Sociological Critique of Baha Tāher's *East of the Palms*

Ezzat Molla Ebrahimi[1*] , Mohammad Safaei[2]

1. Associate Professor of Arabic Language and Literature, University of Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author: mebrahim@ut.ac.ir)
2. M.A. in Arabic Language and Literature, University of Tehran, Iran (msafaeimo@yahoo.com)

Abstract

Literature, in addition to its aesthetic and artistic aspects, has always been a reflection of social and cultural realities and characteristics of its respective era and society. Sociological criticism is a relatively modern method in literary criticism. The method studies the structure and content of literary works and their relation to the structures and evolutions of the societies where they have been created. Baha Tāher is a distinguished Egyptian author who has written outstanding stories in the field of critical and social realism to the extent that the Egyptian society, with all its ups and downs, is inherent in his books. The most significant themes in his stories reflect opposing authoritarianism, imperialism, and feudalism. A distinguished novel of his, *East of the Palms*, includes subjects such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, the youth's and the intellectuals' problems, anti-imperialist movements, social repression, student protests during the Egyptian revolution of July 1958, and the issue of Palestine. In the present study, the authors have conducted a sociological critique of this novel based on György Lukács and Lucien Goldmann's sociological theories. Analyzing the two elements of character and theme, the article seeks to find out whether Tāher has been successful in making a connection between the novel's artistic world and the respective social structures. The analysis method of the study is descriptive-analytical. It is concluded that the writer has been successful in reflecting the realities of the Egyptian society and relating the artistic world and social structures.

1. Introduction

Every literary work is to some extent affected by its respective society and its evolutions. It also more or less affects the society itself. Therefore, it is reasonable to discuss the interaction between literature and the society. This mutual trade between the two elements is studied through sociology of literature. What is more prominent in sociological criticism is the reflection of the society in the imaginary and artistic world of the literary work and its various forms ('Asgari Hasanaklu, 1386 [2007 A.D]: 2). This method of criticism studies the literary work while considering an alive and inseparable connection among the society, the artist, and the created literature. Therefore, the critic must be comprehensively aware of the time and place in which the author has lived and the literature has been created. Through this knowledge, the critic would be able to analyze the literary work in order to study the artist's mentality in reacting against or for the society, as well as his interpretation of the society (Mirsādeqi & Mirsādeqi, 1377 [1998 A.D]: 267).

The appalling social and political situation of Arab countries has persuaded Arab novelists to focus on the society's social and political issues. With his excellent artistic vision in his novels, especially *East of the Palms*, the prominent Egyptian writer, Baha Tāher, has reflected Egyptian society in the middle of the 20th century, and has focused on issues such as socialist revolution and modernization and their effects on people's lives. Considering the anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarianist spirit inherent in all his novels, a sociological study of this novel seems essential. The present study discusses whether Tāher has been successful in reflecting the estate of the Egyptian society and making a connection between the novel's artistic world and the society's underlying social structures.

2. Literature review

Although an Egyptian powerful writer and critic, Baha Tāher is not well known among Iranian scholars and literary circles; only one article has been published in the Iranian literary criticism about his wirings: "The Technical and Thematic Characteristics of the Story in Baha Tāher's Works" by Javad Asghari *in Journal of Arabic Language and Literature* (Vol. 4, Spring and Summer, 1390[2011]), which discusses the technical and thematic characteristics of Baha Tāher's stories. The author argues that most of Tāher's stories have a descending plot, and that he is one of the few novelists who has utilized the "situation story" technique in his novels. Tāher's opposition against imperialists is harsh and he possesses a realistic view regarding the issue of Palestine.

3. Sociological criticism of the novel

The mutual interaction between the society and literature has always attracted the critics' attention. The main component of literature is its language. Language is produced and evolved when human beings interact with each other. Therefore, we may consider literature as a social phenomenon because of its main component. In addition to language, "traditional literary techniques, such as symbolism and rhythm, are essentially social; they are contracts and trends only born in human society" (Wellek, 1373 [1994 A.D]: 99). As a result, never "can the literary environment be free from the social effects. Thoughts, beliefs, passions, and ideas are subordinates of the social conditions. Social criticism studies the effects of the literature on society, as well as the effects of society on literary works" (Zarin Kub, 1361 [1982 A.D]: 41).

