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Imagination : The Forbidden Fruit

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Imagination: The Forbidden Fruit

Dr/ Azza el Kholy

This paper is a comparative study of the Egyptian short story "Worms in the Rose Garden" by Salwa Bakr, published in 1992, and the American story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman published in 1892. Although the two stories are separated by a hundred years, both writers address the same issue; that of women driven to madness because of their refusal and/or inability to fit into the "model" of woman created by their respective societies.

The two heroines are characterized by an imagination that renders them incapable of accepting the superficial, contrived rules of social conformity, and, consequently sets them apart from their socio-cultural environment. This isolation forces them to take a long introspective journey into the reality of their lives which, eventually drives them to the borders of insanity. Imagination also places them at odds with their social milieu as the two writers posit their protagonists against their families; the microcosm of society.

Despite the temporal, geographical and cultural differences, both texts illustrate women's quest for independence and individuality. The texts also discuss imagination as a hindrance and a liability. As a hindrance, imagination is largely responsible for the two women's failure to integrate in their societies and be accepted by those around them, and, similarly, imagination becomes a liability when it leads the two heroines into a state of insanity. Thus, a pivotal question poses itself here: Is female nonconformity synonymous with madness? Or is it synonymous with madness only when it threatens the violation of the rigid rules of a long standing patriarchal social establishment where "the dynamics" of "the social structure...are based on a power relationship in which women's interests are subordinated to those of men"? (Hafez).

However, woman, as Cixous observes "must put herself into the text – as into the world and history – by her own movement"(p.316). Therefore, it is through studying these texts by women and about women that we comprehend woman's place in history and in her society at a given time. The two stories by Gilman and Bakr demonstrate the repressive, oppressive and often marginalized role that is dictated upon the heroines by their societies. The narratives also

demonstrate Woolf's belief that "when a woman comes to write...she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values"(p.51).

The protagonists of the two stories share many things. They are both deliberately, albeit differently, confined. In addition, they are isolated from their closest social unit: their families with which they are in a state of perpetual discord. For whereas the family represents the acceptable social establishment, the heroines come to represent the nonconformist view which is illustrated, simultaneously, in their vision of their needs and their views of life as well as in their behavioral pattern. Refusing to be treated like children, as they duly are by family members, they are regarded as obnoxious, often threatening, and even embarrassing elements within the presumably harmonious acceptable social pattern. More importantly, though, is the two women's obsession with a certain vision that they, due to their estrangement from their immediate social milieu, gradually internalize until they are driven to insanity.

Gilman's heroine is deliberately confined and isolated by her husband, his sister and her own brother. From the very first line of the story we see how her seclusion is both intentional and premeditated as the narrator writes: "It is seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer"(p.800), thus emphasizing her middle class background which does not allow her family the luxury of an ancestral mansion for a summer vacation. Yet, the husband insists on isolating her from her familiar surroundings, claiming that that is the best way to speed up her recovery from the "temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency" that she suffers from, and, ironically, her brother who is, like the husband, a male and a physician "says the same thing"(p.801). Incidentally, the word 'hysteria' as Tyson observes is derived from "the Greek word for womb (*hystera*) and refers to psychological disorders deemed peculiar to women...", Tyson also adds that "it is a patriarchal assumption, rather than a fact, that more women than men suffer from hysteria"(p.84).

The deliberate isolationist policy imposed on the heroine of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is maintained throughout the story when we see the husband choosing a literally secluded mansion to, theoretically, help her recover. Her description of the house reveals this calculated confinement strategy:

It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people. (p.801)

Moreover, he deprives her of staying in a room that she likes, one that "opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings!"(p.802), and puts her instead in a room which she, categorically, declares she does not like and remarks: "I should hate it...if I had to live in this room long"; a room covered in wall-paper that has "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin"(p.802), and a yellow color that is revolting, and keeps her there against her will and in spite of her recurrent complaints.

Furthermore, he denies her any entertaining company under the pretext that this will make her condition worse, she comments: "When I get really well, John says we will ask cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now"(p.803). In short, he forces her into a state of total inertia within a confined area where she becomes "incarcerated within a bedroom that stares at her" (Snyder). The result of course is a rapid decline in her mental and emotional health, ultimately leading her to insanity.

It is interesting to note here that John's confinement of his wife goes against the salient belief, at the time, of the adverse effect of patterns on patients suffering from nervous tension or depression. For, as a physician, he did not seem to realize, or perhaps chose to ignore that:

Doctors of the period criticized wallpaper as part of their battle against neurasthenia: Jonathan Crewe claims that "the exasperating effect of pattern wallpaper on invalids was a medical commonplace..." In his book on American nervousness, Tom Lutz quotes Robert W. Edis, who wrote in

1883 that the "endless multiplication and monotony of strongly-marked patterns...[is] a source of infinite torture and annoyance in times of sickness and sleeplessness". (Roth)

As such, it can be concluded that the husband may have chosen to ignore the undesirable effect of this wallpaper on his wife since he insists on the fact that she is not sick and is only suffering some "temporary nervous depression".

