



October University for Modern Sciences and Arts
Faculty of Languages



The Cycle of Life in Male Ritual Practices as Expression of Subversion and Identity in Ra'faat Al Dewiri's, *Wiladah Mota'sira*, (*Obstructed Labour*) (1985)

Kholoud Mansour

Introduction

Rituals are acts that describe beliefs, customs, and the conduct of societies. In “The Psychology of Rituals”, Hobson et. al. state that “[r]ituals pervade human life. Whether through religion, business, politics, education, athletics, or the military, they are central to the most meaningful traditions and cultural practices around the world” (260). Rituals, thus, serve as markers of group identity. Unlike popular belief, rituals are not limited to religious and secular practices; they include a broad spectrum of both civic and casual activities. According to Seligman et. al, “Ritual behavior, then, is to be found in public realms as well as private ones” (8). Rituals demonstrate the individuals’ loyalty and sense of belonging to their social group. At the same time, they can attest to the individual’s degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with shared principles and traditions. Rituals can deepen both the feeling of connection and the experience of alienation. Subsequently, any change in ritual practices alters the shared experience among the members of a social group. Ra’faat Al Dewiri’s play *Obstructed Labour (Wiladah Mota’sira)* (1985) deploys different ritual performances that challenge the prevailing idea that one’s success, value, and worth are determined by his/her social and economic status.

TANWĪR: A Journal of Arts and Humanities
Online ISSN: 3062-4789
Print ISSN: 3062-4797
<https://tanwir.journals.ekb.eg/>
November 2025, Issue (3)

Aim and Argument of the Study

This study aims to examine the way in which ritual metaphors reflect power and status in each ritualistic practice in Ra'faat Al Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* (1985). It aims to examine men's responses to various ritualistic practices, assessing the relationship between rituals, power, and identity. It argues that ritual performance of dominant social convictions reflects both society and individual adherence to communal principles. The paper focuses on theories of rituals in order to dissect the interplay between social ritual actions and the acquisition of social status and power. The paper explores the performance of rituals in a dramatic performance associated with male practices and the perception of rituals.

It further aims to study the extent of change, evolution, and modifications that take place in the performance of these rituals within the male community. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the function, application, and approach of ritual performance in the play, highlighting the common attributes of classical theories of rituals associated with each ritual act. Moreover, it mainly focuses on stages of the writer's creative journey by using cycle of life rituals to overcome writer's block. The study will attempt to answer the following questions: How can rites of passage, as cultural experiences, lead to social stagnation? How can rituals be used as a tool of social critique? How does postmemory contribute to the restructuring of ritual events?

Dewiri's Theatrical Creation in the Shadows of Power

Dewiri (1937-2018) is a prominent playwright in the Egyptian Avant-garde Theatre, whose works and productions endow them with a direct touch of Egyptian traditions, identity, and practices, remodelling them to challenge his audience to think, doubt, and reevaluate their ideas. The work addressed in this paper is provocative because it explores the fundamental quest for knowledge, purpose, meaning, and self-worth amidst an ever-changing political and social conditions in Egypt; "During the 1970-80s, a new era in theatrical production emerged in Egypt ... characterised by individual, sporadic works [which] attempted to challenge the dominance of an invading commercial culture during that time" (Salam). Dewiri was a distinguished figure who played a central role in this movement and helped bring about a serious shift in the Egyptian theatre challenging the cultural, political, and social status quo; "he is one of the most important writers of the 1980s in Egyptian theatre; "his diverse cultural background and exposure to numerous theatrical experiences worldwide enabled him to maintain and preserve the essence of his heritage"

(Mokhtar). His work, I argue, much like his theatre, stands out as unique amid conformity, seeking to create an alternative reality. His creative production was a reaction to Egypt's political environment at the time. Dewiri, himself, recounts the obstacles he overcame in bringing *Obstructed Labour* to the stage. In his article "Wa Shahida Shāhidun Min Ahlihā", "An Eye Witness's Testimony" (1992), he revealed that the original title of the play was "A Revolution in Wombs"; however, he had to change it to *Obstructed Labour* before it was staged on the Avant-garde Theater. "This change was made based on the instructions of the Reading Committee and the opinion of the Avant-garde Theatre director at the time" (Dewiri, "An Eye Witness's Testimony" 134). Much of what he was eager to do was freeing the theatre from the restraints of censorship and didacticism thus putting into effect the view that; "Drama, it might be said, began when seeing was freed from the shackles of believing" (Wicker 18), in a way, drama separates what people see from what they ought to believe, daring them to bring their own understanding and examination of ideas. In the play, this very same idea reflects the divergent perspectives on rituals held by the characters, whose beliefs frequently stand in stark contrast to their observations.

In the introduction to *Obstructed Labour*, prominent Egyptian drama critic Hassan Attia describes Dweri's "bitter" circumstances leading to and shaping his theatrical experience acknowledging that he is a product of a "generation that experienced the tragedy of a system isolating them, as creative writers, from their community, stifling their ability to contribute to the shaping of their reality, and aborting their ambitions and hopes, closing off all paths to the inevitable future ahead of them" (Attia 5). I would argue that the political and social backdrop of Dewiri's time left a mark on his choices of subject matter. He managed to direct and write many works that, in their complex structure, approached Egypt's most sensitive issues of political and social rights, coercion, creativity, and the self. His refusal to be part of the mainstream culture led to what his son, director Tarek Al Dweri, described as a "character assassination," which, I argue, parallels Waheed's anguished state in *Obstructed Labour*. Therefore, this study aims to examine Dewiri's play as a reflection of writer's efforts to meet social norms embedded in rituals marking life transitions. Because men generally do not openly express their true feelings, rituals reflect their level of fulfilment with life, as they mirror the social standards that should be met or demonstrated through a specific ritual.