The study of the relationship between the society and literature has a long tradition in literary criticism. When Plato, in his *Republic*, talks about the influence of poet and poetry on

the readers, and denies the positive effect of the poet on social life, he is actually beginning the argument. "The Platonic concept of imitation is the underlying idea in realizing literature as an image reflecting the society. Aristotle, after Plato, also talks about mimesis and clearly argues for the relationship between artistic imagery and social reality" ('Asgari Hasanaklu, 1387 [2008 A.D]: 56).

The concept of sociology of literature is applicable in two general approaches: the first approach, founded by Robert Escarpit, considers literature as an economic process which, like all other economic activities, consists of the three stages of production, distribution, and consumption. The second approach, founded by György Lukács, studies the relationship between the society and the novel, and the effects of the writers' social vision on the form and theme of the literary works. Lucien Goldmann, after Lukács, contemplated on his ideas and made them more methodological. Goldmann believes that a literary work is not created by a single person; rather, there are various social groups offering their vision, and the writer only provides an artistic and creative form for the social vision of the group to which he belongs (ibid, 74). As a result, "the originality of sociology of literature is inherited in it making a connection between the society and literary work and explaining their interactions. The society exists before the literature is created and the writer is conditioned. Therefore, the writer also reflects and expresses the society and tries to transform it" (Tadié, 1392 [2013 A.D]: 82).

The argument regarding the relationship between novel and the society has been present since the emergence of this literary form. The emergence of novel, in its contemporary form, occurred under the influence of a particular social situation (the Renaissance); the society was thus mutually affected by the novel and the novelists' ideas. An example of this phenomenon

could be seen in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, which was created by an evolving society and rapidly affected the readers and their conception of the new world ('Asgari Hasanaklu, 1387 [2008 A.D]: 77).

Novels are more documented and cognitive than poems, and there is a more meaningful relationship between their characters and social individuals or classes. However, it should be noted that a literary text is not merely a reflection of the society, nor an imagery of a theoretical argument; rather, it converts social issues into semantic and narrative forms (Zima, 1377 [1998 A.D]: 185). In general, sociological criticism of the novel is rooted in its resemblance to the world outside the text. Michel Zeraffa argues that the writer creates a web of reality for the reader. "Reality" is created through this; the reality which the reader is already aware of (1368: 91).

The major points in Lukács's sociological ideas regarding literature, especially novel, are as follows:

1. Every individual creates his own special artistic world, which is consisted of different lifestyles and particular artistic styles and themes

2. There is a dialectic interaction between the internal structure of the literary work and the mental structure of its creator

3. Lukács, following Hegel, considers novel as a bourgeois epic and the most prominent literary form of the modern era; he argues that novel is the spirit of masculine maturity. Unlike epic, which is about the masses, novel considers and reflects the individuals' internal world. Therefore, the protagonist is not the mass, rather, an individual, a problematic individual

4. Modern life has destroyed the concept of universality as

it was realized in Ancient Greece. Therefore, novel is the epic of the era in order to create a universality of life which is currently hidden

5. In the modern society, the concept of reification is present in all aspects of the social life. Labor division and rationality, widespread bureaucracy, and the increasing importance of commodities and money has turned humans into self-alienated creatures. The outcome is the infinite isolation of the individuals in the new world

6. Lukács, following Marxism, considers realism as the single great school of writing. Lukács, under the influence of this vision, turns into the passionate admirer of realism, a kind of realism which is found in the works of Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, and Tolstoy ('Asgari Hasanaklu, 1387 [2008 A.D]: 122).