Likewise, Farha, Bakr's heroine is subjected to the same kind of seclusion. However, Farha's solitary confinement is rather self-imposed simply because she cannot integrate, interact or accept her surroundings. Initially, she finds her life meaningless, pointless and not worth living to the extent that she contemplates suicide: "Without regrets, Farha will bid this gelatinous life she has lived farewell. How she hated it and never found any meaning in it"¹(p.24). She has problems with her family, "problems with her colleagues at work...[a] constant inability to cope or come to terms with people, she feels intensely forlorn, infinitely estranged; she feels that no one around her can ever understand her"(pp.24-5). Thus, she opts for seclusion, for she has this "chronic desire to distance herself from people and has lost her enthusiasm to talk to any human being"(p.25) and, therefore, always prefers her own company to that of her family or other human beings and retires to her room to separate herself from her surroundings; in total isolation where "her soul drifted far away"(p.29).

This confinement drives each heroine to examine her position within and her feelings about her own family. Moreover, both writers deliberately highlight their heroines' estrangement within the family; the social unit which embodies the salient cultural, behavioral and traditional codes.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the heroine is distanced from her family from the very beginning as she clearly points out to the fact that she feels unwell but is often assured by her husband who is "a physician of high standing" and her brother who is "also a physician, and also of high standing" that she is only suffering a "temporary nervous depression"(p.801). She, on the other hand, recognizes that she is unwell and disagrees with them. In addition, they deprive

¹ The translation of quotations taken from Bakr's Arabic text is mine.

her from exercising her creative abilities and prohibit her to write under the pretext that it will make her condition worse. She says:

I take phosphates or phosphites – whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition. (p.801)

At the beginning, she defies this restraining decree: "There comes John, and I must put this away..." because he will not allow her to write as she states: "he hates to have me write a word"(p.802). She seems to think of writing as a therapeutic exercise, "such a relief" (p.805) as she describes it, and states: "I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me"(p.803). In fact, as Estes remarks: "a woman's creative ability is her most valuable asset, for it gives outwardly and it feeds her inwardly at every level: psychic, spiritual, mental, emotive, and economic"(p.299). Yet, the husband denies her this relief and insists on increasing the mental strain with the false illusion that writing will make her more tired. Thus, "by forbidding her to write...John endeavors to deny the narrator her voice, as well as her psychological experience of physical space"(Snyder).

However, she eventually loses heart and energy and gives it all up because "the effort is getting to be greater than the relief"(p.806). However, she substitutes this mental exercise with another: the deciphering of the pattern of the yellow wallpaper, "the narrator progressively gives up the attempt to *record* her reality and instead begins to read it – as symbolically adumbrated in her compulsion to discover a consistent and coherent pattern amid "the sprawling outlines" of the

wallpaper's apparently "pointless pattern" "(Kolodny, p.53). This, in due course, leads to her mental breakdown.

Other forms of discord with the family appear on several occasions. The fact that she describes her husband as "practical in the extreme"(p.801), as opposed to her imaginative nature, which she is often scolded for by John who "cautioned [her] not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with [her] imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like [hers] is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that [she] ought to use [her] will and good sense to check the tendency"(p.803). This illustrates how distant she is from the sensibilities of her partner. Despite the fact that he is her husband and partner, he fails to comprehend her feelings and concerns, she says: "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows that there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him"(p.802). More often than not, he dismisses her thoughts, fears and emotions until she reaches the point where he becomes the enemy to be feared as she writes: "The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John"(p.808). Thus, as Snyder observes, the story is a "testimony of a monologic "exchange" in which neither husband nor wife are able to understand one another". Distressing, too, is the fact that the only other woman in the story, Jenny, her sister-in-law, is also an adversary, for she seems to have brushed the heroine aside and assumed her role as lady of the house as she "sees to everything now", and is one to be feared, for the heroine says "I must not let her find me writing"(p.804). Jenny represents the conformist who believes in the salient notion that the man, the husband, knows what is best for the wife and duly assumes the role of woman as subservient, obedient housewife.

In Bakr's story too, the heroine finds herself completely at odds with her family. Early on in the story, as she voluntarily visits the doctor's clinic, she is careful not to tell anyone: "She had thought long before coming to this place without telling anyone of her family, she wanted to know herself, and before anyone else, what the doctor would say"(p.23). In addition, she marks the beginning of her mental breakdown with her going away for the summer with the family where she underscores her discord with the habits and behavior of its members. She wants to tell the doctor about their "repulsive appearance round the

lunch table as they ate the fish" and how their "fat bodies that were not devoid of diverse belly sizes and full faces that projected lax dead looks made her feel that they are real corpses that have reached an ultimate state of bloating"(p.26). It is very clear from the vocabulary and the images she uses in her description that there is certainly no love lost between her and her kin.

