CHAPTER FIVE

RACE, CLASS, WAR, AND GENDER IN ṬAYYIBA AL-IBRĀHĪM’S MUDHAKKIRĀT KHĀDIM

...being may determine consciousness but revolutionary transformation of the conditions of being will depend upon raising the level of class [and gender]-consciousness.

...war and nationalist struggle may operate as catalyst[s] for change, breaking down traditional barriers between men and women...

Introduction

Whereas Laylā al-ʿUthmān’s *Wasmiyya* treats the themes of love, class, and gender in pre-oil Kuwait, Tayyiba al-Ibrāhīm’s *Mudhakkirāt khādim* [A Servant’s Diary] explores the same themes in post-oil or contemporary Kuwait. Born in Kuwait in 1952, al-Ibrāhīm¹ has a Diploma in Mathematics and has worked as a teacher and civil servant in Kuwait. She started writing at the age of thirteen (in the 1960s); her stories began to appear in the Kuwaiti dailies in the late 1970s. She has since published more than ten novels, most of them belonging to the science fiction genre.² She is also a social and feminist critic, granting regular

¹ For al-Ibrāhīm’s biography and list of her works, see Laylā M. Ṣāliḥ, *Udābāʾ wa-adībāt al-Kuwayt* (Kuwait: The Kuwait Writers’ Association Press, 1996), pp. 173–177; available online: http://www.althakerah.net/inner.php?Level=2&Id=7&list=; or http://www.maraya.net/inner.php?Level=4&Id=78&list= (last accessed on 12 September, 2008).

² Her science fiction novels—the first in the series being *al-Insān al-bahīṭ* [The Bewildered Human] published in Kuwait in 1986—deal with human cloning. They received some media attention throughout the Arab world beginning from the late 1990s consequent upon the real life cloning of a living being, Dolly the Sheep. See for example, the Kuwaiti weekly *Mirāṭ al-unma* [The Mirror of the Nation], no. 1117, 16 May, 1998; and *al-Siyāṣa* [Politics], no. 11225, 29 February, 2000).
interviews to the press and writing newspaper articles in support of the struggle for Kuwaiti women’s political and human rights. Her social reality narratives—mainly short stories—are very few. One of them is Mudhakkirāt khādim, which is the focus of our discussion in this chapter, hereafter referred to as Mudhakkirāt.

As shown in its title, Mudhakkirāt—a novel of two parts published in 1995—is in diary form. This is a very rare mode of writing in the Kuwaiti literary tradition. The novel has two narrative levels. The main story—largely narrated using the first person, confessional mode—is contained in a diary, written by an unnamed domestic servant who is employed by a middle-class Kuwaiti family. Though already married and a father of several children, he soon develops an inordinate passion for his mistress, Madam Sāra, who is the heroine of the novel.

Because the servant-diarist (herein simply referred to as ‘Indian’ because he, presumably, comes from the Subcontinent) is not literate in Arabic, the author claims that what we are reading is a translation from English into Arabic. The narrative of this diary—a ‘secondary narrative’—is embedded in a ‘primary or frame narrative’, which is ‘focalised’ and narrated by the translator, a Kuwaiti man and friend of the family around whom the story revolves.

In his introductory remarks that can be regarded as a ‘prologue’, the translator notes that he has been asked by the central female figure in the diary to change all the real names of persons and places that appear in the diary before publishing it (57). But, instead of replacing the names with other ones, the translator reverses their linear arrangements in such a way that the reader could easily recognise them. This makes it


4 From the description of the servant and his country of origin, it is very easy to conclude that he comes from the Indian Subcontinent, which includes, notably, countries like India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Bangladeshis constitute the highest percentage of domestic workers in Kuwait.


6 The names, as they appear in the novel, are put as Tayūk (for Kuwayt), Daʿūs (for Saʿūd), Harās (for Sāra[h]), Liban (for Nabīl), Rišān (for Naṣīr), etc. Please note that the arrangement of these words is better understood in its original Arabic scripts, rather than in transliteration.