Goldmann explicitly considers the agent of the cultural creations to be the ideology of a mass, not an individual's; a mass ideology which is conveyed by an individual from the mass through artistic form and singularity. The real creators of artistic works are social classes and groups of people. It is, in fact, their ideology which is manifest in the literary work (ibid, 88-89). Goldmann believes that "prior to looking for the connections between the literary work and the social classes of its time, we need to understand the work itself and its internal and special concepts and then, in terms of the particular world consisted of the created characters and objects through which the writer speaks to us, we should aesthetically analyze the literary work" ('Asgari Hasanaklu, 1386 [2007 A.D]: 52).

Goldmann considers the writer as the representative of the same social class in which he is brought up, or toward which he has a tendency. He is a medium through whom the ideology of a

social class or group is transferred. This way, the work of a writer is the manifest of a particular class's ideology. He does not create an abstract and imaginary world which is not in any way rooted in reality; rather, he creates an imaginary reality which is in direct relation to the social one; this social reality is the arena around which the writer lives. It is only novel which is able to turn this explicit social reality into an aesthetic phenomenon. Goldmann argues that "thoughts and conceptions of a social group or a larger one, in terms of the ideas of a country's population in a particular point in history, are always evolving and progressing." For Goldmann, the term "meaningful structure", in addition to its emphasis on the unity of components in a work, points to the internal structure of the work in its way of reflecting its inherent ideology; "it means how the ideology of a social class or group is turned into a critical element of the text's imaginary world" (ibid, 57).

Therefore, the critique of *East of the Palms* in the present study is based on Lukács and Goldmann's theories. In other words, while introducing the novel and providing a brief summary of its story, we will explain the writer's and his era's socio-historical situation, and then discuss the novel's formal and thematic elements in order to provide an explanation for the internal and special meaning of the book and its interactions with the social structures in which it was created.

4. The writer

Baha Tāher is a prominent Egyptian novelist, journalist, and critic born in 1935 in Giza. He was awarded a BA in literature from Cairo University in 1956 and continued his higher education in the field of audiovisual media until 1973. He worked as a director and broadcaster for the Egyptian radio and television organization until 1975, when he was deprived of his rights to write and publish his books. After this, he immigrated

out of Egypt and worked in various Asian and African countries as a translator. He was a UN interpreter in Geneva from 1981 to 1995. He went back to Egypt in 1995 and currently resides in his home country.

Baha Tāher has written 10 fictional books which include four collections of short stories and six novels. He has also written non-fictional books. Some of his works in their chronological order are as follows:

- *Courtship* (Collection of Short Stories) 1972

- *Yesterday, I Dreamed of You* (Collection of Short Stories) 1984

- *East of the Palms* (Novel) 1985

- *As Doha Said* (Novel) 1985

- *Ten Egyptian Plays* (Criticism) 1985

- *I'm the King, Coming Back* (Collection of Short Stories) 1986

- *Refaa's Sons: Culture and Freedom* (History) 1990

- *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery* (Novel) 1991

- *Love in Exile* (Novel) 1995

- *I Went to a Waterfall* (Collection of Short Stories) 1998

- *The Point of Light* (Novel) 2001

- *In Praise of the Novel* (Criticism) 2004

- *Sunset Oasis* (Novel) 2006

- *I Didn't Know the Peafowls Fly* (Collection of Short Stories) 2010.

Baha Tāher has received various awards for his literary activities. Two of them include The Egyptian Government's Merit Award in Arts in 1998 and the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for *Sunset Oasis* in 2008.

4.1. *East of the Palms*

Baha Tāher wrote *East of the Palms*, his third literary work and first novel, in 1985. The major theme of the story is various issues reflecting the Egyptian society during the British colonization of the country. The writer explains various aspects of the infiltration of imperialism in the country's governmental bases and analyzes the era's social and political events. The novel tells the story of a few students living in a dormitory with their own particular problems. The story consists of three parts. The first part is about the lives of disappointed students who are depressed, indifferent, and wearied of politics and its weaknesses, anti-imperialist activities, and even family situations and the gaps between the educated and the traditional, illiterate generation. In the second part of the story, the writer illustrates the lives of these students outside university and in their home village in an effort to analyze the roots of the failure of the educated and intellectual class in different economic and social aspects of the society. The author talks about the students' anti-imperialist activities and their approaches toward the issues in the Arab World, including opposing Zionism and defending Palestine in the third part.

