


*The Wives of Men  
and Other Stories*

Salwa Bakr

Translated from the Arabic  
by Denys Johnson-Davies

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## Introduction

In a writing career that stretches back no more than a few years — her first volume of stories, published at her own expense, appeared as recently as 1986 — Salwa Bakr has established herself at Egypt's most interesting and forthright woman writer of fiction. Two further collections of her short stories, one of which contains the novella *The Shrine of Atia*, came out in the intervening years, while earlier this year her first novel was published under the title *The Golden Chariot That Didn't Take Off Into The Sky*, in which all the characters are inmates of a women's prison.

Salwa Bakr's father was a railways employée and he died before she was born. Having taken degrees in management and drama criticism, she worked for a time as a rationing inspector — yes, Egypt still has rationing of such items as sugar, tea and rice. More recently she travelled to Beirut and Cyprus where she worked as a journalist. She is now married, has a young daughter and lives in an outer suburb of Cairo. It was no doubt due to her political activities as a student that she recently found herself

arrested early one morning and obliged to serve a short spell in prison – an experience which she found full of interest and which provided her with the background for her first novel.

The protagonists of Salwa Bakr's stories are in the main working-class women who are struggling in one way or another to provide themselves with the basic necessities of life. Her stories seek to show that the strong are able to exploit the weak by reason of their strength and material advantages, but that the weak themselves only too often contribute to their enslavement through the usually groundless fear that rebelling will only worsen their lot. 'Fishing of a Soul', though not one of her outstanding stories, neatly sums up in part the attitude of Salwa Bakr towards the society in which she lives. The inability of the young middle-class couple in the story to resist the social pressure to conform results in their life gradually deteriorating into one of grey drabness. Where working-class persons are concerned the price paid for complacency and passivity is often humiliating servitude and deprivation. In 'Doty Noona', the young servant girl with an instinctive yearning for the education she never received is forced to take action when her life, wretched as it is, is threatened with being deprived of the strange form of education that makes up for her drab existence. Salwa Bakr shows that running away can itself be a form of courage. In 'The Wives of Men', a story with echoes from *A Thousand and One Nights*, the two wives (of the same man) desire nothing more than the security of a roof over their heads. When this is threatened by the prospect of a third wife being introduced into the home, their fears force them to an extreme expedient.

Sometimes in these stories the central character is striving to achieve love, or even just surreptitious sexual

fulfilment, or merely a modicum of self-esteem, as in the tragic-comedy of the middle-aged housewife in 'That Beautiful Undiscovered Voice'. The monkey trainer in the story of that title is not being gratuitously cruel, he is merely carrying out the procedure for training monkeys that has been handed down to him. For him the monkeys are not flesh and blood but objects to be moulded to his will and to certain patterns of behaviour that will provide him with a living. It is significant that the trainer meets his match in the one monkey who has the courage to refuse to conform, while his companions live in a mixture of fear and false hope; even more significant is the fact that it is only the monkey who rebels whose condition is bettered. The human condition, Salwa Bakr would maintain, is little different in this respect: politically, economically and socially life has been set in certain moulds and only with courage can one break out of them.

But the price of rebelling against the conventions is sometimes high: the protagonist of 'Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees', a story in which Salwa Bakr is at her most poignant, merely wishes for herself and others a world that is greener and more colourful than that which most people are prepared to accept. Right from the beginning of the story we are aware of the price she has had to pay for her attempts at improving life since she is writing of her experiences from the confines of a mental home. Several of Salwa Bakr's characters are not only uneducated and under-privileged but are often almost mentally sub-normal, or at least eccentric. It is as though the writer is saying: What is so desirable about being 'normal', when the normal in our society are so often hypocritical, greedy and uncaring.

While containing many of the themes that recur in her short stories, the novella *The Shrine of Aha* is at the same

time more ambitious in form. We learn about the central character (a woman considered by many to have been a saint) through statements made by various people who have known her during her lifetime, in answer to an enquiry being conducted by a newspaper. Was Atia really such a saintly character, even though eccentric by the norms of her society? Some of the statements contradict this view and are antagonistic towards her. The people making the statement have their own reasons, their own motives for the views they express, and their statements reveal as much about themselves as they do about Atia.

