



## THE RABBIT AS A SYMBOLIC MOTIF IN SALWA BAKR'S LITERARY WORKS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19230519>

**Annotation:** This article examines the symbolic function of the rabbit image in Salwa Bakr's short novel *"Rabbits"* within the broader context of world cultural and literary traditions. The study explores the multifaceted meanings of the rabbit as a universal symbol, encompassing fertility, wealth, cunning, as well as weakness and cowardice across various cultures, including ancient Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Asian, Slavic, and Uzbek traditions. Particular attention is given to the allegorical representation of the protagonist Usama, whose characterization embodies the dual symbolic nature of the rabbit. The article also analyzes Bakr's distinctive narrative style, emphasizing her use of symbolism in conjunction with realism, and situates her work within contemporary Arab literature, which addresses pressing epistemological and socio-political concerns. Furthermore, the study highlights how the novel reflects the socio-economic realities of Egyptian society and underscores literature's role in revealing suppressed truths.

**Keywords:** *Salwa Bakr, Rabbits, symbolism, rabbit image, allegory, Egyptian literature, Arab literature, cultural symbols, realism and symbolism.*

**Introduction:** In contemporary Egyptian literature, Salwa Bakr occupies a distinctive position, and her short novel *"Rabbits"* is regarded as a work of high artistic merit. The success of any literary work is closely associated with the appropriateness of its title. The designation *"Rabbits"* for Bakr's novel is therefore not incidental. The rabbit functions as a symbolic motif and is represented in the text through a unique artistic approach.

Owing to its remarkable reproductive capacity, the rabbit has been widely employed as a symbol of fertility in numerous ancient cultures. In many traditions, it also possesses mythological significance. In the Greco-Roman world, the rabbit symbolized not only fertility but also love and passion; it was considered one of the most acceptable offerings to the deities of love, Aphrodite and Eros.

According to Egyptologist and archaeologist Tarek Tawfiq, in the ancient Egyptian language the rabbit symbol was pronounced as "un" or "venin," corresponding to a verb meaning "to be," "to occur," or "to continue." He further notes that ancient Egyptians frequently depicted wild rabbits in their tombs. This can be attributed to their admiration for the animal's intelligence, agility, large





perceptive eyes, and long ears, which function as mechanisms for detecting and signaling danger. The rabbit motif appears in numerous tomb paintings, often in scenes of desert hunting and military combat. Furthermore, the guardians of the gates of the afterlife are depicted as hybrid beings with lion bodies and human-like heads bearing rabbit ears. In colloquial usage, the term “rabbit” ( أرنب ) is also employed to denote one million Egyptian pounds.

In Native American folklore, the rabbit is commonly portrayed as a trickster figure, employing cunning and stratagem to achieve its objectives.

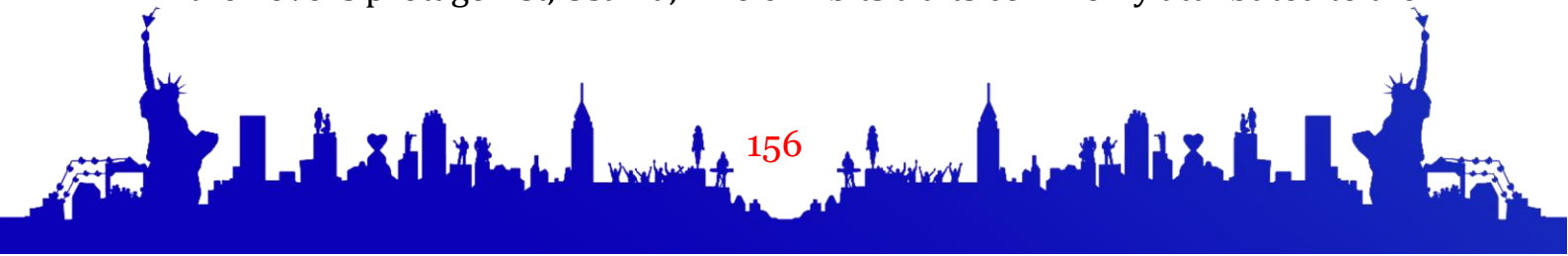
In contrast, among Slavic peoples, the rabbit primarily symbolizes cowardice and is perceived as a defenseless creature. A Belarusian legend attributes the rabbit’s timidity to the small size of its heart.

In a number of Asian cultures, particularly in China and Japan, the rabbit is associated with longevity and is closely linked to lunar mythology; it is believed that a rabbit resides on the Moon, where it prepares the elixir of immortality. In contrast, in Korean literary tradition, the rabbit is often perceived as a symbol of harmfulness or pestilence.

Within Uzbek folklore, the rabbit is predominantly conceptualized as a symbol of fear and frailty. In colloquial usage, the expression “*quyonyurak*” (“rabbit-hearted”) is employed to describe cowardly individuals, while the phrase “*quyonning rasmini chizdi*” conveys the meaning of sudden disappearance or escape. Similarly, in Uzbek literary discourse, the rabbit functions as a symbol of cowardice and duplicity. An illustrative example can be found in Ulug’bek Hamdam’s novel “*Muvozanat*”: “– Try to understand, this is not the time for heroism. One must be a rabbit! – Mirazim uttered, choking with emotion.”

Irrespective of whether the rabbit symbolizes fertility, prosperity, agility, love, and cunning, or, conversely, weakness and cowardice, it retains its status as a universal cultural symbol. A comparative examination of the rabbit’s representations across different literary traditions demonstrates its complex and multifaceted semantic nature.

