

Madwomen' voices in two Arab women authors' short stories: 'fury' and 'from mare to mouse

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present two Arabic short stories, translated into English, and read their respective representations of "madwomen" – women who find that marriage leads to their self-annihilation and threatens their sanity. The first is a short story by Emirati author Amina Abdallah, entitled "Fury." The author writes about a Middle-eastern woman, the protagonist, who is married to a very rich man, yet is unable to find happiness. Madness enters the picture and is her escape from the patriarchal world. The second text is "From Mare to Mouse" which is written by Lebanese author Layla Ba'albaki. The unnamed protagonist is the daughter of a European woman who had married, presumably, a Lebanese man. As such, she is a hybrid, unable to find a balance between her two heritages. Throughout her narration of the events, we witness her decline and self-annihilation. Like most oppressed female characters, only through madness are the characters able to resist patriarchal impositions. Both texts attempt to write, or re-write, the figure of the "madwoman", only this time, this is the Eastern "madwoman" rather than the "madwoman in the attic." This paper examines madness as a liberating literary concept used in women's writing.

Keywords: madness, text, Arab, women, writing

Introduction: Main Section

Recent feminist scholarship has begun tapping into a relatively new area, which is contemporary Arab women's writing. The Arab woman, still a subject of mystery and the unknown, still manages to invoke images of the Harem. There is a critical awareness that fears homogenizing women's experiences, and it is problematic to claim that there is one category of the "Arab woman." As such, this paper is interested in looking at intertextual relations between literary texts that invoke images of mad protagonists. Intertextuality is significant as a critical reading tool because "it foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness, and interdependence in modern cultural life" (5). This paper places two short stories written by different Arab women, from different parts of the Arab world, in order to examine the literary image of the Arab "madwoman." Madwomen protagonists have been woven into literary texts for centuries: as mad doubles, mad covertly and overtly, housewives, mothers, and agents of rebellion. During the twentieth century the debate on madness in literature emerged and fueled the discussion on women's writing. Lillian Feder's book *Madness in Literature* claims that it would be "difficult to find literature without at least some sort of thematization of madness" (5). Many Western texts employed the character of the madwoman to critique social values and patriarchal societies. The marginalized figure of the madwoman thus emerges as a literary tool to examine patriarchal societies that continue to subjugate and oppress women.

Both of these Arab women writers' texts focus on two intertwined themes: women's madness and domesticity. The notion of public space versus private space is central to the development of the protagonists and their eventual descent to madness. Yet it is this very descent that is to be called into question. Through the characters' madness, there is an emerging sense of emancipation and liberation. Madness is

used as a tool for asserting a stronger female self, a theme that attempts to subvert dominant patriarchal ideologies that continue to condemn women to the domestic sphere. The theme of madness and madwomen protagonists is a textual strategy, one that makes use of fragmentation and unsettles the readers. The texts do not provide a sense of completeness or closure; they are fictions of fragmentation, of gaps and inconsistencies, multilayered discourses of otherness, and a sense of disintegration. There are multiple tensions that must be reconciled within the madwomen's volatile environments and their inner consciousness. The protagonists are not 'normal' in any sense, they are different and deviant, and their endings are culminated in madness.

In *the Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that madness in nineteenth century literature was a theme that women writers adopted, as well as "dramatizations of imprisonment and escap we believe they represent a uniquely female tradition in this period" (85). Like Gilbert and Gubar, I argue that there is something very distinctively "female" in the writings of the Arab women writers I have selected, and that perhaps a new tradition is in order, one that encompasses the "other madwoman" and brings the Victorian madwoman closer to her Eastern counterpart. Gilbert and Gubar maintain that:

It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels, they must be monsters. Recently, in fact, social scientists and social historians like Jessie Bernard, Phyllis Chesler, Naomi Weisstein, and Pauline Bart have begun to study the ways in which patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally (53).

In the same vein, this paper aims to find the parallel connections that "make women sick."

