University Press, 2020), translated by Nancy Roberts. Note that this review applies only to the original, Arabic text.

shedding light on the socioeconomic realities that inform the limited dynamism of their social statuses oscillating between servitude, concubinage, and prostitution.

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The story follows the life of the enslaved black woman Ta'widha and Muhammad Bin Shatwan, a Libyan who owns her and takes her as a concubine in addition to his wife. As Muhammad goes off on a trade trip, his family marries Ta'widha off to another slave, kills her son, and disappears her in the city's brothel. Ta'widha later manages to escape the brothel and starts a new life on the outskirts of Benghazi in an area called al-Ṣābrī, where she gives birth to another child fathered by Muhammad, 'Atīqa, whom she raises along with an adoptive son, Miftah.

As Ta'widha's life events unfold, we are exposed to the grotesque normalization of slaves' disposability and objectification as means of transactions. They are enumerated among cargos of "salt" and "flour" as their lives swing between arbitrariness and necessity. The chronicles of Ta'widha's life under slavery show the entrapment of the slave body in the state of exception under the biopolitical regime of the period. Although preserved as a domestic and a pleasure concubine, she is immediately sacrificed through the many attempts of Muhammad's family to send her to the slave market, marry her off to another slave, and ultimately disappear her beyond the reach of their son. Ta'widha's acceptance of her role in the libidinal economy of slavery does not shield her from being reduced to a bare life, where for the preservation of the normative relationship of Muhammad and his "honorable" wife, she is made yet again disposable on the auction podium. The numerous forced abortions on Ta'widha's body, enacted mostly without her knowledge, show not only her lack of agency but also the fungibility³ of both black and master-slave offspring.

One does not need to explore scenes of subjugation to imagine the gravity of the institution of slavery, but the novel provides a shaking reminder about the depressing lives of slaves, especially women. As Ta'widha endures the slave auction, standing bare-breasted, we are given a glimpse into the severity of her condition. Unlike the prevalent assumption that renders Islamic slavery benign and pits it against chattel and plantation-model slavery, the novel proves the extent to which slave lives and bodies were abused in the precarious domestic

³ In Agamben's sense; see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

realm. Islamic jurisdiction and the social norms that observe it remain silent in the face of injustices enacted on the enslaved woman.

The novel equally complicates our understanding of the processes of liberation granted to enslaved women who bear masters' children. The child that Ta'widha bears from Muhammad does not redeem her from her enslaved status nor become her winning ticket to freedom. Unlike some female slaves incorporated into the concubinage system, Ta'widha fails to thrive as a concubine with *umm al-walad* status (i.e. a slave who had borne her master a child and was therefore to be freed upon his death). The assumption that freedom is automatically granted to the enslaved woman after birthing mixed offspring is revealed to be a complicated process that does not easily apply to everyone. The love of the master does not elevate Ta'widha beyond the position of the concubine but instead further criminalizes her as a superstitious black slave. As Muhammad develops strong emotional ties to her, his feelings are discredited by his family and attributed to the effects of the black magic that his concubine is accused of mastering.

In an interview with BBC Arabic,⁴ Bin Shatwan underscored the role of oral history and collective memory in helping her reimagine the stories of the long-silenced enslaved subjects of the period. Biased as it is, the reliance on such selective collective memory leaves indelible marks on this work of fiction. It becomes apparent throughout the chapters that the author does not rest on a robust written historical repository. Throughout the novel, she rarely uses periodization or hints at political events that would inform the reader about the historical time period in which it is set. Echoing the dearth of historical literature on slavery, the novel only succeeds at capturing the feel of a hazy history, as it is collectively sensed and remembered. Although a historian by training,⁵ Bin Shatwan preferred to simulate the storyline as retained in the collective reminiscence and rehearsed from generation to generation, going back and forth with her inventive memory without adopting a sequential narrative line.⁶ The only instance where we are given a temporal sense of the events is when Bin Shatwan mentions the

⁴ "عالم الكتاب: 'زرايب العبيد' وتراث الرق" (BBC Arabic, July 8, 2017), at <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/tv-and-radio-40543199>.

⁵ Bin Shatwan obtained a doctoral degree in the history of Ottoman Libya from the Sapienza Università di Roma in 2017.

⁶ See her talk given at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair in 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvvoAjghapY>.

Italian mission and the Sanussi brotherhood, hinting at the centrality of the Sanussi order to slavery in Libya.