Salwa Bakr has made her own position clear with regard to feminist literature. In one of the few interviews she has given she expresses the view that women's writing achieves nothing if it is merely directed against men. 'In our backward society,' she says, 'it should play a positive role not only in freeing woman but also the man. What the woman requires in order to realize herself is equally required by the man, for he needs to enjoy the presence of a compatible woman as a life-partner, the presence of a mind that is in tune with his, the presence of emotions that can interact with his own.'

When asked about literary influences, she named Chekhov and Cervantes, both read in translation. These two are unusual choices, as modern Arab writers are more likely to opt for fashionable authors like Camus and Márquez. She was particularly attracted by Cervantes' sense of the ridiculous and his natural though sophisticated methods of story-telling. When talking about possible future projects, she expressed her admiration for Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy and her wish to write a similarly substantial work told from an exclusively feminine viewpoint. Arabic literature, she contends, even more than that of the West, has been the preserve of men and it is the

task of women writing in Arabic today to try to redress the balance.

Salwa Bakr is essentially an angry writer. In her opinion, now is not the time – in the political and social context in which she writes – for the telling of stories that merely entertain.

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gripping his own in case she should fall because the heel of her shoe had begun to upset her balance slightly. Behind them walked Fawz's brother screaming and crying and demanding that they carry him because he wanted to go to sleep and at the same time cursing Khadiga and accusing her of having trodden on his foot. As for Fawz, she was staring ahead indifferently, thinking about taking her courage in both hands and asking her mother to buy them halva for supper. She was, meanwhile, carrying a small copy of the Qur'an on the inner cover of which was written: 'To the diligent pupil Fawziyya Mohammed Farid for her excellent performance in the end-of-the-year examination.' Below this was a printed seal with the emblem of the Republic, then the name of the distinguished teacher, headmistress of the school, and her signature.

## That Beautiful Undiscovered Voice

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Everything had started quite naturally in accordance with the usual daily rites: the rooms were tidied and cleaned, the plates were laid awaiting the food, the radio, turned down low, was chattering out the afternoon news, which in general was the same as usual. Abdul Hamid, however, felt that there was a certain unease affecting his wife, causing her to hunch her shoulders more than usual when she swallowed her food; also she was not entering into the conversation with him as she should.

'What is it, Sayyida?' he asked her.

'Nothing,' she replied glumly and went off to the kitchen, pleading that the tea was boiling over. But when she returned she seemed even more distressed and allowed the top of the teapot to fall on the floor as she was pouring the tea into the glasses. Abdul Hamid again asked her what was wrong in a disapproving tone. She shyly whispered back that she wanted to talk to him about something, but that she was embarrassed.

'Hope it's all right,' he said as he lit a cigarette, guessing at what the news would be. She would no doubt be asking for money and would give as a reason some incidental matter, or would try to persuade him that the monthly expenses had gone up. There was no other subject Sayyida would be embarrassed to talk about. He bared his teeth and knotted his brows and moved his neck from left to right so as to make a cracking noise as he prepared himself for the inevitable battle. He decided that he would come out the victor, however heated it was, for he was not going to pay one single red millieme over and above what he was already paying in household expenses each month, not if Sayyida — as the saying goes — were to see her own earlobe. He took a sip of the almost black tea, and said to her between clenched teeth. 'Out with it!'

From deep down inside her Sayyida tried to thrust her courage up to her tongue and to utter what she wanted to say, but her courage quickly slipped back again into its abyss. Her voice emerged weak and timid.

'The fact of the matter is I've discovered I'm . . .'

'Pregnant?'

The husband was on his feet, screaming, like someone who has of a sudden accidentally impaled himself. The words, 'Can it possibly be?' sprang from his lips, accompanied by a spray of spittle brought about by his agitation. 'Is it possible that you can again be pregnant, Sayyida? By my mother's grave, I'll be really annoyed with you if it's true, and my pocket's empty, which is to say no more children and, no more abortions. You get yourself out of this one, if you can.'