It is crucial to historicize the emergence of madness and its repercussions. Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* is considered one

of the most influential works on mental illness, a great contribution to the sciences and the arts. Foucault argues that madness is not necessarily a biological or natural state, but is socially constructed and sustained by oppressive societies which aim to control, regulate, and monitor human behaviour. Foucault has studied the institutionalization of madness and humankind's fear of "the bestiality of the madman... The mentally ill person was now a subhuman and beastly scapegoat; hence the need to protect others" (vii). Perhaps the biggest downfall of Foucault's work is its preoccupation with the West's views on madness, yet it remains indispensable to the study of madness. For the purpose of this paper, Foucault's work will be the site of introductory notions of madness.

For Foucault, madness and sanity are mutually constructed. He speaks of the "man of madness and the man of reason, moving apart, are not yet disjunct... Here madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason are inextricably involved: inseparable at the moment when they do not yet exist" (x). Sanity and insanity are dualistic oppositions, but for Foucault, they are coexisting. The question of madness in Foucault's text deals with Western notions of reason and unreason, what constitutes both, and how society had perceived those who failed to behave within the reason framework. Western culture went through a series of reactions to madness, or what was deemed as "unreason." At the end of the Middle Ages, "madness and the madman [became] major figures, in their ambiguity: menace and mockery, the dizzying unreason of the world, and the feeble ridicule of men" (13). The madman, so to speak, was able to enunciate reality and reason through his utterances of unreason. He was able to provide, or speak, "love to lovers, the truth of life to the young, the middling reality of things to the proud, to the insolent, and to liars" (14). Perhaps even more so is the madwoman, who in her madness is able to threaten the patriarchal order.

In many literary representations of madness, the madwoman figure is a figure of protest that almost always speaks out against the hegemonic order, and uncannily is the voice of wisdom. Her voice is the voice of true reason, the voice that the author employs to critique society and women's subjugation. The madwoman figure in these short stories serves as the voice of agency and an accurate diagnosis of patriarchal societies.

The first text is a short story by Emirati author Amina Abdallah, entitled "Fury", while the second text is Lebanese author Layla Ba'albaki's "From Mare to Mouse." Both texts re-write the figure of the madwoman, only this time, this is the Eastern madwoman, rather than her Western counterpart, the infamous "madwoman in the attic." In *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context*, Anastasia Valassopoulos suggests that Western feminist and Arab feminist are not synonymous, and therefore our reading of Arab women's writing should be adjusted accordingly (16). She argues for a "more revolving and evolving cycle that *informs* as well as *transforms* the ideas of Western and other feminisms" (16). By proposing a more inclusive objective, a cross-cultural and transnational feminism that seeks to weave narratives together to create a new space for feminist readings of contemporary writings by women, we are able to push the boundaries between Western feminism and Eastern feminism. The madwoman prototype has always been Charlotte Bronte's Bertha, and most scholarship has been centered on the Western

madwoman's literary experience.

Sabry Hafez examines Arab women's narratives and the correlation of patriarchal discourse in "Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology." Like their British counterparts, Arab women writers began searching for a literary feminist consciousness at the beginning of the 19th century, and this tradition "has continued throughout the twentieth century until the contribution of women writers has gained currency and prominence in contemporary Arabic narrative" (156). However, he also points out that the "feminine literary discourse which prevailed in Egypt and the Levant in the last decades of the nineteenth century... is currently echoed in Arabia and the Gulf. This highlights the uneven literary development of various parts of the Arab world" (161). This point clarifies the necessity of avoiding homogenizing Arabic works of fiction by Arab women writers as one category of analysis. This paper examines one specific genre, the short story genre, rather than Arabic novels. Roger Allen's "The Arabic Short Story and the Status of Women" highlights the development of the short story in Arabic and the common themes that women writers have explored. Namely, they have focused on "the status of women in society... Writers have cast a mostly critical eye on the institution of marriage" (78). The private domain is equally important, as it is the place that envelops and at times, suffocates the female protagonist. A hierarchical family structure and male tyranny are common tropes that appear throughout the short story, usually with the protagonist attempting to escape from the oppressive environment. If we postulate that the personal is political, and the private sphere affects the public domain, then these protagonists are able to establish agency through their defiant madness.