Obstructed Labour is infused with a taste of Egyptian social traditions and ritualistic practices. The main character is Waheed, a playwright struggling to voice his inherited thoughts

and conflicts. He looks forward to changing the monotonous norms of life, breaking away from the restrictions of free expression, and to escaping the phony reality propagated by the exterior social practices. Waheed is a man who refuses to give in to the prevalence of corruption, exploitation, and dishonesty. He believes that it is only through theatre that he can fully articulate the true state of affairs in society, and only through his writing can he unleash the “revolution in wombs” (Dewiri 26). Throughout the play, Waheed is fighting “the yellow serpent” (40) crawling deep within him, stifling and barricading his visions, thoughts, and fantasies. In the play, his internal struggles are highlighted in a network of relations regulated and controlled by several ritualistic practices and events. In his play, Dewiri incorporates different rituals of birth like Waheed’s 40th birthday celebration or Alsubu (an Egyptian traditional celebration of newborns), to expose the conflicting power of oppositions, between starting over and falling back into a predetermined pattern of behaviour and belief.

The Performance of Rituals

Rituals serve as a reflection and a representation of social and communal roles, rules, and traditions. I argue that although this representation often reflects the beliefs of the majority, it can also widen the gap between the group and individuals, particularly those who fail to see beyond the surface of the primary nature and function of rituals. In ritual studies, The phrase “rite of passage” was first coined by the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his 1909 book *The Rite of Passage*. The three stages of rituals stated by Gennep are the breach of rituals (separation), the rites of passage (liminality), and regression (Incorporation); in his examination, he argues that different ritual acts “demonstrate that it is really a rite of either separation, transition, or incorporation (166). Therefore, rituals reflect various forms of social changes. Van Gennep uses the term to describe every change taking place in one’s life, either a change in place, state, social position, or even age. As an indicator of change, the rite of passage decides the way in which an individual is viewed by his/her community. Van Gennep is “pivotal in drawing attention to the socio-cultural work conducted through ritual action” (Stephenson 57); he, thus, argues that there is a level of similarity between the different ceremonies and rituals where people’s life is like nature in the sense that neither the individual nor the society is independent; nature connects and is connected to everything around it and every change in nature marks a rite of passage whether towards blossoming or withering.

Despite the fact that J. L. Austin is a renowned figure in the philosophy of language and speech theory, his work has been approached in light of ritual performance. Stephenson points out a number of key elements in reading and understanding ritual in Austin's book *How to Do Things With Words*. Austin's work, argues Stephenson, is "a step towards an understanding of ritual as a vehicle of transformation" (86). It breaks the illusion between doing and saying, arguing that in saying people are, in fact, doing; "saying does not preclude action: saying and doing, communicating and acting need not be conceived as oppositional categories" (87). If the word is an action and a ritual, so is the transition from the verbal to the physical. The movement from words into actions is the embodiment of the rites of passage. Victor Turner further elaborates on this idea, discussing representations in his 1974 book *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, which highlights the increased curiosity about the connection between culture, cognition, and the perception manifested in symbolic forms. He develops the notion of the rites of passage into a theory of social drama. Turner argues that "Van Gennep made a striking discovery when he demonstrated ... that human culture had become cognizant of a tripartite movement in space-time. His focus was restricted to ritual, but his paradigm covers many extra ritual processes" (13). The tripartite movement refers to Van Gennep's distinctive structure of rituals into separation, transition, and reconciliation. Anthropologists have been mainly studying rituals in relation to social actions; thus, Turner argues that the improvement of anthropological techniques presents new data posing a challenge to theoreticians as they are expected to provide adequate explanatory frames responsive to the new data. In other words, it is plausible to apply Van Gennep's theory to include various cultural and social situations that involve transition and change. Turner summarizes Gennep's view as one where "in all ritualized movement there was at least a moment when those being moved in accordance with a cultural script were liberated from normative demands ... In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen" (Turner 13). Although Van Gennep theorizes a fixed structure of rituals, his theory recognizes that the space within the liminal zone is unstructured, where an individual must create a specific framework to progress toward reconciliation.

In the performance of rituals, symbols are vital for the expression of culture-specific practices and norms. Victor Turner examines and describes how social actions are performed through the metaphor and paradigm of their performers. He, however, states that the performer is not the only measure of social action, for intensive circumstances of a social experience can

generate new forms that add to the pre-existing metaphor and paradigm. He argues that social dynamics are not meant to be performative sets; they cannot be a preplanned structure. This does not come as a result of one's free will to become, but rather due to the process of the action itself. This argument leads to Turner's close examination of liminality and liminal phases, where people are liberated from the normative demands of their cultural system. Similarly, Seligman et al. argue that "ritual offers more than one way of crossing into a subjunctive world, and that each mechanism has potentially different social consequences, including different possibilities for the creation of empathy" (69). They address the various social, cultural, and personal possibilities integrated within ritual experiences. Furthermore, it transcends ritual's function of social unity to foster a deeper emotional connection of empathy, ultimately resulting in a strong, stable social structure.

By the same token, in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte stated that both ritual and theatre studies are similar in the sense that "[b]oth cases advocated the reversal of hierarchical positions: from myth to ritual and from the literary text to the theatre performance. In other words, both ritual and theatre studies repudiated the privileged status of texts in favor of performances" (31). According to Fischer-Lichte, social ideologies are valued when practised. It hints at the social function of rituals as an embodiment of values, principles and traditions shared by a group of people. Thus, it can be argued that the performativity of rituals is the primary factor contributing to social cohesion. Accordingly, the subversion of a ritual performance by means of exaggeration or manipulation of ritual tools and symbols aims to question, alter, and challenge the common social experience and the psychological state of both the characters and the audience.