The separation from the family is further emphasized in her refusal to participate in either their activities or conversations, especially that she had gone with them "against her will" (p.27). She refuses to partake of their meals, prefers to leave them and go to her room, refrains from taking part in their conversations, even though some of these concerned her, declines to watch video films with them and, ultimately, thinks of them all as leading "a silly life, a meaningless life"(p.27). Therefore, Farha is like many of Bakr's female characters who attempt "successfully or unsuccessfully to construct a life outside the institution of the family"(Rizal et al).

Here, an important question emerges: what is the reason for this separation from and discord with the family in both stories? The answer, as is obvious in both texts, is that the family represents the oppressive, repressive agent for both heroines. The two families are there to check, control and force the women to conform to the pattern of female entrapment inherent in both societies.

Each of the two families exercises control over the heroine. This is done initially by assuming the role of the parent and instructor over the child/woman concerned. For example, in Gilman's story, the heroine is forever being treated like a silly child who says nonsense and does not know what is good for her. When she thinks the house is "haunted" and that is why it has been "let so cheaply", John "laughs" at her "of course", and when she tells him "that there is something strange about the house", he says that what she feels is a "*draught*, and shut[s] the window"(p.801). The narrator describes him as "very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more"(p.801). The fact is that he takes control over her life, not allowing her to do anything she wants to do and schedules her daily routine for her to the extent that she actually feels guilty of ungratefulness!

Furthermore, the manner in which he addresses her reveals his view of her as an immature child who cannot be responsible for herself. He calls her "blessed little goose"(p.803), "little girl" and says "Bless her little heart"(p.807). When she dares tell him that she is not feeling any better, his answer is "I am a doctor, dear, and I know", and he maintains, with a "reproachful look" that what she feels is no more than a "false and foolish fancy"(p.807), and often recommends that she exercise "proper self-control"(p.802). Significantly, the room he insists on choosing for her is "the nursery" whose "windows are barred for little children" (p.802) and where, ironically, she is made to spend most of her time while he is "away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious"(p.802). Sometimes he takes her on guilt trips and makes her feel ungrateful, tiresome and a burden as she clarifies on several occasions. The text abounds in examples of the pressure and emotional blackmail exerted upon her by the husband. She writes: "He said we came here solely on my account"(p.802), and "I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim"(p.803). He also tells her that she "must take care of [her] self for his sake, and keep well"(p.807), and ultimately, she feels guilty for being unwell and without "control" as she observes: "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!"(p.803). John also threatens to take her further into seclusion:

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell² in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so! (p.804)

He, therefore, maintains control over her life and creates a sense of fear that drives her to cheat, dissemble and hide her feelings and fears from him.

Farha in "Worms in the Rose Garden" is also subjected to a similar kind of repressive control which is illustrated in the family's view of her as an immature,

² Weir Mitchell (1829 -1914) is a doctor who was specialized in what was known as the "rest cure". Gilman had undergone treatment under Mitchell and so did other women writers like Edith Wharton.

incapable being who cannot be trusted to handle her own life. However, in Farha's case there is this extra cultural component that single Egyptian girls cannot be independent; they are only allowed to be daughters, sisters or wives but never independent entities since "the social concept of a woman ...[as] a wife and mother has never changed that much over the years"(Rizal et al). The heroine tries to convince her parents to leave her behind and not drag her along with the rest of the family to the summer resort but she fails to do so:

Had they only agreed to leave her behind in Cairo, as she had pleaded with them before they came to the summer resort. She had used the excuse of not being able to take leave from her work, however, her mother vehemently refused and her father hurried to solve the problem with the company doctor, who was his friend, and had him issue a medical certificate saying that she was unwell throughout the summer. When they had cornered her so, she said that she was old enough to stay at home on her own but her mother resolved the issue by saying: "No matter what...you are still a girl, it is impossible for you to spend the night on your own at home". (p.26)

As such, the traditional notion of single women as incapable of independent lives deprived the heroine of her peace of mind and led her to more repression and eventually insanity. Like Gilman's heroine, Farha is not to be trusted with her own life, not to be given the right to make her own decisions and, consequently, not entitled to adulthood without marriage.

The issue of marriage itself becomes another form of socio-familial oppression for Bakr's Egyptian heroine. Staying with her maternal and paternal aunts and their children, the crowded household interferes in Farha's life. They succeeded to "aggravate her nerves by their perpetual insistence on her accepting a certain groom who had proposed to her some time ago and whom she had refused"(p.27). And in spite of the fact that she found that she had very valid reasons not to accept this man who had a "flabby figure and slimy gelatinous

looks that made her feel that he was crawling on the floor as he walked beside her with the rest of the family after they left the restaurant he had invited them to have dinner at"(p.27), the family persists in addressing the same issue over and over again.