To better understand the themes of this novel, we need to quickly review Egypt's politico-social trends of the time. During the 40s, British imperialism was roaming through the Arab World and occupation of the Palestinian lands by the Zionists was concluded through the support of the British government. Deep social gaps, feudalists' oppression and tyranny, and social injustice on the one hand, and Palestine's occupation and its

disastrous outcomes on the other, had made the Arabs' blood boil. Therefore, we witness various revolutions and liberalization movements around the Arab World during those years. One of them is the Egyptian Socialist Revolution of July 1958 led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, which aimed at liberating Egypt from British colonialism, opposing feudalism, promoting social justice, forming a powerful national military, and trying to liberate Palestine; although some of its slogans and promises never turned into reality (Badavi, 1993:183).

The Egyptians' anger and hatred toward British colonialism and the country's appalling situation persuaded writers and poets to reflect Egypt's political and social realities in their works. Baha Tāher, also, did this in his novel *East of the Palms* where he tried to analyze the country's events in the 40s and 50s and the students' demonstrations during the July 1958 revolution. "He, who was once a follower of Gamal Abdel Nasser and believed in Egypt's Socialist Revolution, has a critical view toward the revolution and its promises and outcomes" (Asghari, 1390 [2011 A.D]: 34). In his books, he considers the events of Nasser's era as "damaging to the future of the Egyptians" (Asghari, 1390 [2011 A.D]: 36). He has been regarded as a writer in search of the truth who extremely disapproves of Egypt's revolutionary government because of its untrue promises, violating the people's trust, and imposing injustice and cruelty over them (Asghari, 1390 [2011 A.D]: 44).

5. A summary of the novel

East of the Palms is in fact the story of a few students who have come to Cairo to study at the university, but spend most of their time in overnight parties. Throughout the time of the story, several events happen to them, which change their lives. The narrator, a villager who studies at Cairo University, is the main character or the protagonist, whose name is not mentioned in the

novel. Initially, he achieves great educational success. But as time is passed, he feels disappointed and suffers spiritual crisis, which lead to his educational downfall and prolongs his educational period. He is no longer interested in studying; he does not attend his classes and turns to drinking and smoking. "Leili", the narrator's classmate, is fond of him and tries to help him and find the reason for his crisis. But she leaves him when she cannot come to a desirable outcome.

What has caused the narrator's crisis is rooted in the issues and problems happening for his family and relatives in his home village. His father is a great landowner and has obtained considerable fortune and lands through usury. He has even distrained the properties of a few of the other landowners of the village, including Haj Sadiq's children, and is in possession of their bonds. His brother, the narrator's uncle, works on the lands he has inherited from his father. However, Haj Sadiq's children, who themselves are great landowners of the village, argue with him over a part of the land and claim it as their own. The narrator's uncle goes to his brother (the narrator's father) for help and asks him to exploit his influence over Haj Sadiq's children and deny them from acquiring his lands. But his brother, who only thinks about his own interests, refuses to help him. Regardless of all the efforts done by the narrator and his cousin, Hossein, in order to solve the problem, no positive outcome is obtained. In addition to that, the narrator's sister, Faride, and Hossein's marriage is called off because of their fathers' conflicts.

Finally, when the narrator is back to his village for his summer vacations, he finds out about the deep conflicts between the members of the family and his relatives. On a Friday, when Hossein and his father are coming back from the Prayers, Haj Sadiq's children, who still intractably consider themselves as the true owners of the land, attack them with weapons. Hossein

covers his father to save him and, shot by Al-Awadi, one of Haj Sadiq's children, both of them are covered in blood. The death of his uncle and cousin leads to the narrator's spiritual crisis and ultimately his educational downfall and addiction to drugs.