He gave himself a good scratch between the thighs and walked, crazed, towards the window, which overlooked the street filled with the clamour of people and cars. Enraged, he thought of what he might do to her. Should

he hit her? Throw her to the ground and kick her till she started bleeding and had a miscarriage? Or should he open the window full and throw her out? If it hadn't been that the cigarette was almost burning his fingers, so that he had to return to bury the stub in the ashtray, Sayyida may not have found the opportunity, her courage having risen to her tongue, to say to him, 'It's not pregnancy or anything of the sort — the thing is that my voice has become extremely beautiful.'

Abdul Hamid fastened his gaze on her for several seconds, during which he remained at a loss. Then he burst into hysterical laughter, as though he had just heard a joke without an end. Blood gushed to his brain making his puffed-up head look like a red balloon on the point of bursting. His features and teeth went on making agitated movements which were only brought to a halt by the angry voice of his wife.

'Just listen, first.'

He seated himself and she began to recount to him exactly what had happened to her. After he had left for work in the morning, and after the children had gone off to their schools, she had as usual remained alone in the house and had set about her household work: sweeping and dusting and cooking and tidying up the rooms. After the call to the noon prayer she had said to herself, 'Go off, my girl, to the bathroom and pour a pail of water over yourself and you'll feel refreshed and get rid of the dirt.'

It was after Sayyida had taken her clothes off and washed her head a couple of times, and while she was removing the soap from her eyes, that it occurred to her to sing and amuse herself as usual. No sooner had she begun with the song '*I love the life of freedom*' than she felt as though some other person had come into the bathroom with her and had begun to sing in her place. The voice was

not her own voice, the one she had become accustomed to; instead it was a beautiful melodious voice wholly unrelated to her own. She immediately splashed some water on to her eyes to get rid of the soap and gazed round the bathroom. She wheeled about in search of a human being or some other creature, while invoking God's name and seeking to be protected from the Devil. But her eyes fell on nothing but the single window, which was firmly closed, the mirror over the basin, with the toothbrushes placed on the shelf, and her clean clothes, which she'd just got out of the cupboard, hanging on the nail on the back of the door. She muttered, 'There is no god but God!' and went on with her shower. When she was sure that there was no sound except that of the water flowing over her body, she continued with her singing of '*I love the life of freedom*'. The voice that issued from her was even more beautiful, clear and strong. The loufa in her hand became as though nailed to her thigh, which she had begun to scrub. She said, 'In the name of God the Merciful, the compassionate,' and, 'I take my refuge in God from the accursed Devil,' and despite her belief that there were no *afreets*, except for human beings themselves, she was nevertheless frightened. Her heart was beating hard and she called out to herself in a low voice: 'Sayyida, Sayyida.' Back came a voice other than that which she knew. It was too beautiful. So she began to raise her voice still further and to put inflections into it, 'O Sayyida. . . O Sayyida,' at the same time overcome by a state of joyous rapture. However, she suddenly came to her senses.

'Perhaps someone had heard me, or you had returned home, Abdul Hamid, for one reason or another, and had heard me calling to myself. You would think I'd gone off my head or was a bit touched. So I kept quiet and terror made of my tongue a piece of dried firewood, while my

teeth were chattering, and I said to myself, "Maybe it really is a question of *afreets*." So I began reciting to myself. I said, "I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of that which He created", right through till I'd finished the chapter. I dried my body with the towel, and in my confusion I put my *galabia* on back to front. I then opened the door and went running to the window, looking down at the people in the street and feeling less alone. When I was back to my old self and had relaxed, I went and sat on the sofa and did my hair. After that, as though I had heard some disembodied voice calling to me, I found myself once again singing, "*O sweetness of the world, O sweetness*." Imagine, my dear Abdul Hamid, I found that my voice was even sweeter, a voice that might have issued from Paradise, a magical voice that was unrivalled in this world. To tell you the truth, I was delighted and at peace with myself. The sensation of fear had left my heart, for I felt it was impossible that the voice was that of a *djinn*; it was a human voice, a completely natural voice and yet very different from my old one.'

Then, looking into his eyes with a deep contentment, she said, 'Please, Abdul Hamid, please just listen to me.' And she began to sing.