Soon enough, this marriage topic turns into a form of harassment of the heroine as she is reprimanded for objecting to the groom on account of his looks and character and is duly told that "men are not assessed by their looks or appearance; a man is only at a disadvantage if his pocket lacks money"(p.27). Gradually, she is even accused of deviating from the "norm" where women are concerned when her aunt tells her: "You have grown Farha, and another year that passes you by will make you a spinster", to which her own mother bluntly replies "to put it plainly, the truth is she is actually a spinster. After the age of twenty-five a girl's betrothal becomes a problem because her glow fades away gradually and she enters the realm of womanhood and her chances of finding a reasonable husband are minimized"(p.28). We notice here that the entire conversation is carried out among the women of the family and Farha is not even given a chance to participate but is rather looked at as the sole impediment toward achieving the prime goal of females in society. Digges' following query/statement "can Bakr's characters count on their mothers or sisters – traditionally the closest relationships among Egyptian women – to provide help or solace? Apparently not", confirms the isolation of the heroine even among the members of her own sex.

Moreover, the materialistic outlook that characterizes the Egyptian family's view of marriage separates the heroine more from her surroundings. For whereas she "dreamt of walking on the sand with a young man she loves beside her, talking gently and compassionately about hopes and dreams that will engulf them in a beautiful world where people enjoyed the joys of the soul before those of the body"(p.29), her family views marriage from a very different perspective. Her aunt finds men eligible for marriage if they have cash and particularly recommends the said groom because he "has an apartment – a thing we should be grateful for – considering the unavailability of apartments nowadays, and it is rare to find a groom with a flat, which actually solves the most important problem", then happily adds that "he comes from a good family and his parents are well-to-

do and will not ask for any dowry or demand the furnishing of the house"(p.28). Here, it should be noted that the aunt's words underscore financial issues as the primary component for a successful marriage. Ironical, too, is the reaction of the young cousin who is only sixteen and who represents a complete contrast to Farha and a typical paragon of the female social role as wife and mother:

Her cousin suggested, laughing, that she marry this groom instead of Farha because she is ready to get married instantly and does not want to go on with her education. As she said that, she was occupied by painting her long nails in a bloody red color. (p.28)

As the story unfolds, Farha's total conflict with the family becomes quite obvious. She refuses their materialistic view of life as exemplified in their idea of marriage as a social necessity, their obsessive attitude towards food and trivia like playing cards or watching horror movies.

The heroine also rejects the image of woman as object of pleasure. This is illustrated in her unwillingness to succumb to marriage as a social necessity and also in her repulsion at other women who promote this notion of the female as a brainless, lifeless object. Her comment on her cousin's beautification process is reminiscent of her critique of the nurse's contrived feminine appearance. She tries to convince herself to "forget this horrible painted smile on the nurse's face with her bright red smeared lips that seem like two attached worms, which separate occasionally to show a small opening that hides a deep abyss"(p.24). Farha also cringes at the portrait of a half naked woman in her room, revealing a deep-rooted objection to this image of woman as seductress, Bakr writes:

She was staring at a painting hanging opposite her. It was a painting of a plump woman lying on a vast bed covered with a yellow atlas throw that hardly covered anything of her body. She felt uncomfortable seeing this and preferred to close her eyes and sleep. (p.29)

As such, Bakr's heroine makes it quite clear that she is not part of, or in agreement with, the salient Egyptian cultural, traditional notions of womanhood. Therefore, she is isolated, lonely, and silent. She often resorts to tears as a form of relief from the frustration she feels: "she retreated to her room, crying fervently in a low voice, overwhelmed by sorrow and pain"(p.31).

Gilman's heroine also resorts to isolation, silence and tears. Gradually she stops taking walks and remains confined in the room, where deciphering the pattern of the yellow wallpaper becomes her sole occupation. She does not welcome the company of her husband and his sister and, like Farha, resorts to tears, she writes: "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone. And I am alone a good deal just now" (p.805).

Furthermore, both women suffer from lack of sleep; a thing that aggravates their nervous tension and accelerates their mental breakdown. Bakr's heroine does not sleep because she is terrified of the macabre vision that besets her every time she closes her eyes: "she wants to sleep and is afraid to breakdown due to lack of sleep but she also does not want to fall asleep lest she be attacked by this ghoulisn nightmare that awaits her every time she closes her eyes and falls into a deep sleep"(p.25). Gilman's narrator, however, does not sleep because she is busy trying to stealthily decipher the pattern of the wallpaper. She pretends to sleep to appease John and divert his attention from her plan. She writes: "He thought I was asleep...but I wasn't" and only sleeps in the morning but stays awake at night to carry on with her mental exercise in secret. Therefore, both heroines suffer from a highly strung nervous tension that is significantly, in both texts, heightened by the choice of season in which the stories take place: summer. In Bakr's story the heroine leaves with the family for a summer vacation and Gilman's heroine is spending the summer away from home. Their nervous tension is also sharpened by the protagonists' need to hide, dissemble and repress their real feelings and fears from their families.