Performativity of Rituals in Dewiri's Play

In this section, I argue that incorporating rituals into theatre, particularly in Dewiri's work, acts as a performance of social beliefs to either critique or redefine the nature and function of ritual practices. Focusing on the performance of rituals, Richard Schechner, a theatre director and theorist, defines the performance of ritual as "restored behaviors" or "twice-behaved behaviors" (28). The definition is an indication of the repeated actions carried over time, from one generation to the next, sustaining and preserving a shared cultural and social identity. According to Schechner, such restoration of behaviours can, evidently, be traced in theatre: "[s]ocial life as behaved is performed in the sense that ... every social activity can be understood as a showing of a doing" (Schechner

168). This, I argue, shares the same nature of ritual performance; rituals are rehearsed, have an audience, and are enacted at specific locations. Consequently, ritual has a “fictive” quality to it in which an actor/performer is “showing” the action. Ritual, thus, is a display meant to be observed from a distance, even if it is internalized and practiced by oneself to realize its purpose and meaning. Schechner argues that whatever is performed has to be regarded as “practices, events, and behaviors, not as “objects” or “things” (2); ritual is a dynamic affair that cannot be bound to time; it is an ongoing affair practiced over time. Despite being an embodiment of social values, ritual is a performance that “isn’t “in” anything, but “between” (30). In other words, ritual is not found in the action itself; rather, it exists in the connection between the performance and its delivery, the experience in between. Once the performance occurs, the spectator becomes a co-performer, contributing to the experience and bringing the action, event, or feeling into the realm of existence and adaptation.

Dewiri uses theatre to represent rituals in a different light. He challenges common social beliefs as each ritualistic event highlights and criticizes a major social issue associated with the ritual performance. Dr Ibrahim Hassan argues in his article “Raafat Al-Dewiri’s Theatre Between Tradition and Experimentation” that

in constructing his texts, Dewiri incorporated elements of experimentation by employing dramatization. He used the stage not merely as a neutral background or interchangeable frame, but as a visually impactful and symbolic environment that shapes the meaning and emphasizes the fundamental conflict. This approach reflects the dramatic relationships between the characters (Hassan 370).ⁱ

Dewiri uses different rituals where the cycle of life, expressing birth, circumcision, marriage and death metaphorically, to express a writer’s block. He utilizes multiple elements in order to present an intense writer’s dilemma through the cycle of life ritual experience. He uses a tape recorder, a fictional chorus, and a fusion of time and space in order to heighten the melodramatic performance of birth-associated rituals. In his theatre, much like in ritual performance, the immediate environment is part of the social ritual performance. The special context adds to the significance of the ritual performance through its symbolic associations and the strands of traditions conveying rituals. Nehad Selaiha testifies to Dewiri’s excellent embodiment of heritage into a theatrical experience, stating that he “developed a type of drama that is at once undisguisedly theatrical ...

firmly rooted in the Egyptian popular tradition ... drawing on myth, fable and folklore, reverting time and again to the consecrated themes of fertility, death and resurrection with their associated complex and time-hallowed rituals” (Selaiha, *The Egyptian Theatre* 243). Since rituals in nature are dramatic, dynamic, and communal, their theatrical integration into any performance depends on the vision, the purpose, and the specific nuance of a playwright/director. The interplay of social, ritual and individual aspects in a theatrical performance offers a new reading of social traditions. Selaiha states that his dramatization of rituals reshapes the ritual experience and the traditional methods of viewing them:

given that the theatrical material in Dewiri’s texts is often rooted in heritage with a heavy accumulation of traditional connotations—such as the human experience of birth—blending styles becomes a crucial and effective method for liberating the heritage material from the constraints of well-known meanings, creating a sense of wonder and excitement (Selaiha, *Theatrical Glimpse* 110).

Dewiri’s rituals reflect a different dimension of the collective social practices. He focuses on the individuals’ take on various ritual performances and the ways in which they associate with these ritual practices. My examination of the play is done following the framework of the three ritual phases of Van Gennep.

Birth As a First Stage of Separation

This section focuses on the ritual experience of birth as a representation of Van Gennep’s first phase of separation. Dewiri successfully portrays rituals marking the cycle of human existence, the 7th day ritual after birth, circumcision, and funeral rituals in a symbolic, creative form. A ritual performance is an act where people uphold the social values embedded within the ritual act, which serves as the “foundation for the prevailing dogmatic and social structures in society. These values set the tone of the various relationships among individuals within that society” (Hussien 35). In fact, this was not realized by Waheed, the main character, who could not achieve the intended purpose of different ritual performances because he did not fully experience his rites of passage. He is trapped in social practices that have shaped his life in a way, he believes, that stripped him of his autonomy. It is evident as he recalls the memories of different ritual celebrations, where the chorus echoes the ritual birthday song. The opening scene's stage directions suggest a birth celebration yet starkly contrast with its actual festivities. The scene title is “A Nightmarish Opening”; it establishes

a dark atmosphere, with only a few spots of light breaking through the dark, hence diverting from the common mood of birthday celebrations despite using the ritualistic symbols associated with it. The lights, the melody, and the character are all acting in opposition to the prevailing rituals of birth; “eventually, the audience can realize that the eerie music playing on stage is actually a distorted version of the “birthday” melody, rendered in a nightmarish, frantic, chaotic, rhythm.” (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 13). The stage space is dominated by gloom, a shocking intense utilization of theatrical tools to create a contradicting dual imagery. Contrary to birth celebrations, Waheed’s struggle and aversion to everything associated with birth are “much like a fetus heroically resisting the separation from the comforting embrace of an armchair” (Dewiri 14). The image symbolizes a baby’s reluctance to birth, with the armchair serving as a metaphor of the womb. In a sense that the main character is most comfortable in a small space, protected from, and unaware of, the world outside.