Western literary representations of mad female characters have long been a subject of interest for leading critics such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* focused mainly on 19th century English women's literature. Their study brought forward connections between women writers of the 19th century, and managed to bridge gaps between the Brontes, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, and more. As such, their contribution remains indispensable, and in that same vein, I would suggest that there are connections between representations of madwomen in world literature. If we take Gilbert and Gubar's lead and their celebration of the madwoman figure, then it is possible to transfer to Arabic writings a similar ideology of madness serving a greater purpose, both for the Arab woman writer and the protagonist.

In the Western tradition of madness, it has more often than not, been understood in terms of regression of the mind, chaos, loss, and destruction of the self. What interests me is the depiction of madness as emancipatory. I do not wish to obliterate actual lived experiences of madness, as this paper is only concerned with literary and fictional portrayals of madness. In Arabic fiction, I suggest that the Sufi understanding of madness is especially relevant in considering madness. Sufism (*Tasawouf*) is a mystical branch in Islam, and there is yet a lot to unravel within its discourse. For the interest of this paper, madness in Sufism is not necessarily a breakdown, but a breakthrough. It is a break away from the social world, a state of union with the Divine, and a return "home" if you will. According to James R. Newell, madness in the Sufi tradition is:

A discipline which leads one to a conscious union with source of all things...Intoxication is that state of madness which results from surrender to this overpowering love for the Beloved, which seeks only *fana* (annihilation) in the *baqa* (subsistence) of the Beloved/God (202) ^[1]

When Arab women writers employ the theme of madness and madwomen, it is a tool against the social order, hierarchies, and domestic oppression. Only in madness is there an awakening, a process of enlightenment, a move away from the ego. It is not deemed pathological in the Western sense, but rather a spiritual awakening, a transformative process that mitigates pain, and heals the mind/soul. In a sense, the protagonists in both of the short stories are able to break free from a cycle of oppression by entering the realms of madness, by choosing to alleviate their sense of self, and removing it completely from the patriarchal social order.

Amina Abdallah's short story "Fury" is relatively new, and her work has still not been collected or compiled in book form. Emirati literature is on the rise in Gulf countries and there are a number of contemporary female authors that are dealing with women's issues. Abdallah focuses on an Emirati woman's struggle against patriarchal dominance at home. Amina, the protagonist, (like the author's name) is married to a wealthy man, someone who is unlike her first in every way (127). The theme of arranged marriage is of course, common in Arab women's writing, and the repercussions of a lost love are always emotionally and mentally crippling. Amina was taken from "her world in the Fisherman's Quarter in the east of the city, a quarter sharp in smells and full of communal joy, to this quarter of fine, well-lit houses" (127). Amina used to live in a rural area, and is moved to live with her new rich husband, where everything around her changes, and she has no feelings towards him. As her environment and surroundings drastically change, Amina feels that this "world of things, which seemed exciting at first...transformed into an infernal place...emphasized her bitter feelings of alienation" (128). Amina, in an angry revolt, breaks everything around her, from the clock, to the vases, as she is "overcome with the desire to direct a blow at a world that tormented her" (129). Amina's subsequent bout of madness, which her husband mocks, is very similar to Jean Rhys's Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who is taken from the Caribbean islands to live with Mr. Rochester, and eventually loses her mind. Amina and Antoinette mirror each other in their alienation and they both share the same fate, as they try to fight against the tyranny of their rich husbands, who attempt to erase their identities and backgrounds. The anger and rebellion shared between these two protagonists reminds us of the commonality of women's struggle and emancipation, at least in world literature.