**Main part:** In light of these observations, the image of the rabbit in S. Bakr’s novel “*Rabbits*” acquires a distinctly symbolic function. This symbolism constitutes a complex allegorical construct, simultaneously embodying two divergent meanings: on the one hand, the rabbit as a symbol of fertility and abundance, rooted in ancient Egyptian mythology; on the other hand, as a representation of weakness and timidity. These dual characteristics are reflected in the novel’s protagonist, Usama, who exhibits traits commonly attributed to the





rabbit. This is further substantiated by several instances in the narrative where Usama is explicitly compared to a rabbit.

هب أسامة من مكانه كالأرنب المذعور

*“Usama abruptly leapt to his feet, like a startled rabbit.”*

لم تخط يده كلمة «لاء»؛ إذ كان مضطراً لقول: نعم؛ لأنه يشارك فيها عادة بناءً على تعليمات رؤسائه في الوزارة، فيذهب إلى المقر الانتخابي وكأنه أرنب صغير ممسوك قسراً من أذنيه لا يقوى على الإفلات، ويكتب منصاعاً الكلمة التي حفظها عن ظهر قلب وأجاد قراءتها وكتابتها «نعم».

*“He writes the word ‘Yes’—which he has memorized and learned to read and write—with the obedience of a small rabbit that has been forcibly seized by its ears and is unable to escape.”*

Symbolism occupies a significant place in Salwa Bakr’s творчество. This essential feature of her stylistic approach closely resembles that of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. In Ibsen’s dramas, the emphasis on moral issues enables a synthesis of realism and symbolism. As the world becomes increasingly globalized, the tendency to perceive reality in abstract terms within the creative process has also intensified. This has made it possible to express metaphysical concepts and to articulate the relationship between artistic creation and the Absolute Creator. Indeed, through creative imagination, the artist is capable not only of perceiving phenomena that are imperceptible to the ordinary eye, but also of rendering them through symbolic representation. In her novel “Rabbits”, Salwa Bakr likewise skillfully integrates symbolic imagery into the fabric of the work through her creative imagination.

The novel “Rabbits” reflects the level of aesthetic and intellectual consciousness of Egyptian society, while simultaneously prompting an analysis of and reflection on the impact of political, economic, and cultural decline on the lives of ordinary individuals. In many of her works, Salwa Bakr focuses on the fate of marginalized women; however, in “Rabbits”, she chooses a male protagonist. His name, Usama, in Arabic means “lion.” In Arabic literary tradition, the lion has long symbolized courage, bravery, and valor. This name, however, stands in stark contrast to Usama’s character and is employed in an ironic sense. The author characterizes Usama as follows:

*“In my short novel ‘Rabbits’, we observe that its protagonist, Usama, is portrayed as a deeply humane and kind individual. He is depicted as a citizen of the Third World who, having become accustomed to oppression, ignorance, and poverty, is a person devoid of any real power or authority.”*

Through the fate of such an ordinary individual, the image of an entire society is revealed. As has been noted, “Contemporary Arab literature stands at a crossroads. The problems confronting literature today are primarily





epistemological in nature. Literature constitutes a privileged, perhaps even the principal, means of knowledge—both of the world and of the self. In societies where truth is concealed, distorted, or suppressed, the function of literature is to reassess that truth and to articulate it openly.” In the short novel *“Rabbits”*, Usama’s efforts to meet the basic needs of his family, as well as the realities of his lived experience, are rendered through an artistic lens.

The depiction of the harsh living conditions of an ordinary individual and a heart filled with suffering and anguish constitutes a defining feature of Salwa Bakr’s distinctive literary style. It is for this reason that she has been awarded the prestigious Mahmoud Darwish Prize in the Arab world. As has been observed, “Salwa Bakr regards writing as a means of ‘struggling against oppression’ and reflects on the ‘subjugation of women’; she also draws attention to the falsification of collective memory by official historiography. Her multifaceted resistance to oppression has positioned her as a defender of freedom and emancipation on a global scale. All of this justifies the awarding of the Mahmoud Darwish Prize to Salwa Bakr.”

She is also considered a follower of the renowned Egyptian writer Khairy Shalaby, who brought the sufferings and hardships of the lower social strata into literary representation.

Conclusion: The short novel *“Rabbits”* by the renowned Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr embodies a significant literary depth and, through the use of symbolism, explores some of the most pressing and painful issues of Egyptian society, as reflected in the life of an ordinary working-class individual. Bakr emphasizes that a writer should strive to become the conscience of their era. She perceives herself as a witness to the contradictions and conflicts within Egyptian society, particularly to their impact on the lives of her characters.

As noted by the prominent literary critic Faruq Abdel Qadir, “Unlike Nawal El Saadawi and many other Arab women writers, Salwa Bakr does not depict simplistic or purely conflict-based relationships between men and women. Rather, she presents both male and female characters in a balanced manner, highlighting their positive and negative traits alike.” This observation attests to Bakr’s ability to create nuanced and multidimensional characters. In *“Rabbits”*, she successfully applies this approach, crafting a convincing and well-developed character in the figure of Usama.

#### **Foydalanilgan adabiyotlar ro`yxati:**

1. Claude K. Abraham, “Myth and Symbol: The Rabbit in Medieval France,” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1963), pp. 589– 597, – P. 589.