Another part of the novel illustrates the scenes of the students' demonstrations and talks about some of the political issues in the Arab World, especially Palestine. "Samir", the narrator's friend who lives with him in an apartment, has been familiar with political movements for a long time and has attended the students' demonstrations and strikes. They do not meet very often and are at home at different times of the day. "Suzie", their friend and classmate who is secretly in love with Samir, has been unaware of his whereabouts for a long time. Thus, she goes to the narrator and asks him about Samir. However, the narrator cannot help her and she leaves. On the other hand, Egyptian security forces, who are looking for Samir, storm his apartment in search of a clue. They rummage Samir's room and take some of his books and magazines. The same afternoon, Samir goes to the apartment and tells the narrator that they should go to "Tahrir Square", the focal point of the students' demonstrations and get "Leili" out of the protests.

The narrator, who does not know the reason for Samir's political activities, curiously asks him about his acts. Samir answers: "when I was a freshman, I lived with a Palestinian student called "Essam" at the dormitory. I had a habit of joking around with other students and I used to tell Essam that they had sold their land to the Jews. One day, finally, Essam told me the story of the occupation of their land. He told me how the British had presented Palestine to the Jews with deception and deceit and how his father and grandfather had lost their lives defending their homeland. A few years later, I saw a photo of him in a newspaper. The photo was captioned 'Martyr Essam, Engineering Student at Cairo University'. Then, I found out that

he had sacrificed himself for his homeland just like his fathers. After some thinking, I suddenly found Palestine in the middle of Egypt and Egypt in the middle of Palestine. Yes, our tragedies are one, thousands of our ancestors and fathers have been martyred like Essam's father."

Through the words of a Palestinian student, the writer artistically tells the story of the British and Zionists' cooperation in occupying Palestine and the spiritual and physical pressures imposed on the Palestinians by the British soldiers to give up their homes and lands. Baha Tāher, in his books, "has a completely realistic perspective of the Palestinian issue which is far from the populist judgments" (Asghari, 1390 [2011 A.D]: 44) and illustrates their sufferings comprehensively and methodologically.

When, finally, Samir and the narrator arrive at Tahrir Square, they find a huge number of student and non-student demonstrators. The narrator tries to get Leili out of the population, but she resists. After the police issues an ultimatum for the demonstrators to leave the square, the students' slogan screaming "my country … my country, wake up Egypt" gets louder and louder. Finally, police attacks the demonstrators. The narrator, who is trying to protect Leili, is severely injured and passes out. When he regains his consciousness, he meets Leili and Samir looking after him in the hospital. *East of the Palms* ends with the description of the narrator's wedding ceremony.

6. Critique of the novel

The reflection of the society in the novel and the coherence of the social structures in the artistic work could be more clearly analyzed by studying the two elements of character and theme.

Character. Character is probably the most fundamental element in the story. It is described as "a collection of personal

instincts, tendencies, characteristics, and habits. A character is a set of normal, spiritual, and moral qualities, which is the outcome of the mutual interaction between the fundamental nature and inheritable and acquisitive characteristics which manifest themselves in the thoughts, talks, and behaviors of the individual, distinguishing him/her from others" (Yunesi, 1382 [2003 A.D]: 289). In Mirsādeqi's (1380 [2001 A.D]) words, "the created individuals of stories, plays, etc. are called characters. Character is an individual whose psychological and moral qualities are manifest in what he does and what he says" (Mirsādeqi, 1380 [2001 A.D]: 83). Virginia Woolf, in explaining the importance of character, says: "I believe that all the novels only deal with characters and it is only to depict the character that the form of novel is introduced and promoted" (Allott, 1380 [2001 A.D]: 455). Jean Paul Sartre argues that "there is no idea or theory in a novel, unless it is conveyed through the interactions of the characters with each other" (1370: 91).