But Abdul Hamid silenced her with a resolute look. It was as though he hadn't heard anything of what she had said. He then asked her if she had told anyone but himself of the matter. When she confirmed to him that the thing had happened only a few hours ago and that she had not met a soul since he had left in the morning, he heaved a sigh of relief and asked her to forget the whole thing. 'And don't bring the subject up with anyone whatsoever,

and especially not with the children.' She was annoyed that he didn't believe her and swore by all that was holy that what she had said had really and truly happened.

The tears gathered in her eyes as she vehemently denied that she'd gone soft in the head.

Abdul Hamid sat on the sofa and asked her to make him a lightly sugared coffee. While she was putting her feet into her slippers and preparing to go, he suddenly felt sorry for her and said, 'Listen, Sayyida. You're over forty and you've got four kids, meaning to say that talking rubbish diminishes your status and makes you a figure of fun in front of the children. And what would the position be if any grown-up person in his senses were to hear you? Just suppose that what you say is true - what does it mean? Are you intending to take up singing, for example? Intending to become a professional singer? By God, what a story!'

He laughed with satisfaction, for he found the matter to be far removed from any of the fears he had had. Then he gave her a playful slap on the bottom and whispered to her, 'After the coffee, come along and we'll stretch out together on the bed.'

For the rest of the day things went on as usual, and Sayyida almost forgot what had happened to her that morning. She continued to carry out the tasks of the second part of the day with her usual enthusiasm: she folded up the washing, took tea round to the children while they were doing their homework, and made herself free for half an hour to watch the television serial. When Abdul Hamid returned from the café, to which he had gone after sunset, she made supper for him with the

children, a meal during which he joked with some and rebuked those who needed rebuking.

But in the evening, when she was on her own, Abdul Hamid having gone to sleep, she thought confusedly as to what she really was going to do about her voice, that beautiful voice that she had suddenly discovered was buried inside her, like someone who has come across a wonderful treasure and doesn't know what to do with it. She began actively to think, but always came back to the same logical answer: a beautiful voice is made for singing. So why didn't she sing and let people hear her voice? She was tempted to believe that it was only right that people should hear her voice, and that a person's voice had nothing to do with his age. What was wrong with people listening to someone's voice regardless of age or whether he was a man or a woman? She had more or less become convinced by this line of thought, when she became possessed of an overwhelming desire to sit in bed and sing '*O sweetness of the world, O sweetness!*'

So she started to sit down but, just as she was about to open her mouth and begin, Abdul Hamid turned over in bed and became aware of her. He looked at her anxiously and asked, 'What's wrong, Sayyida?'

She said she was on her way to the kitchen for a drink of water because her mouth was a bit dry.

On the following morning, when she began to sing, Sayyida became madly excited. Standing in front of the sink and washing the dishes left over from breakfast after Abdul Hamid and the children had gone out, she again heard that beautiful voice that sounded so fascinating, unearthly and overflowing with power and purity. She was seized with a feeling that she was some other being,



with no connection with the Sayyida she knew, the Sayyida that dusted and swept and did her head up in a kerchief each day because she couldn't find the time to put a comb through her hair. She quickly rinsed her hands of soap, drying them with the end of her nightdress, which she hadn't yet taken off, and ran to the mirror. Standing in front of it, she sang, '*I love the life of freedom,*' and her voice rang out anew, strong, pure and clear, like some priceless jewel. She watched herself, her lips dancing with the tuneful words, her eyes sparkling with joyful enthusiasm, her cheeks ruddy with blood which she imagined had gushed from hidden springs in her body, her eyebrows that met and separated in ordered movements, leading the features of the face in a brilliant concord of sounds, as though they were the two skilful hands of the conductor of a superb orchestra.

She felt she was beautiful, perhaps for the first time for quite a long while. This feeling came to her and it rejuvenated her. She stood looking at her face, reproaching herself for the way she had left her eyebrows untrimmed, embarrassed to find a slight moustache under her nose, sorry to have so neglected her hair. Then she felt anger at herself. Why had she let herself go in this way, while possessing within her this beautiful voice? She stood there and came to a decision: 'In order to sing I am obliged to feel beautiful. Yes, by God - obliged.'