Consequently, this repression increases the two women's sensitivity to their respective nightmarish visions. Each woman's initially hypothetical fear

turns gradually into a ghoulish, overwhelming nightmare that infiltrates her consciousness and drives her to insanity.

Farha, whose name, ironically, means "joy" in Arabic, emerges first as a woman who is anxious about her inability to sleep due to the recurring image of a worm infested world that disturbs her peace of mind. However, as the story unfolds, we see the heroine's vision becoming more poignant, more overpowering and certainly more socially oriented than she expected it to be.

Early on in the story she compares her current condition to that of the past when she ponders over the way the doctor will react to her: "Perhaps she could deduce from his words, looks or attitude towards her that there is indeed no hope, and that she will never return again to what she used to be: the calm, docile and joyful girl; Farha the young lady who neither saw worms nor was scared of them"(p.24). Moreover, when she contemplates suicide, if she were to be told that hers is a hopeless case of madness, she considers killing herself by swallowing worms! She says:

She will die in a guaranteed method from which there will be no return. She will open her mouth wide and devour, at one go, and without closing her eyes, a large amount of spongy white worms that will surely be enough to end her life immediately out of sheer disgust. For as soon as these ghastly creatures will settle in her stomach, there will be no time for nausea or fainting because the sudden shock will have happened immediately. (p.24)

Such thoughts undoubtedly betray her inherent, almost obsessive fear of worms. The choice of worms as the heroine's worst nightmare discloses the writer's conscious decision to liken the girl's vision of her world as repulsive, gelatinous and slimy. In short, Farha's environment is opaque, boneless and devoid of function or meaning. This is especially evident when the heroine starts to envision her world as a worm infested place.

She contemplates how she hates doctors and their "depressing clinics that inspire extreme loneliness in the soul and are forever a reminder to the human

being that he/she is a minute, weak being who is not, ultimately, much different from worms"(p.24). Here, Farha's development of the "human as worm" paradigm indicates the intensification of her fears. From then on, humans become worms for the protagonist and thus her total alienation from her surroundings takes on the alarming dimension of fear from others. Thus, Farha's constant repression of her fears does not end them but rather increases them and gives them uncontrollable proportions as Tyson observes: "repression doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions. Rather, it gives them force by making them the organizers of our current experience: we unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to "play out", without admitting it to ourselves, our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress"(p.15).

Gradually, Bakr's heroine begins to see a "worm" in every human being she meets. First comes the nurse whose "bright red smeared lips...seem like two attached worms"(p.24), then her paternal aunt whose neck, Farha discovered, "resembles a humongous worm like those she had seen one day preying on the stomach of a corpse on the side of the waterway of their village when she was young"(p.26). A while later she begins to view her life and that of her family as the life of worms and contemplates telling them:

People: the truth is that our life is very stupid and devoid of any meaning. For about a year now I have been preoccupied by the idea that we resemble worms; we eat, drink and sleep. I hope our life could change, I wish we could do something meaningful; think about the world in a different way that will make us feel like people – human – different from worms. (p.27)

However, she never actually breathes a word of these thoughts to anyone and eventually develops excruciating headaches as a result of repressing her emotions, worries and fears. Soon she starts seeing this nightmare of worms devouring the beautiful wheat fields and the colorful rose garden, and, eventually, those terrifying worms develop the faces of her own kin and that is when her vision becomes a tormenting experience.

Farha's dream symbolizes her loneliness, seclusion and fears:

She saw, as a sleeper sees, that she was sitting alone in a vast plane surrounded by magnificent wheat fields with stems dancing to the breeze. It seemed like a unique golden shawl was enveloping the trees of the green plane that abounded in the most extraordinary fruits and the strangest of humming birds, whose lovely bewitching voices she had never heard the likes of before. She was undecided as to which part of the plane she should head for to dance joyously and gratify her soul. As she was thus unresolved, her eyes fell on a flower garden that extended to the horizon. It included what was indescribable of God's healthiest floral creations which filled the place with their scents and essences. Farha started to breathe in the scents and fill her lungs completely, telling herself how beautiful life is and how wonderful nature is. As she was thus engrossed in this state of comfort and ecstasy, dark clouds began to fill the sky and bar the horizon. She looked far off only to see huge, grey, depressing slimy worms approaching bit by bit until they reached the vast wheat plane, devouring it all instantaneously. The worms moved towards the birds and the trees where they stripped the branches of their green, and scared the birds that escaped emitting sad, melancholic noises. When the worms had reached the rose garden, they devoured the red and the blue, the yellow and the white, erasing all that was a pleasure to the eye and a joy to the heart. The worms then stood erect like enormous grey, gelatinous lumps with huge human faces in which Farha deciphered the features of her mother, her father and her aunts. She then started to run out of sheer terror, shouting with all her might...(p.30).