Another depiction of a female protagonist who is driven mad because of patriarchal oppression and alienation is apparent in Layla Ba'albaki's "From Mare to Mouse." Ba'albaki is a Shi'ite Muslim who rose to immediate fame with the publication of her first novel *I Live* (1958). Her work has always been concerned with feminism and challenging the patriarchy. The unnamed protagonist is the

daughter of a European woman who married a Lebanese man. As such, the protagonist is a hybrid, unable to strike a balance between her two heritages. The protagonist's mother instills in her a love for ballet, sending her to Paris to become a professional dancer. Eventually, she marries an Arab man who forces her to give up the art of ballet. Her spirit is shattered and her body is no longer free. She continually narrates a recurring vision she has of a mare who used to enjoy the beauty and freedom of nature, of a "new world, clean and bright" but then met a man who "put his hand on her body...She let him take her with him to the city" (215). To go from the wilderness, from freedom, to the constraints and oppression of the city, of society is the breaking point. She discovers that her husband is the same man who takes the mare away from her sanctuary, the same man who sits across from her in the living room. She states: "I became totally lost to reality...I became a little mouse, slightly larger than a cockroach, clammy...the mouse lived inside the man's chair...During the day the man would prepare a trap" (215). The symbolism is obvious, like the mare, the protagonist has been taken away from her world and into the world of "proper" society and culture, made to succumb to domestication and its rules. Having lost her dream of dancing (and also her mother's dream) she feels insignificant, suffocated and trapped. There is a transformation that takes place, she regresses from a wild, free mare, to a scared and incompetent mouse. Yet she manages to find strength and ignite a rebellious spirit in the mouse: "He should know, thought the mouse, that to get rid of me he is actually going to sever his own arm from his armpit...I laughed as I imagined myself a mouse with a transparent body, leaping into the air" (216). Similarly, to Amina and Antoinette, our unnamed protagonist is caught between two cultures, between East and West, between nature and civilization, and longs to go home. Born to a Western mother and an Eastern father, she states that "I would always be a stranger in both places" (217). When she gets married, she believes that she would find a new home, and her husband promises that she would dance forever, "between heaven and earth" (217). Instead, she finds herself expelled from any home, from heaven and earth, from her hybrid space, and from the personal space that used to be entirely hers: the space and freedom that dancing provided her.

Because the protagonist's losses are multiple, her anger is immense, and she realizes that she has to "wake up" (218). She stands up, proud and defiant, taking her clothes off, dancing wildly, screaming that she is "becoming a mare again." (218). Her husband calls her crazy, and we are informed that she picks up her child and leaves "very, very far away" (219). This specific "madwoman" finds emancipation through embracing dance again, through a re-assertion of herself, of her "wild" side, of embracing the mare within her. Like Amina in "Fury" it is through a physical manifestation of anger and defiance that she manages to unsettle the power dynamics and power relations at home. By screaming and dancing like a madwoman, by being labeled "crazy" she is able to regain power and agency. Amina literally breaks the materialistic world around her, and the dancer in "From Mare to Mouse" strips naked and dances, defying all social rules and proper codes of conduct and behavior.

¹ Newell, James R. "The Wisdom of Intoxication: Love and Madness in the Poetry of Hafiz of Shiraz." *Creativity, Madness and Civilisation*. Ed. Richard Pine. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

Conclusion

The characters in the two texts are able to rebel against their domestic roles, their oppression, and re-assert themselves and re-embrace their buried identities. Through their bouts of madness, they form a new literary Arab madwoman prototype, one that provides a space for personal and political agency. Their private revolt affects the public space, their small acts of rebellion urge for a public feminist revolt against patriarchy and female subjugation. "Fury" and "From Mare to Mouse" create a new figure of an Arab literary "madwoman" who exists in different places and spaces; this "madwoman" calls for a re-examination of the term and a celebration of its potential for subversion of rigid patriarchal hierarchies. Madwomen figures speak, but are not heard. In literary works, their words are usually words of wisdom; they have an uncanny ability to diagnose the failures of their societies and criticize the oppressive forces of patriarchy. There is a paradoxical power of madness that threatens to unravel and vocally criticize previously sanctioned ideologies of oppression. These two Arab women writers have written these voices into the literary canon, giving voice to an otherwise silenced woman, and to create a space for female voicing of oppression and tyranny. Madness is not presented as a dangerous or threatening space; rather, it is a space that reanimates the self and confronts social and ideological injustices that have burdened both the individual and the collective. In this case, literary depictions of madness is a site for, at the very least, potential of subversion and questioning of the hegemonic order.

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