Sayyida quickly put on her clothes, for she must go down to the street to buy vegetables and bread before Abdul Hamid and the children returned home. Her mind was still occupied with the same matter, but she naturally had no plan in relation to how she would sing, and where she would begin, and how she would face Abdul Hamid with

this decision of hers. She thought of going to some friend of hers to disclose her secret to her, as women do in films, but she discovered, for the first time in her life, that she had not a single friend, no human being with whom she was intimate, nobody close to her heart, apart from her mother and her sister Awatef, both of whom she had at the outset regarded as not being suitable, by reason of her prior knowledge of their attitude were she to tell them of the matter. It would be an attitude of scorn which would have them laughing at what she had to say, turning it into a joke and announcing it in front of any relatives who visited them. She thought of her neighbour, Umm Hasan, but Umm Hasan, despite their very good relationship, had never had any secrets with Sayyida. For the first time in her life she felt resentment towards Abdul Hamid, because he had friends with whom to sit in the café, and there was his bosom friend Ismail, to whom he may have told secrets that he had never divulged to her, despite the fact that she was his intimate companion and had given him four children.

Her state of excitement remained with her even as she entered Isa the grocer's shop to buy some cheese and macaroni and ten eggs. Old Isa had no need to scrutinize her closely to notice that she was distraught. 'Why are you upset, Mrs Sayyida, so early of a morning?' he asked her, but before she answered he had decided that he knew already: life had become hard, and the high cost of living was an unrestrained ghoul who made its way into everything and was completely out of control. Meanwhile people walked about and talked to themselves because of their wretchedness and lack of means (of course, Isa had noticed that she used to talk to herself occasionally). Then he said to her - and he was the old grocer with whom they had been dealing for a long time and with whom

they had links of neighbourliness and affection – that he knew that Abdul Hamid was doing all he possibly could to provide for the children and that she should be patient with him. He was none the less astonished when, suddenly, he found her bursting into tears and sobbing like someone who has lost someone dear to them.

Isa took her by the hand and sat her down in a chair, then opened a bottle of fizzy lemonade for her, saying, 'Take it easy and put the Devil to shame.' It was morning and the shop was not yet filled with customers, so the man whispered to her earnestly, 'Any problem, God forbid, between you and Abdul Hamid?' It was difficult for her to explain, so she burst into sobs once again.

When she had recovered, she said, 'Listen, Uncle Isa, I need to talk to you about something, something slightly personal, on condition you try to understand me and don't talk to Abdul Hamid about it, because he's sworn to divorce me if I don't keep the news well hidden and not talk to a soul about it.'

Uncle Isa sensed that the matter was indeed grave, and he was seized by an irresistible desire to hear a family secret that had to do with one of the inhabitants of the street; he experienced the pleasure of being about to learn some new bit of gossip that he would quickly be employing, so he drew up a chair and sat down close to her so that he might not miss so much as a word.

'It's happened that I've discovered my voice,' she said, as though divulging a solemn secret, and she began to relate to him what had happened to her and the words that had passed between her and Abdul Hamid. The man did not laugh, or utter so much as a word – as they say in books. When she had finished her story and said to him, smiling with embarrassment, that she was ready to let him hear her beautiful voice, so that he might confirm

for himself the truth of what she had said, he scrutinized her pityingly and replied, 'Drink up the lemonade, Sayyida.'

Without drinking the lemonade, she took up the things she had bought from him and left. When, in the afternoon, Abdul Hamid returned, and while they were having their lunch, he told her that, on his way home, he had bought some matches from the shop of Isa the grocer, and that he was going to the doctor's that evening and that she must accompany him.

When they arrived at the clinic of the psychologist, Sayyida was partly convinced about her husband's idea. He had said that he loved her and that he wanted only her good and that of the children and that psychological illness was like any other illness and that there was nothing to be ashamed about. In fact it was quite curable, but the important thing was to treat it quickly, right at the beginning. Thanks be to God, there was nothing wrong with her, but the story of the voice had perhaps come about through being exhausted with housework, or some hidden problem inside her she wasn't aware of, because the inner part of every human being is a vast bottomless sea, and the spirit's secret is deeply hidden, with the Almighty alone knowing what is in the inmost depths of every human.