One of the subversions in the celebratory rituals of birthdays is bringing out bold, vivid colours; above the armchair where Waheed finds comfort, there are “swirls a vibrant, ever-changing whirlpool of colourful intense lights” (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 14). The intense, strong colours reflect a tense buildup leading to rituals; it also mirrors Waheed’s conflicting emotional state. Selaiha comments on the implications of the strong colours used in the play, arguing that they draw an emotionally complex scene; “the bloody red symbolism evolves to represent revolution and resistance, as well as the symbolism of birth, sacrifice, and ritual purification. Thus, red symbolizes life and death in the play *Obstructed Labour*, where the dark womb shape dominates the theatrical space” (Selaiha, *Theatrical Glimpse* 113). The horrifying details of the birth process, the colours and the vocabulary Waheed chooses ascribe a sense of horror rather than the joy of birth; “**Waheed.** the red waves won’t sweep me away ... dreary ... sticky ... the fiery cave gapes its mouth” (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 14-15). This description depicts a picture of great dismay and distress, where the process of birth, analogous to the birth of ideas, is agonizing, vicious, forceful, and pervasive. The contrast between Waheed's description contradicts that of his wife, Sonia, whose anticipation of the birth celebration reflects the various roles and associations of rituals among both sexes. Sonia’s bird-like singing evokes a sense of two opposing states, hope and freedom on the one hand and the fragility and vulnerability of a newborn on the other. It is also a reflective state of Waheed’s tense feelings and fear of the process. Waheed believes that it is to be the end of him, not the beginning; “A lifeless corpse [the cave] spits me out” (16). He perceives the process as “drowning”

that he must evade if he is to survive; he keeps repeating “I won’t fall” (18). These antithetical views of birth perceptions reveal the fundamental dichotomy of life and death, beginning and end, initiation and termination. Waheed simultaneously diminishes the original significance and purpose of birth celebrations, assigning them a new, different, frightening meaning.

Only by completing the rite and grasping the true meaning of the ritualistic practice can people recognize the social function of rituals. Looking at his forty burnt candles decorating the cake, Waheed is contemplating in disappointment the different stages of his life; though this is the age of wisdom and maturity, he was not able to fully experience the different rituals associated with each phase of his life: “The candles now burned were once blazing, luminous, I will, once more, reignite the candles of my life (*he lights his lighter and begins relighting the burned candles while his voice rises as he sings*) haha... Happy birthday to you!” (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 57). This state shows a different angle to ritual practices, where the character delves into introspection and evaluation of the core function of rituals where rituals imbedded meaning does not align with the social, emotional, and psychological state of the character. It is important to note that Waheed does not refuse the rituals themselves, he simply cannot maintain the social expectation associated with them. Hagag emphasizes that “the symbolism of rituals ... serves as a lens to explore and interpret modern human conditions and experiences of oppression, fragmentation, and the struggle for rebirth and renewal. In this sense, rituals provide a timeless, universal framework that the author adapts to illuminate present-day realities” (Hagag). Waheed’s 40th birthday is a part of the liminal stage of rituals because it carries the remains of his past life; it marks another ritual celebration that he is incapable of following through or fulfilling its expected function.

7th Day Ritual after Birth: The Beginning of the Liminal

This section contends that Waheed’s writing experience is expressed through the rites of passage. It is reshaped by postmemory. The ritual events enacted occurred earlier in his life; in fact, some happened before his birth. It is important to note that in the liminal stage, the two stages of obstructed labour and birth are overlapping. The role of postmemory is to enable Waheed to analyze his rites of passage, retracing, and reliving the ritual process. The memory of Waheed’s birth coincides with his celebration of his birthday.

In birth, the initial nature and function of ritual is to celebrate a newborn baby, typically taking place on the seventh day after birth. The event is filled with various customs and rituals,

offering a rich cultural experience. It was yet distorted to reflect each character's identification with their role and the nature of ritual performance. Wicker stresses that the need for an alteration of ritual comes out of the dissatisfaction with the associations of the present version of it where it does not answer to the demands and concerns of a personal crisis; "The starting point for the new ritualism is, of course, a sense of having been defiled by contact with, or even by being born into, the prevailing 'system' This defilement is, of course, recognized as inevitable, but it is also rejected as evil" (Wicker 30). Hence, the performance of rituals stems from a need for purification, and within the ritual performance, it is a declaration of innocence and righteousness, yet the change in rituals represents the inability to trust "the system" and being a product of such a system means at some points losing trust in oneself; thus comes the need to revise the common practices and if needed, change it.

The subversion of rituals often poses a question about their meaning and purpose; Waheed, through his creation and writing, is trying to make sense of ritual process and social roles, yet he always fails, the emotional tolls of the experience persist yet the purpose eludes and baffles him: he comments "Disfigured stillbirth .. my perceptions are going down" (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 78). Waheed refers to ideas that could not be rightly expressed. His writing, as with any creative process, is an effort to understand and interpret reality. A way in which the impact of life-altering events is properly grasped and portrayed; however, as he recalls each event, his frustration and inability to turn it into words increase. When rituals are not fully completed or are devoid of their intended meaning, the process remains incomplete and empty. Waheed's inability to finish his writing is always linked to ritual of birth: "a revolution in wombs .. obstructed labor... a disfigured fetus (*His eyes drift toward the birthday cake, with forty candles flickering at different heights. He gazes at the burning candles and slowly mutters*) The years of my life are burning away" (39). The celebratory birthday cake stands as a reminder of what he could not accomplish in life. He walks up, looking closely at his mother's photo when the melody of "*Al-Seboû plays, with its ordinary, usual rhythm, accompanied by the beats of the copper mortar and pestle, interspersed with live ululations from time to time*" (39). A group of boys and girls who, within the same photo frame, push a colourful baby crib. The head of the bed holds a copper plate filled with henna paste from which seven unlit candles emerge. Each boy carries a colourful clay pitcher, from which a candle also emerges, singing "Birjilato .. Birjilato .. A golden earring in his ear" (42). The mother emerges behind the kids taking her part in the rituals while wearing a bright white dress with blood stains at