This horrifying dream comes to exemplify the protagonist's perception and fear of her world.

Actually, this perception takes on colossal dimensions as she begins to see the "human as worm" image when she is fully awake: "more importantly, is the fact that she now started to see the worms in her waking hours"(p.31). Watching her mother and aunt eat one day, "Farha saw four huge antenna horns sprouting on their heads. She was frightened and retreated to her room, sobbing in a low voice, overcome by pain and sorrow"(p.31). The problem increases to the extent that she "began to see worms everywhere"(p.31), or better still, project her paradigm of "human as worm" on all those she resents. She insults her boss by calling him a worm because "she hates him, for he is a thief and one who takes bribes"(p.31), and tells her neighbor who is a "fat woman with a flabby neck wearing many gold bracelets on her left arm...welcome madam worm"(p.32). She even calls her father from the shower to answer the phone saying: "come out quickly, my uncle worm is on the phone"(p.32). Finally, as she sits waiting her turn at the doctor's clinic, she "watches the nurse as she stands up or moves towards the doctor's room and notices her wiggling behind as she walks chafing the floor with her shoes. She sees two antenna horns sprouting and gradually extending above her head. Terrified, she decided to run very fast towards the street"(p.32).

The heroine's derogatory view of people around her is proof of her inability to survive within her social milieu. Her repeated attempts to voice her dissatisfaction with the life that she and her family are leading are often ignored, belittled or both and thus she is like many of Bakr's characters who are engaged in "desperate attempts...[to] change their circumstances"(Rizal et al). In fact, when Farha tries to tell her family that their life is meaningless, she confirms what Hafez observes when he says: "The perception of gender and/or individual identity is generally linked to the wider perception of the national-self and its place in the surrounding world" in women's literature.

Unfortunately, however, Farha's tragic dislocation from her surroundings is merely brushed aside by those who are closest to her and she eventually becomes the odd one out; a person full of "complexes"(p.29), as her aunt emphatically describes her. The disaster is that no one seems to notice that the

heroine is suffering from some kind of trauma as Tyson explains in the following lines:

If my nightmares begin to occur while I'm awake – that is, if the breakdown of my defenses is more than temporary, if my anxiety cannot be abated, if the truth hidden by repression comes out before my conscious self in a manner I can neither disguise nor handle – then I am in *crisis*, or *trauma*. (p.29)

Therefore, because no one seems to be able to see the heroine's intense suffering, viewing it as an unwelcome, unacceptable form of nonconformity, Farha is left alone to suffer and pay the price of not fitting into the established order of things and, eventually, go mad.

Gilman's heroine undergoes a very similar experience in which she, too, like Farha, internalizes her morbid vision until it gets the better of her. From the beginning, the narrator sees the house as "haunted"(p.800), but more importantly, is her repulsion at the room she is staying in; "a room whose wallpaper reduces an artistic and articulate woman to a beast, stripped entirely of her sanity and humanity and left crawling on all-fours in circuits, or smooches, about the room"(Bak).

The heroine's description of the room as a "nursery" with "barred windows" and "rings and things in the walls" and "stripped off" wallpaper (p.802), does not make it a cheerful residence. However, it is the wallpaper that immediately captures her attention as she says:

I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they

suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. (p.802)

Thus, as early as her first encounter with the patterned paper she feels the discomfort it radiates. The pattern is irritating, confusing and aesthetically revolting and the color is equally ugly and repulsive. Nevertheless, she is deliberately imprisoned in that room and when she complains about the paper, the husband "laughs at [her]"(p.803). Deprived of any form of mental activity, she starts to focus on the pattern that stares at her all the time until, finally, uncovering the logic of the pattern of that "horrid paper"(p.803) as she calls it, becomes an obsession that dominates her entire existence.

Before long, she begins to delve deeper into the seemingly meaningless pattern of the paper and tries to figure out what it constitutes:

This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breaths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. (p.803)

Here, the heroine transforms the pattern from an inanimate object to something that is alive, staring at her with "bulbous eyes" that are forever "unblinking". Like Farha, the obsessive nightmarish vision she sees comes to life and takes on a more vivid dimension that threatens her sanity.

The wallpaper seems to subdivide by time and project more meaning than she had initially bargained for: "This wall-paper has a kind of subpattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then"(p.804). Furthermore, she begins to identify a "strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design"(p.804), and, ultimately, the paper becomes part of her as she says: "It dwells in my mind so!", and she is determined to "follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion"(p.805). Therefore, it is not surprising to find the heroine's condition worsening as she devotes her entire existence to the deciphering of this now three-dimensional pattern that stares her in the face round the clock, especially if we take into account that Susan Carter in 1893 "described how wallpaper, 'to many a nervous invalid, renders his hours intolerable, as he counts and combines over and over again the meaningless recurrence of a marked angle or curve, or the ever-repeated big, awkward rose or tiresome convolvulus' "(Roth).