Sociological study of the novel regards character in a limitless setting and widespread universality, which can be interpreted as the novel's society. When considered inside this universality, the character can engage in mutual interactions with the other elements of the novel and also with the writer and the reader. Lukács believes that the character, like the whole world of the novel, is under the writer's control and cannot have any power on the scene except on the writer's will. Goldmann views character as a representative of a social group or class and Mikhail Bakhtin argues for character's independence and liberty in his actions and considers the writer's control over character to limit the opportunity of communication in the novel. What is clearly manifest in these approaches, is the importance of character and characterization in the social criticism of the novel ('Asgari Hasanaklu, 1387 [2008 A.D]: 97-98).

Through this introduction, we will study the characters of *East of the Palms*. The novel includes several leading and several supporting characters. A group of them are the protagonist's (the narrator's) classmates whom he has met during his education at the university. The other group consists of his family and relatives, whose lives and problems are re-counted when the narrator talks about his home village.

The Protagonist (The Narrator), who faces various problems and doubts when he is encountered with the issue of modernization and the challenges between tradition and modernity in his village and Cairo, is the representative of the Egyptian student and the educated class in Egypt, a class which, although educated and distanced from ancient traditions and beliefs, is still not fully aware of political and international issues. The narrator could be considered as the representative of a society where the internal problems and conflicts have prevented people from focusing on their future and fate. In fact, the story conveys the ideology of a large group of Egyptians in the middle of the 20th century, a group of people who initially ignored politics and the country's current trends, but, gradually, when the masses became more politically-sensible and the politically-aware, began enlightening the others, waking up and asking for a change in their country's fate.

The narrator is a compassionate and sympathetic individual who does not hesitate to solve the problems of the other characters: "Listen to my solution. We go to Haj Sadiq's children and ask them not to let the case go to the court. Because this'll take years and us and them will both suffer. It'll be best if we reach an agreement" (Tāher, 1985: 48). He is after noble values like peace and social justice and tries to prevent conflicts.

Samir is the representative of the intellectual, educated, and informed class of the society. He attends political activities and student oppositions. His reformist, informative character plays a

vital role in introducing the narrator to politics and issues regarding the country's future. Samir explains Palestine's occupation and its connection to Egypt's situation: "to write a text about Essam, I studied a little about Palestine and Halhul (Essam's hometown) and then I found myself reading about other things. Suddenly, I found Halhul in Egypt and Egypt in Halhul. I saw how thousands of our ancestors and fathers, like Essam's father and grandfather, had been killed. So, our tragedies are one. Our sorrows are identical … When the British occupied Egypt, they distributed our lands among those less than a hundred people who had helped them in doing so. But they imprisoned thirty-thousand people who had contributed in Arabi Pasha's uprising. These were in addition to those who were killed in the war. Which of these groups do the Egyptians belong to? When the Jews came, some Palestinians who were less than a hundred sold them their lands. But thousands were killed during the uprisings and war with the Jews. Which ones are Palestinian? My friend! There are people among every nation who will always bark for those who give them a bone. Do you want more than this? There's a barker dog inside everybody. But the important thing is to shut it down" (Tāher, 1985: 92).

The Narrator's Father is the representative of the landowner and feudalist class of Egypt. He prefers his interests over everything else. He is a usurer, a stingy person. His actions and manners in the novel manifest the authoritarianism, the despotism, and the tyranny of the feudalist system and the rules of the traditional beliefs. He does not even help his own brother to maintain their fathers' lands, to the extent that his brother tells him: "I mean they're your friends. I'm your brother. I'm your own flesh and blood. When I need your help, I expect your assistance. But you keep your friends more valuable than your brother. Maybe this suits you well. My brother! I know that you've distrained many of their lands for the money you've lent them. To all of them. All of their houses and each one of them has an account with you" (Tāher, 1985: 31).

The Narrator's Uncle is the representative of the opposing, anti-imperialist, and anti-tyranny masses. He is not well-educated, but stands against the tyranny of the feudalist class. Although he is killed in the end, he does not stop seeking justice and righteousness.