both its back and front (41). Dewiri utilizes elements of the ritual celebration of newborns, the song, children, candles and clay to convey a traditional joyful event; yet he disrupts the celebratory scene with blood on the mother's dress. It is a representation of the ugly, painful face of birth and a subversion of joyful rituals aiming to shock the audience into questioning the entire ritual celebration.

After invoking such a scene, Waheed enthusiastically holds his pen and starts to write. It is the association of birth and creativity that drives his need for creative writing and creation, since rituals are the stepping stone towards new beginnings, and so is his writing. In Al-Seboū's tableau, each character sticks to his/her role in the rituals, yet towards the end, it becomes hysterical. Waheed's father Malek, keeps on reading the names attached to each candle "Wa .. he .. Waheed? Waheed .. is this a human's name? haha ... haha .. Waheed would not be my son ... he would not be the only one" (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 45). This shows the main function of rituals as they demonstrate people's social status. Having only one son goes against the social norms of having many kids to ensure the continuity and the pride of families. The mother's "nervous ululations" echo everywhere while the father's throwing money on the gathered group of kids causes "chaos and disorder," leading to a fast and irregular rhythm of the ritualistic song "(*With a hurried, irregular rhythm*) May you grow up to reach our age" (45). The chaotic scene brings forth the way in which each character struggles to embody the nature of rituals. The birth of a son is the manifestation of manhood, continuity, and fertility. Since both Malek and The Mother are not following the common ritual practice of birth celebration, it is a subversion and statement of rejection of its symbolic meaning.

Circumcision Ritual: The Passage into Manhood

I here contend that the circumcision ritual represents the rite of passage which introduces Waheed to a transitional phase towards maturation and manhood. At the end of the opening Act, a 15-year-old, blindfolded, wearing the outfit of the mythical Aladdin. After the circumcision ritual is performed, the Blindfolded Boy becomes The Boy; "blindfolded" is dropped when, supposedly, he has completed his rite of passage and has finally learned the ways of the masculine world. Circumcision does not solely reflect social conditions; it is also a statement of the psychological state of people. According to Van Gennep, "Variations in the age at which circumcision is practiced should themselves show that this is an act of social and not of physiological significance" (70).

Waheed's dilemma justifies his attempt to persuade, even coerce, The Boy into oblivion; on the one hand, he wants The Boy to become his own man, know the way of the world on his own terms, and he wants to come to maturity by his own volition. However, he is plunged into the cycle of rituals with little agency and scant knowledge, knowing he must follow along the rituals or else he cannot be accepted into society as a man.

Since The Boy is Waheed's young self, this scene can be considered a postmemory monologue of Waheed reflecting on one of the main ritual events, shaping his being. At one point, Waheed says, "The past is a dark womb .. scary .. sticky .. where owls reside in it .. bats sleep and lay eggs" (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 73). The recurrent image of a womb is presented differently in this ritual event. Its association changes, as it represents the renewal and rebirth of social ideas and principles. The choice of owls and bats reflect Waheed's dual nature of wisdom and knowledge, like an owl, but also fear and darkness like a bat. In his doubtful state, the ritual act of Circumcision makes Waheed's question the validity of social dogmatic perceptions of manhood; since it is not the result of one's own inquisitive inclinations, it cannot be true to his life, needs, and personality; he condemns it as "A jaundiced, bitter awareness" (74).

The Blindfolded Boy parallels Waheed's younger self, one who is inquisitive, hopeful, yet naïve. The reference to the folktale in the opening act, along with the fact that the boy is blindfolded, alludes to the cultural significance of Aladdin in the collective consciousness of the people. Aladdin is a very famous story from the Arab folktale, *Arabian Nights*. The folktale is employed to eliminate possibilities and face reality. It tells the story of a poor boy who finds a magic lamp that grants him wealth, power, and recognition. He then marries the princess and defeats the evil sorcerer. The story, therefore, is one of self-actualization and self-fulfillment, yet it contradicts with unattainable wishes of Waheed. The young Aladdin is daring; he stands against the norms of his small city, which The Blindfolded Boy could not do. Hence, in the circumcision scene, he is no longer wearing the costume of the brave mystical character.

The boy is just a few days shy of his thirteenth birthday, the age of puberty, where it is an expected ritual commemorating the end of childhood and marking the beginning of maturity; it serves as a rite of passage that symbolizes a transition in life. In this transition, a boy becomes a man on both the physical and mental levels, yet for Waheed, the traditions and rules of society condition and limit the process of maturation. Challenging rituals or rebelling against the process

disturbs the rhythm and essence of the rite. For the society at large, the circumcision equates manhood and maturity; however, for Waheed, it does not signify his manhood; it rather acknowledges his social conformity. In the process, The Boy is to learn the notion of manhood “dictated to you as the main condition to pass to men’s world ... there is no puberty without the rituals of dictation” (75). The Boy is eager to reach manhood yet wants to realize it on his own terms: “I will seize knowledge by force .. I refuse the rituals of dictation” (75). The main goal of the young boy is to obtain knowledge, an overwhelming urge to learn. In going through his rite of passage, The Boy’s refusal to adhere to common social constructs creates a “breach” and a conflict that hinders the ritualistic event. This point could be clarified in light of Wicker's argument that

initiation is a catastrophic affair: the crossing of a boundary between two worlds, childhood and adulthood. Accumulated defilements and guilts inevitably go with the explosion of adult potentialities upon the child ... Initiation is the resolution, after a period of crisis, of the conflicts associated with this passage from one world to another. (Wicker 24)