The truth is that the more she occupies herself with this process of deciphering, the more she becomes deranged. She exerts an enormous effort to understand the design, looking at its principles of symmetry, its horizontal and vertical lines, its curves, contours and the effect of light on it until she finally reaches the conclusion that "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will", and it is only then that she thinks of herself as an independent entity from all others and makes the distinction of "them" and "I" (p.806). She then starts to dissemble and hide her occupation from John and his sister and soon refuses to leave the room and becomes totally engrossed in the pattern and the imaginary prisoner who is trying to free herself from the confines of this pattern. She sees a figure "like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" who "seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out"(p.806). Here, Gilman's choice of the prison image, like Bakr's choice of the worm image, is functional in the unraveling of the heroine's predicament. In giving this wallpaper the dramatic effect of prison and prisoner, the writer underscores the heroine's entrapment.

Reaching the point where her illusions become one with her reality, the heroine begins her descent into a hallucinatory stage in which, as Marks and Colwell remark "the images do not coincide with the things outside us but involve projection, and outward movement of images, nevertheless". Thus, she projects her own internal fears, psychological and physical entrapment onto the pattern that glares at her.

From a simple floral arabesque pattern, the wallpaper soon becomes a design with a sub-pattern that changes "as the light changes"(p.808) and hides an imprisoned woman, especially at night, she says: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean and the woman behind it is as plain as can be"(p.808). Conversely, by daylight, the woman is "subdued, quiet" and this is interpreted by the narrator as the effect of the pattern, for she herself confesses that the pattern "keeps [her] quiet by the hour"(p.808). Here, the heroine fully identifies with the woman and we see her projecting her own imprisonment on the wallpaper character she sees constantly trying to escape confinement.

Moreover, her total absorption in and unification with this hideous pattern becomes more obvious as she grows very protective of it. She resents anyone's interest in the paper except herself and imagines that they, too, are competing with her in the attempt to uncover the secret of the woman inside the pattern, she writes: "I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times *looking at the paper!* And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her had on it once"(p.808). It is then that her fear of others, like Farha, becomes apparent and her separation from her surroundings also becomes more poignant as she sees herself the possessor of a secret and a mission that others wish to confiscate from her.

It is, however, her transformation from hatred for the wallpaper to an actual attachment to and fusion with the horrible pattern that is, indeed, very pathetic. She says: "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be"(p.808), and "I don't want to leave now until I have found it out" (p.809). Sadly too, the yellow wallpaper starts to dominate her senses as it did her mind when

she discovers a specific smell for the paper, a "yellow smell" that "creeps all over the house" and gets into her hair; a smell she can identify wherever she goes as "the subtlest, most enduring odor"(p.809) she has ever known.

In addition, she deciphers "a streak that runs around the room", thus signaling the overwhelming impact of the pattern which transcends the walls to the actual space inside the room and goes round and round until it makes her "dizzy"(p.809). Totally obsessed with the pattern that soon begins to move because "the woman behind shakes it", the protagonist imagines she sees other women too who try to escape but are strangled by the pattern, she says: "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one always trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so...They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!"(p.810). She recognizes the crippling effect of the pattern, which is very much like the limitations imposed upon her, and imagines that there are many fellow sufferers but, nonetheless, confirms the presence of a certain woman that she knows very well. At this point in the story, the heroine ceases to become an observer and turns into a participant as she categorically identifies herself with the woman of the pattern:

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!
And I'll tell you why – privately – I've seen her!
I can see her out of every one of my windows!
It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and
most women do not creep by daylight...
I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught
creeping by daylight!
I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. (p.810)

She thus confirms her internalization of the imaginary drama that takes place inside the pattern. By so doing, she becomes more independent and perhaps freer, for "In objectifying herself through this imaginary woman, the narrator can free herself, if only in mind, from the external prison her husband places her in"(Bak).

In addition, she finds solace in the company of the imaginary creature and takes pride in helping her to get out, which is yet another proof of her role as participant:

I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. (p.811)

She seems to feel that her mission is to free all those imprisoned creatures whose "strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!"(p.811). Almost immediately, the protagonist begins to wonder whether all those creeping women who fill the grounds have "come out of the wall-paper as [she] did?"(p.812), thus emphasizing what Cixous points out about women's concern with the plight of their gender: "In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women"(p.323).

Finally, by the end of the story, all the imprisoned women are freed and the heroine, now completely part of her hallucinatory vision, says: "It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please"(p.812). She goes round and round in circles until the husband finally walks in:

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last", said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (p.812)

Ironically, she has freed herself from the constraints forced upon her but has, sadly, descended into a state of insanity.

Gilman makes it quite obvious that she is out to blame the husband and the family, as representatives of the socio-cultural codes, for what happens to her heroine. The final lines of the story illustrate this as the protagonist says "I've got out at last...in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back. In a sense, our heroine has been freed as Bak remarks: "though externally she is clinically insane, unable to ascertain why her husband should be floored by her aberrant behavior, internally she is, for the first time, devoid of that identity that her husband (and his patriarchal society) had inscribed upon her".