Essam is a Palestinian student who is the symbol of resistance and opposition like the narrator's uncle. Although his personality is not independently present in the novel and readers know him through the conversation between Samir and the narrator, Essam plays an influential role in changing the ideas of the other characters, such as Samir, and in changing the sequence of events in the story. In fact, Essam is the reason that Samir has engaged in political activities. He is the representative of the Palestinian oppressed and suffering nation who are being killed one after another in their fight for taking back their lands from the Zionists. He tells the story of his father's resistance and death defending his homeland: "he told those who were with him: 'if we're to die, we have to die defending our homeland. There's no reason for us to be sacrificed like our fathers.' He was one of the hundreds who carried a gun and stood against the Jewish tanks. They were massacred right then and there and no one recalled even their names" (Tāher, 1985: 90-91).

We can divide the characters of the story into three general categories: the first one is the protesters, students, and the educated, intellectual class – the narrator, Samir, Leili; the second category is the capitalists and landowners – Haj Sadiq's children, the narrator's father; and the third group are the advocates of the government – the security forces and the old man on the train.

As witnessed, the characters of the story are each a reflection of the characteristics of a particular social group. Protesters, students, and intellectuals are the leading characters of the novel. But the characters advocating for the government, who

are against opposition, are all supporting characters which are not too many; for example, the security forces who are bound to support the government and oppress the opposition or the old man who is a passenger on the train and is against the student and public demonstrations, are all supporting characters who are rather few in the story. The small number of the government-advocating characters and the large number of the protesters and intellectuals in the novel represent that a considerable part of the Egyptian society consists of the well-educated intellectuals who had embarked upon the journey to protest and oppose against the British tyranny and imperialism during the time of the colonialism because of their increased political awareness. This was the class who played an important role in the future socialist revolution. Yet, among these, there were a few who advocated the government and served the tyrannical objectives of the ruling system. In other words, the quality and quantity of the characterization very well depicts the society's structure. In this way, the writer has bridged a connection between the artistic world of the novel and different layers of the society.

It is the same regarding the issue of feudalism which was a prominent phenomenon among the Egyptian society during the years of the British colonialism. Baha Tāher depicts a society in another part of the novel which still lives under the feudalist system and the will of the masters is preferred over everything else, even if it is the death of peasant. The story of the narrator's uncle's resistance against the tyranny of Haj Sadiq's children which ultimately leads to his death is a clear example of the ruling system over Egyptian farmers during those years. The writer, in this way, expresses another layer of the society.

Theme. Theme is a prominent term in literature which is sometimes taken for the subject or topic, while its meaning and application are different. The well-known definition is that theme is the major, dominant idea in a literary work. In fact,

theme is an outcome of the subject, which emphasizes the broadness and evolution of the story. It is the idea or the set of ideas which consolidate author's fundamental subject and "lead the story to an artistic unity" (Mirsādeqi & Mirsādeqi, 1377 [1998 A.D]: 174). Mirsādeqi and Mirsādeqi (1377 [1998 A.D]: 176)believes that "theme is an idea born from the author's experience." In other words, the "theme of a story is its ruling spirit and a general outcome about life, which is either explicitly conveyed or interpreted" (Perrine, 1376 [1997 A.D]: 57).

Writers of literary works often refuse explicit expression of the theme in their writings and use indirect methods to convey and illustrate it. For example, they hide themes in their characters' thoughts, behaviors, and imaginations and the readers find those themes by reading the story, interpreting these thoughts, and grabbing the subject. However the writer is more delicate and implicit in conveying the theme, his work is more influential on the readers.

The main theme in *East of the Palms* is the problems and challenges of the educated, intellectual class, as well as the events leading to the revolution of July 1958. Baha Tāher illustrates the contemporary Arab's wanderings and problems, especially those of the educated class in the Egyptian society, a society in which social traditions and repressions have made the situation unbearable for the intellectuals. This, ultimately, leads to an awakening, which turns them into the pioneers of opposition against domestic and foreign tyranny. This theme influences every event and aspect of the story throughout the novel.