In other words, rituals are the salvation for those in crisis, much like Turner’s idea of liminality and reconciliation taking place due to the performance of rituals. Yet, for Waheed and The Boy, rituals intensify the crisis of the inability to express himself fully rather than resolve it: Waheed declared that “no coming of age without rituals .. no knowledge .. no awareness without a blood sacrifice .. no manhood without severance .. without circumcision” (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 75). Waheed’s words reflect Van Gennep’s argument that “circumcision cannot be understood if it is examined in isolation; it should be left within the category of all practices of the same order which by cutting off, splitting, or mutilating any part of the body modify the personality of the individual in a manner visible to all” (71).

The Circumcision Chorus is made up of a group of boys and girls wearing hideous bat-like and owl-like masks, holding sharp, large-sized metal tools, while one is carrying a blackboard, symbolizing knowledge and learning. They are chanting the traditional ritual circumcision song “ما أطهر إلا الصغير الصغير، وليه شمعة بتتور بتتور” (no one is as purified as the little one and he has a candle that is lit up, lit up) (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 76). The ritualistic circumcision song describes young boys who are the joy and pride of their parents, bringing them light and joy as they are coming into manhood. It is used metaphorically, within Waheed’s postmemory, to signify the state of a writer’s

maturity. By the time the procedure is completed, the chorus holds up a blood-stained white napkin that marks the Boy's identification with and completion of the rituals, thus with maturation. In Waheed's postmemory of his circumcision, he takes up two different roles, the executioner and the condemned as he fights off the rite yet forces the Boy to do it; he rejects any predestined, indisputable narrative yet he actively participates in the performance of rituals; Dewiri clarifies this by stating that "Modern writers are, inherently, at odds with their present, their sense of self, and their reality. As a result, they often feel a romantic nostalgia for the past and their heritage" (Dewiri, "Contemporary Arab Theater between Heritage and Modernity" 88). This is an indication of the inevitability of rituals; it is an integral part of transformation and maturing, yet it is also a way to evaluate one's own position within the social construct. It is, in fact, because of the lack of satisfaction with the present life that draws people to rituals, since they hold the answer to the prevailing social practices. Rituals, hence, serve both the community as well as the individuals.

Marriage: The Performance of Social Transition

This section explores Marriage as another representation of social transition into maturity. Van Gennep expresses it: "marriage ceremonies are rites of passage from one age group to another" (87). Waheed, though older, is disillusioned by the fantasy behind the folktales of marriage and the harsh realities of the world. He reaches the milestone of forty with no remarkable achievement that satisfies him, struggling in his relationship with his wife Sonia, and is exposed to the conventional marriage he is a product of. He also recognizes that evil and good are not too distinct from each other. Even his writing, his sole outlet for novelty and creation, represents a struggle. In Act Four, marriage rituals are questioned. Malek (Waheed's father) is an elderly male, while The Mother is introduced in her youth; a gap accepted and acknowledged in most conventional marriages. The Mother argues the reality and validity of their marriage; when she says "We aren't and won't be married" (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 82). According to her, the marriage document is "just a piece of paper" (82), an empty ritual that carries no meaning for her. Van Gennep argues that "the rites of marriage, which consist chiefly of rites of permanent incorporation into the new environment but which often include rites of individual union also, though the latter do not occur as frequently as one would at first expect" (117). It begs the question of rituals as applied to both men and women, and the different meanings rituals carry for each of them. It implements a different individual experience within the social ritual process of marriage. The analogy of Malek's name and its

meaning “owner” reflects the expectations often placed on women in marriage as possessed by an owner, Malek.

In the wedding scene, the Mother dances in joy for making the right decision despite not loving her husband. This concurs with Sonia, at the other end of the stage, sobbing intensely, underpinning The Mother's dance and song, indirectly indicating that the choice was not right. However, as the sobbing increases, the dance gets more nervous, frantic, and neurotic until The Mother passes out. This underlines the missing and empty rituals of a traditional wedding, bringing to light some void practices associated with weddings. The contrast between sobbing and dancing confuses the scene, blurring the distinction between sadness and joy expected at weddings. It stands as another way of subverting the rituals of marriage. It enforces the notion that the mere performance of the rites of passage is not in itself a guarantee of reaching reconciliation; “they must be incorporated into the sacred world and cannot function without the operation of the rites of passage” (108). The sacredness cannot be realized if the participation in the passage is impaired by a lack of social comprehension of their nature and function.