The two protagonists' final descent into madness brings about the initial question posed early on in this paper: Is female nonconformity synonymous with madness? Or is it considered madness when it threatens the violation of the rigid rules of a long standing patriarchal social establishment?

In the two stories under discussion, the writers illustrate the repressive nature of the societies in which their heroines live. Gilman, herself a social reformer, feminist and writer who was an influential member of "the progressive reform movement that flourished in America from the 1880s into the 1920s" and who "challenged uncritical submission to the authority of the past...supported the suffrage and labor movements, championed sweeping changes in education and called for economic reform" (Upin), must have been undoubtedly conscious of the statement she was out to make in her story "The Yellow Wallpaper". Similarly, Bakr who is also an activist and a member of the human rights movement is out to underscore many of the socio-cultural ills in modern Egyptian society. However, as women, both writers are undoubtedly concerned with the adverse effect of repressive social conditions on women, especially those who are considered nonconforming by the salient social standards.

In addition, as Cixous remarks, "a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust"(p.326). Indeed, the two texts powerfully question the oppressive dogmas imposed on women in both societies, the results of which are the total marginalization of the nonconforming, imaginative and independent

woman. Significant too, is both writers' choice of madness as a fate for their heroines, for in each of the stories the protagonist goes mad because she cannot tolerate the repression she is subjected to.

In a sense, both Bakr and Gilman seem to want to challenge and expose the dominant cultural and social rules of the patriarchy by writing the experiences of these two women. Salwa Bakr "has committed herself to giving voice to women's experiences in her fiction. Her work criticizes institutions that oppress people (women particularly)" (Rizal et al), and she aptly demonstrates the family as an oppressive institution in her "Worms in the Rose Garden". Similarly, Gilman in her seminal work *Women and Economics* (1898) maintains that "women's subjugation is an unnatural aberration that is impeding the progress of the race", and adds that the female's socio-economic "environment is unnatural and artificial – that of economic dependence on the male [and] has warped her development and threatens to drag down the whole race"(Donovan, p.44), and thus sets out to portray this total dependence on the male in her story.

The two writers are, therefore, out to make a statement about the oppressive and artificial milieu of their heroines. In Bakr's story, Farha does not accept her family's social behavioral codes, their materialistic outlook and their persistence in treating her like a child, yet, she cannot make her voice heard and her opinions are often dismissed as eccentric or as deviations from the norm. Bakr creates a heroine who has her own dreams, hopes and aspirations for a better, more meaningful life as Farha time and again points out within the text. However, this nonconformist, imaginative disposition is what actually causes her mental breakdown as she comes up against a society that is oblivious of women's individuality and independent thought; a society where "even the mildest groping towards creativity and self-esteem meets with repression or derision"(Digges). The result is a state of total repression that leads her to a mental breakdown.

Likewise, Gilman's heroine is imprisoned in a repulsive interior, isolated from her familiar surroundings, constantly treated like a helpless child, and most importantly, deprived of her creative abilities until she finally cannot tolerate this repression and breaks away from the imposed rules and regulations by descending into insanity. Indeed, as Kolodny observes:

For insofar as writing and reading represent linguistically based interpretative strategies – the first for the recording of a reality...and the second for the deciphering of that recording... - the wife's progressive descent into madness provides a kind of commentary upon, indeed is revealed in terms of, the sexual politics inherent in the manipulation of those strategies. We are presented at the outset with a protagonist who, ostensibly for her own good, is denied both activities and who, in the course of accommodating herself to that deprivation, comes more and more to experience her self as a text which can neither get read nor recorded. (pp.51-2)

Consequently, both women's estrangement from their surroundings directs them to experience a strong sense of abandonment that leads to a state of intense internal reflection which eventually foregrounds their repressed feelings. And since, as Meltzer observes: "The unconscious "contains" wishes and even information of which the Subject is unaware and which his "censor"...strains to keep from the Subject's consciousness", but which, also sometimes "[leaks] through the "repression barrier" and thrust[s] its way into consciousness"(p.151), the two women internalize their nightmarish visions, effacing the line of demarcation between their repressed fears and emotions, and reality. As such, their hallucinatory visions become their reality and insanity takes over their lives.

To conclude, it can be said that female nonconformity is, indeed, synonymous with madness when it violates or deviates from the rigid rules of a long standing patriarchal social establishment like the one that existed in the turn of the century America and the one that still exists in Egypt. As is clear from both stories, women who do not fit in the straitjacket of social rules and regulations are viewed, at best, as strange. Doubly tragic, though, is the situation of those imaginative, creative females who are deprived of their creativity and independence and whose imagination, is, indeed, regarded as a forbidden fruit in the intolerant, rigid societies they live in.

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