'What I am trying to say is that it's difficult for a man to know himself, Sayyida, and medicine has been made for just such difficult circumstances. Also, Sayyida, despite my modest education, I am a believer and profess the unity of God, and I don't believe in the story of djinn and *gheests*, because our Lord has said in the Qur'an: "And we have made between you and them an impregnable

barrier." Anyway, my dear, let's have a go. All it means is losing ten pounds from the money which anyway is flying away like so many sparrows out of our control. Maybe, with God's permission, they'll bring a cure and everything will return to normal and you'll be all right. The fact is, this morning you told Isa the grocer, but tomorrow or the day after, against your will, you could tell someone else, or something could happen that would make us a laughing-stock in front of people, and all sorts of things could be said about you, without cause. And I, Sayyida, were it not for my affection for you and for the children, I'd have shut up about the matter and kept quiet, but you know I am fond of you since you are the mother of my children and my life's partner.'

They entered the doctor's office and sat down. The man asking her about her problem seemed to her to be very peevish, grumpy and disturbed, also in a great hurry. So Abdul Hamid started off by telling him the story in brief. But the doctor, rapping the glass top of his desk with his pen, asked him to let her tell it; so Sayyida recounted everything that had happened to her from the very moment she had entered the bath, right up to her conversation with Isa the grocer.

When she had completed all she had to say, noticing that the man had listened to her attentively without any interruption, she asked him, smiling with pleasure because of her feeling that he understood her situation, 'Could I sing you a little song, doctor?'

No sign of interest showed itself on the doctor's features. He looked as though he were accustomed to such things. He didn't smile, he didn't frown, and he made no reply. He merely wrote some words in a foreign language

on a piece of paper and gave it to the husband with the words, 'Three pills of the first kind daily, after each meal, and one of the others every evening before she goes to bed.'

Then he turned to Sayyida, saying, 'Keep away from anything that causes you stress, and never allow yourself to be alone. Put on the wireless when you're in the bathroom, eat well, but try to go for walks and lose some weight, because you're too fat. Keep on with the medicine, and when you feel depressed and you're in a bad mood, come along at once to the clinic.' Then he stood up and stretched out his hand to her saying, 'Nice to have met you.'

The others went out as usual next morning and she remained alone in the house. She got up sluggishly, without enthusiasm, to gather up the breakfast dishes. She swallowed the food that was left on the plates, telling herself as usual, 'It's a shame to throw a couple of mouthfuls of beans into the rubbish bin. There's not enough cheese left to make it worthwhile keeping the plate for it.' Then she made herself a glass of tea, which she sipped while nibbling at a pastry that had remained on the table. Feeling she had eaten too much, she got up, dragging her body along, to tidy up the rooms and sweep.

While in the bedroom she came face to face with herself in the mirror. She contemplated herself in her nightgown: a pallid yellowish face, despite its fullness, listless eyes, expressionless features, like those of someone from whom life had absented itself. She pulled herself together and tried to sing '*O sweetness of the world, O sweetness*'. She made an effort but no sound came from her. She cleared

her throat and tried 'I love the life of freedom', but in no way would the voice imprisoned in her throat come forth. It was as if it were stoppered by an enormous cork. She cleared her throat again and finally decided to practise scales. She was surprised to hear the old voice, the voice she had known since she had first become aware of life, her own voice, weak and hoarse and devoid of any beauty, clarity or strength. She contemplated herself again. Her face was her face of old, the face she had known in times past. She gave a bitter smile, shaking her head with sorrow, then took up the two boxes of pills to flush them down the lavatory.

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## The Smile of Death

I remained as though nailed to the platform while the strange smile on the face grew fainter and fainter with the gathering speed of the train, the smile I had not seen for a second in the whole ten years, no not even for less than a millionth of a second of time that is not calculated in the simplest unit of time. I imagined I was dreaming: the buildings, the people, the trains and the solitary green plant in its pot on the platform. All had lost their customary existence, and I experienced a sensation I had never felt before, except for that one faraway time when I was to have an operation on my tonsils and was counting up to four after being given the anaesthetic.

I raised my hand, touched the features of my face and asked the time of someone passing in front of me. I was trying to cling on to time and place. The last carriage passed in front of me. The smile that I was seeing for the first time in ten years had shrunk, as had the hand raised in farewell, to a small black spot that was vanishing. Ah, Aunt Umm Samia had departed.