Dewiri uses folkloric characters to criticize social mobility and social status. The financial status forces The Mother not to pursue higher education, hence losing the chance of marrying her well-educated cousin. The Grandfather, however, sees through his daughter's suffering in sacrificing love for money; in an attempt to convince her to follow her heart, he draws the image of “Eid al-Adha” carrying her on his shoulders and choosing between “Shkoko or Antar Al-Hommam ... will it be Shokoko with his golden hat or Antar Al-Hommam with his rusty sword” (Dewiri, *Obstructed Labour* 87-88). The tale is an allusion to the well-known film *Antar and Liblib* (1952). The choices yielded Egyptian culture and heritage as Shkoko is a comedic iconic figure, the famous Egyptian entertainer, Mahmoud Shkoko. The choice of “golden cap ... طرطور” colloquially describes someone naive or easily manipulated, though his hat and silly character make him appealing. On the other hand, Antar Al-Hammam is a strong, heroic character, a pre-Islamic Arab knight and poet. He is famous for his bravery and strength in battle, often depicted wielding his sword despite it being described as rusty or old. His tales and poems are a significant part of Arabic literature and folklore, celebrating his heroism and romantic adventures. The hint at these two folkloric characters is a statement of Dewiri's intellectual excellence, implementing heritage and rituals, as mentioned by Selaiha: “He differentiates between mythology as a repository of positive, progressive values inherent in the popular consciousness, and mythology as a misleading myth

aimed at oppression and manipulation” (Selaiha, *Theatrical Glimpse* 110). He explores alternative masculine narratives in Arab and Egyptian history by playing on these two characters. Shkoko's widespread popularity, despite his light comedic roles, demonstrates his representation of both male culture and women's expectations.

There is a difference between saying and doing; therefore, rituals are the ultimate equalizer because, within the ritual practice, all people participate in the same ritual performance regardless of their social or intellectual status. In the practice of rituals, people take active parts in a unified social performance of rituals. In a dialogue with The Grandfather, Malek shows the power of money robbing people of the freedom to choose, where the roles of the hero and the clown are confused; “Malek. (*laughing*) Does your kind have the right to choose?” (Dweri, *Obstructed Labour* 89). His character hints at the changes in Egyptian society; the divide between money, power, and knowledge. At this point, the Chorus changes the lyric of the wedding song highlighting the wealth of the groom while he enjoys his long-awaited moment, the moment of “dominance” and “acquisition” (95). At the end of the scene, the rhythm of the wedding song accelerates as Malek enjoys his new “possession”, asserting that her whole being is his. Meanwhile, Waheed is in the fetal position, back to the pre-ritual phase, fighting unidentified powers attributing to his fall, fighting his very being resulting from the unjust union. The acceleration of ritualistic song identifies both heightened emotions and struggles, as well as a frightening change in the rather happy rituals. It sums up Dewri's conception of both modernity and the utilization of heritage in theatre. In his article, “Contemporary Arab Theater between Heritage and Modernity,” Dweri states that:

Modernity involves removing old archetypes, then creating a new one, and repeating this process to create even newer archetypes. This constant dismantling and rebuilding is modernity's way of rejecting the influence of past parenthood. This is done by removing the stigma from the past and its models, considering them mere historical forms with no eternal sanctity, and thus subject to change (92).

In his implementation of rituals, he challenges gender roles, knowledge, social equality, and equity. The characters' yearning for change, prosperity, recognition, and continuity clashes with their denial of their present reality, resulting in a bittersweet ending: though their lives remain unchanged, the potential for change persists.

Death and The Reconciliation with Life

In this section, I contend that the ritual of death and funeral represents the reconciliation stage of Van Gennep, helping Waheed to accept his inability to write. His act of burning his writings by the end of the ritual symbolizes the belief that only through their destruction could he begin to write again. Waheed's struggle with social regulation of rituals is internal; his worldview is at odds with the beliefs of those around him, either his intimate circle, Sonia, or society at large. Yet, the ending of the play depicts the triumph of love and words over social rules. The symbolism of Waheed's various ritual experiences allows him to eventually achieve knowledge. Maturity cannot be achieved without losing a bit of innocence; the womb represents a blank slate, an experience-free/experience-less beginning untouched by a pre-existing worldly experience. When Waheed restructured ritual events in his life, it stemmed from his desire to reset his life experience, feeling a sense of emptiness and worthlessness in his current existence. He says, "(as he relights all the candles), and now I will return to the warmth of the womb. With the imagined willpower I die .. and with the voluntary imagination .. in the darkness of the womb .. I am inserted .. buried .. to be born again" (Dwiri, *Obstructed Labour* 58). Cyclical rituals echo the cycle of life. After a period of crisis, of the conflicts associated with the passage from one phase to another, initiation is the resolution.

Dwiri combines reality and myth to highlight different social statuses and roles. In a "symbolic struggle" where Malek and the Grandfather are referred to as The Rukh, a giant mystical bird in *Arabian Nights*, versus Worker Bees, Malek loses. Of both creatures, one is mythical while the other is actual; one is the representation of aloofness, power, and dominance, and the other is community, care, protection, and service. The symbolic fight highlights what each of them stands for "Malek. Axes and hammers. The Grandfather. Pens and flags" (Dwiri, *Obstructed Labour* 134). In the Arabic culture, the term "أقلام وأعلام" is a symbol of identity, thoughts, and culture. While pens refer to the role of the word in shaping awareness, flags are symbols of national or intellectual belonging and identity. Hence Dwiri extends the figurative fight to the larger national issues that can be applied to society as a whole. With Malek losing, a funeral procession sings the birthday song in a mournful melody. The funeral procession proceeds from the frame of Malek's painting; a black coffin emerges, placed on the colored newborn bed, adding a different meaning and significance. The way the coffin is placed atop a newborn's bed symbolizes the concurrent presence of life and death. It indicates the completion of the cycle of life, as death is the new beginning,

which is the reason Dweri makes use of the tools used in the birth scene, incorporating the traditional ritual song of birth, yet sadder. The Grandfather invites Malek to welcome his death as a normal part of life: “Come on .. head towards your demise ... The end of every newborn” (Dweri, *Obstructed Labour* 138). The cycle of every living being is death, but death is never the end of this cycle. In a reversed ritual, the funeral chorus intones "Happy Birthday to you" with the mournful, somber beat of a funeral dirge. Ibrahim Hassan comments on Dweri's converging various ritual and traditional elements, stating that: “the absurd and irrational overlap between the rituals of death and birth holds a symbolic meaning. It reflects a hopeful outlook on the birth of a new reality from the remnants of a corrupt past burdened with tools of oppression and control” (Hassan 384). The merging of life and death within the same scene emphasizes the concept of temporal power, which is both dominant and short-lived; it cannot extend beyond its immediate existence. Dweri comments on the distortion of the traditional ritualistic practices as part of the modern representation of social ideologies and principles, stating that:

The essence of the modern artist will inevitably collide with his\her cultural memory or the old cognitive image that the artist carries. Modernity demands breaking this cognitive image; it requires the deconstruction and disturbance of the cultural memory. This is achieved by the modern artist reinterpreting that heritage memory from a modern perspective (Dweri, “Contemporary Arab Theater between Heritage and Modernity” 94).