Accordingly, Baha Tāher, throughout *East of the Palms*, portraits student strikes and oppositions during the revolution of July 1958, which were formed in order to throw out the British imperialists and destroy domestic tyranny. The writer frequently reflects on student and public oppositions and demonstrations in

order to express their ideals and objectives: "I told you that there, in Tahrir Square, there was a demonstration … When I looked out of the streetcar's window, I saw fifty or sixty around me who had covered their heads with their books and their hands and they were running fast. Security forces were running after them. My country! My country! And the military beat them …" (Tāher, 1985: 25).

In addition to the main theme of the novel, there are various secondary themes which include expression of the rites and beliefs of the traditional societies, conflicts between tradition and modernity, condemnation of feudalist and landowner class, constraints of women, repression, and restricted political situation.

In addition, the writer also illustrates various limiting traditions of traditional societies, such as constraints for women in choosing their spouse, "when my uncle came to see us, me and Hossein were lying down in a room. My uncle told my father: Faride will marry Hossein. My father answered "who's better for her than her cousin …" (Tāher, 1985: 22). Baha Tāher also points to some of the superstitious beliefs of the Egyptians and rejects them in the story: "my mother always burns Espand in order to protect us from the evil eye. When my father was not there, my mother used to cry all the time and say that: Ah, Faride! You have a lot of sorrow and despair! …" (Tāher, 1985: 36).

Moreover, the Tāher freely attacks the Egyptian feudal and landowner class and those whom he considers to be evil and tyrannical: "they want to claim the garden and you want me to say nothing? What should I tell father when I'm in the grave, when I'm dead, lying next to him? … Brother! You know they're evil … My uncle said: I wish God has mercy on you! You will find tomorrow that who the criminals are. Today, they began from my land, and tomorrow, they will invade yours …" (Tāher, 1985: 31-32).

Expressing the symbols of repression in the society is another secondary theme in the story. Security forces have all the opposition and individuals connected to them under surveillance and know all the details of their lives. Accordingly, a police agent tells the narrator: "we know you as well. Two or three years ago, when you were a member of the faculty's society of literature, arranging cultural speeches and things like that, we thought about you for a time. We knew that those activities would lead to some problems in the future. But when you left the society and the faculty for the cabaret, you actually made us feel comfortable very early" (Tāher, 1985: 67).

7. Conclusion

Based on what has been demonstrated and discussed in this paper, we can conclude that Baha Tāher is a realist writer. In *East of the* Palms, he enters the heart of the social and political lives of Egyptian people in a particular point of time to depict the realities of the country's society. He has been successful in portraying different layers of the Egyptian society in the artistic world of the novel, which has been the basis of our sociological critique. The story narrates the challenges and conflicts of the people who are trapped in the middle of the ups and downs of their time and place. It also expresses the problems of the educated class and the wanderings and contradictions they encounter. The novel depicts two contradictory trends of the educated intellectuals in the Egyptian society. Throughout the story, some of the leading characters feel absurd, lonely, and wandering, and are entrapped in drugs because of their self-alienation, which results in temporarily identity confusion. But these groups are, in Baha Tāher's belief, the outcomes of a society's transition from tradition to modernity and the writer firmly believes in this change. Accordingly, some of his story's students turn into the leaders and pioneers of anti-authoritarianism, and play a key role during the July revolution

and student oppositions, demonstrations, and strikes. The author also talks about the Egyptian society's social gaps, the conflicts of the rich and the poor, the economic, livelihood, social, and cultural crises, the promotion of injustice, the spread of obliquity, and its negative outcomes for the society.

Finally, Baha Tāher has a completely realistic and special view toward the issue of Palestine in his novel. He depicts the oppression and suffering in the form of conversations between the characters and tries to inform the people and change their approach toward the issue, conveying the importance of supporting the Palestinians to his readers.

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