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The novel raises many urgent questions about the legal conditions of the characters and the milieu they inhabit. One might ask, were they runaway slaves or manumitted? If free, how were they ejected from the institution of slavery, especially since the novel's events unfold before the abolition of slavery in Libya. Even as she situates the story at the marginal slave pens of Benghazi, the author does not give any allusion to the context of the establishment of these peripheral slums. It is worth mentioning that the slave pens (زرايب العبيد) of the book's title are not fictional. These animal pen-like shelters actually existed in Ottoman Benghazi, according to the Benghazi-born author. In the above-mentioned interview, she reveals that she stumbled upon a photograph of them, allegedly taken by an unknown Italian traveler before the Italian occupation of Libya, on a friend's desk. In it, three black women appear standing beside their ravaged huts along with a little child. The four black subjects of the photograph gripped the writer and inspired her to investigate the "slave pens" and, ultimately, write the novel.

The uncritical use of terminology remains an undeniable flaw that the novelist ought to have rectified. Bin Shatwan uses the term "Africa" to refer to the land of origin of the enslaved characters in the novel. Referring to the sub-Saharan side with the historically loaded and undifferentiated term "Africa" shows the extent to which the novelist is, herself, perpetuating the dismemberment of Libya and North Africa from the rest of the continent. The use of slurs and terms to refer to black characters is equally problematic. The epithets used by 'Atiqa, Ta'widha's daughter, in describing the variations and shades of blackness of some characters come across as if the narrator is not black herself. In this way, the novel seems to fluctuate between 'Atiqa's voice and the omniscient Bin Shatwan, whose views, curiosity, and lack of knowledge about these identities slip into 'Atiqa's voice. Terms like *zanji* (زنجي), *shūshān* (شوشان), *'abd* (عبد), and *khādīm* (خادم) seem to be interchangeable with the color black, which in itself is synonymous with the status of servitude. As she names her characters, the writer does little to illuminate the meanings of their names, either. 'Atiqa's name (عتيقة), for instance, literally means "freed slave" and yet the novelist does not reveal enough about the reason behind which the mother, Ta'widha, would name her daughter as such. Why would Ta'widha choose to burden her daughter with a name of such problematic connotation? The author's choice of Muhammad's surname, Bin Shatwan, remains equally curious as it is the novelist's own surname. Why did Najwa

Bin Shatwan burden herself with such a responsibility vis-à-vis her characters? When asked about this choice, she said that she did not want to “clash with people’s real-life sensitivities” by invoking another Libyan family’s last name.⁷ But in a work where race and color take center stage, it is baffling that the novelist does little to illuminate the meanings, histories and reasons behind which these terms and names are chosen. As the omniscient narrator’s voice interrupts both ‘Atiqa’s and Ali’s streams of consciousness throughout the novel, Bin Shatwan’s choice of lending her last name to the slaveholding family prompts more questions about the genre of the novel and the extent to which it holds the seeds of an autobiographical text.

Despite these deliberately overlooked deficiencies, the novelist’s bravery in tackling the taboo subject of slavery remains laudable. Albeit fictional, the novel is the first of its kind in attempting to recollect, imagine, and incarnate the female enslaved figure. Generally, the question of gender in relation to slavery has rarely been broached in North African novels. Notable exceptions are Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), Taher Ben Jelloun’s *Moha le fou, Moha le sage* (1978), and Abdelkrim Ghallab’s *دفننا الماضي* (*We buried the past*, 1968), in which the subject was only timidly alluded to. *The Slave Pens* is thus arguably only the second North African historical novel which centers on the black enslaved subject, after Tunisian writer Béchir Khraïef’s *برق الليل* (*L’éclair de la nuit*, 1961).

The lack of slave narratives from the period of trans-Saharan slavery renders the task of reincarnating the silenced challenging. It is only through fictitious recollections of these fading memories that one can capture the feel of history and come up with what might simulate lost archival testimonies. In this recovery of this buried history, the Libyan writer spectacularly reincarnates the black enslaved woman who, in the words of historian Chouki El Hamel, is “the tragic heroine of North African slavery.”⁸

⁷ “Confronting A Darker Chapter” (Qantara.de, 5 May 2017), at <https://en.qantara.de/content/libyan-author-najwa-binshatwan-on-the-slave-pens-confronting-a-dark-chapter>

⁸ Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: a History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11.