The disturbance of rituals crystallizes Waheed's struggle with his time; the “cognitive image” of his time does not coincide with his needs, because it is limiting and dictating. Therefore, the urge to create his own version of events and a comprehension of their true nature and function are contributing factors leading to the revisitation of rituals. Hence, Dweri's implementation and manipulation of rituals. With the death of Malek, Waheed declares the end of the Revolution in Wombs. He reflects on life, reality, and illusion; A long journey of a short life functioning as a transition into a new “better” beginning (Dweri, *Obstructed Labour* 144); a completion of the cycle of life.

Conclusion

The rituals of the cycle of life are used metaphorically to reflect the process of creative writing, reflecting birth, maturation, death, and a possible rebirth. In every ritual practice portrayed

in the play, there is a heavy presence of a modern problem. In the different scenes, the characters do not struggle with the ritual performance in itself as much as it was with the implications and expectations placed on them because of the ritual events, like celebrating the passing of the year as an achievement in and of itself. Waheed's dilemma was stated in the opening scene of the play to be a conformity issue. When the cultural performance of rituals is not fully realized, it leads to social stagnation where people cannot make sense of their world, not until they understand their history that they become able to grasp the nature and function of rituals. The postmemory experience of revisiting ritual events enabled Waheed to finally reconcile with his past, present, and anticipation for the future.

Dewiri does not merely focus on the social function of rituals as a social statement, nor does he deny the social nature of rituals. He mainly tested the probability of rituals serving both society and individuals at the same time without compromising one in an endorsement of the other. The dramatic formation of rituals is an emphasis on its relevance to the life of the modern individual as much as it is to the people as a whole; it serves as a direct link to the group's tendencies and beliefs. The external performance of rituals ends up "internalized," becoming part of both collective and personal identity. Moreover, despite the fact that a performance of rituals is taken on willingly yet it is also involuntary because it is a preordained rite of passage toward maturity and integration into the prevailing social order. Waheed also uses them as a weapon to criticize unquestioned principles and modes of thinking through the writing process. The rituals of life-to-death and the rite of passage are the preparatory stages, equipping Waheed with the knowledge needed to complete his cycle of creation.

Bibliography

Austin, J L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press, 1962

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. Routledge. 2008.

Hobson, M. N., et. al. "The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 260-284.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868317734944>.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

---. *Performance Theory*. London: Routledge Classics, 2003.

Selaiha, Nehad. *The Egyptian Theatre: Plays and Playwrights*. General Egyptian Book Organization. 2003

Seligman, et. al. *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Stephenson, Barry. *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. NY: Cornell University Press, 2018.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Wicker, Brian. "Ritual and Culture: Some Dimensions of the Problem Today." In *The Roots of Ritual*, edited by James D. Shaughnessy, pages 13-45.

الأبيض، منة الله، طارق الدويري: والدي تم اغتياله معنويا ومات دون أن يدري به أحد "Tarek Al Dewiri: My Father's character assassination and Unnoted Death" بوابة الأهرام، 29 ديسمبر 2020

<https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2551535.aspx>

الدويري، رأفت، وشهد شاهد من أهلها "An Eye Witness's Testimony"، فصول؛ الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، مجلد (11)، عدد (3)، 129-135، 1992، <http://search.mandumah.com/Record/373010>

--، ولادة متعسره "Obstructed Labour". الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب. 1985

--، المسرح العربي المعاصر ما بين التراث والحداثة "The Egyptian Theatre Between Heritage and Modernity"، فصول؛ الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، مجلد (14)، عدد (1)، 108-88، 1995

<http://search.mandumah.com/Record/482327>

حسن، إبراهيم، مسرح رأفت الدويري بين التراث والتجريب "Ra'faat Al Dewiri's Theatre Between Heritage and Modernity"، مجلة كلية الآداب، جامعة الإسكندرية، مجلد (66)، عدد (84)، 44-1، 2016

https://journals.ekb.eg/article_154910.html

حسين، كمال الدين. التراث الشعبي في المسرح المصري الحديث "Heritage in Modern Egyptian Theatre". الدار المصرية اللبنانية. 1993

سلام، أبو الحسن. رأفت الدويري رجل المسرح: الذات والموضوع "Ra'faat Al Dewiri, The Man of Theatre: The self and the Subject Matter"، الحوار المتمدن، عدد (2928)، 2021

<https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=721914>

صليحة، نهاد. ومضات مسرحية "Theatrical Glimpse". الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب. 2001.
عطية، حسن، "مقدمة" "Introduction" ولادة متعسره. الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب. 1985
مختار، حسن. رأفت الدويري. رائد تطويع المسرح للتراث "Ra'faat Al Dewiri, The Pioneer of Adapting Heritage
to Theatre"، البوابة، 2018، <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3386906>

ⁱ All translations from Arabic into English are done by the researcher unless otherwise mentioned.