

Woman's Image in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Fadia Faqir's, *Pillars of Salt*

A Feminist Approach

صورة المرأة في قصة تشارلوت بيركنز جلمان "ورق الجدران الأصفر" ورواية فادية فقير "أعمدة الملح" من منظور نقدي نسوي

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the

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## **Authorization**

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband and children and my family abroad who encouraged me throughout every phase of this project. I thank my husband whose constantly encouraging words and support enabled me to continue. Finally, I would like to especially dedicate this work to my youngest children, Sabreen and Rayan who waited patiently on the side for their mother to finish writing and typing.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><u>Subject</u></b>	<b><u>Page</u></b>
Acknowledgment.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Abstract in Arabic.....	v
Chapter One – Introduction	
Background.....	1
Statement of the Study.....	3
Objectives of the Study.....	4
Significance of the Study.....	5
Limitations of the Study.....	6
Definition of Key Terms.....	7
Chapter Two	
Review of Related Literature.....	22
Chapter Three	
Woman’s Image in “The Yellow Wallpaper”.....	41
Chapter Four	
Woman’s Image in <i>Pillars of Salt</i> .....	75
Chapter Five	
Conclusion.....	109
Bibliography.....	123

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**Abstract**

This thesis presents a critical study of two literary works by applying a feminist approach. It examines the image of woman as portrayed in the short story of the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and in the novel of the Anglo-Arab writer, Jordanian-born Fadia Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* (1996). It shows how, despite the distinctly different cultural setting of both stories, the feminist message remains the same – women are shown as occupying secondary roles in their patriarchal societies. Both stories demonstrate how women were kept confined to severely traditional female roles constructed and determined by their patriarchal cultural and social systems. As a result, these main female characters are denied a voice, an identity, and even physical freedom. This denial leads to the tragic outcome of their lives.

In Gilman's short story, the main character presents an uncanny autobiographical resemblance to Gilman's own life. The main protagonist, Jane, tries to break free from the bonds of a domineering male medical profession which subjects her to a debilitating and forced treatment known as the "resting cure" which denies her the freedom to engage in intellectually stimulating activities. As a result, she spirals into a psychologically damaging state of mind. Through her story, Gilman had hoped to create an awareness of the erroneous medical conventions imposed on women and to underscore the social injustices that many American women were subjected to during the late nineteenth century.

Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, likewise, explores the violently damaging effects that patriarchal systems in post-colonial Transjordan in the 1920s had on the main characters. Faqir weaves a narrative intertwined between the two main characters, Maha and Um Saad, both of whom recount their individual stories of oppression and the physical and sexual violence to which they are subjected by the male figures of their restrictive patriarchal society. The novel highlights the characters' cultural, social and gender differences and the injustices the female characters suffer in their man-dominated society.

This study concludes that the two stories discussed here present the stereotypical images of women which eventually lead to inflicting some damaging effects, both physically and psychologically, on the female protagonists. It also demonstrates how the two women writers, American and Anglo-Arab, utilize their writing to portray the image of women with a view to drawing attention to the various problems women face in patriarchal societies.



صورة المرأة في قصة تشارلوت بيركنز جلمان "ورق الجدران الأصفر" ورواية فاديا  
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ملخص

تقدم هذه الرسالة دراسة نقدية لعملين أدبيين من خلال استعمال المنظور النسوي، فهي تبحث في صورة المرأة كما رسمتها قصة الكاتبة الأمريكية تشارلوت بيركنز جلمان "ورق الجدران الأصفر" (1892) ورواية الكاتبة العربية-الانجليزية من أصل أردني فاديا فقير "أعمدة الملح" (1996). وتوضح الرسالة أنه رغم اختلاف الخلفية الثقافية لكل من هاتين القصتين إلا أن الرسالة النسوية فيهما تبقى واحدة وهي أن النساء يقمن بأدوار ثانوية في مجتمعاتهن الذكورية، ففي كلا المجتمعين يقتصر دور النساء على أدوار تقليدية جدا تبنيها وتحدها الأنظمة الثقافية والاجتماعية الذكورية. لذلك فإن الشخوص الإناث لا يملكن الصوت ولا الهوية ولا الحرية الشخصية مما يؤدي إلى النهاية المأساوية لحياة هذه الشخوص.

في قصة جلمان هناك تشابه غريب بين السيرة الشخصية للبطلنة وحياة الكاتبة نفسها كبطلنة القصة تحاول أن تتحرر من القيود التي يفرضها الرجل المسيطر على مهنة الطب والتي تخضعها لمعالجة طبية تحد من حريتها وتضعف من قدرتها من خلال إتباعها "علاج الراحة" الذي يمنعها من المشاركة في أي نشاط فكري مثير. ونتيجة لذلك فإنها تسلك طريقا يؤدي إلى تدهور حالتها العقلية. لقد هدفت الكاتبة من خلال هذه القصة إلى خلق شعور بالممارسات الطبية الخاطئة وإلى التأكيد على

المظالم الاجتماعية التي كان يتعرض لها عدد كبير من النساء الأمريكيات في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر.

وفي روايتها "أعمدة الملح" تبحث فاديا فقير أيضا في الآثار المؤذية التي سببها النظام الذكوري على المرأة خلال حقبة الاستعمار التي تعرض لها الأردن في العشرينات من القرن الماضي. ففي هذه الرواية تصور الكاتبة قصة الشخصيتين الرئيسيتين مها وأم سعد حيث تقوم كلا منهما برواية قصتها المتضمنة مظاهر الاضطهاد والعنف الجنسي التي تعرضت لها على يدي الرجل والمجتمع الذكوري. وتوضح الرواية أيضا الفروق الثقافية والجنسية والاجتماعية بين الجنسين والظلم التي تتعرض له المرأة في مجتمع يسيطر عليه الرجال.

وأخيرا تخلص الدراسة إلى أن كلا القصتين تناقشان الصور النمطية للمرأة والتي تؤدي في النهاية إلى إلحاق أضرار جسدية ونفسية بالمرأة كما أنها توضح كيف أن هاتين الكاتبتين استخدمتا الكتابة لرسم صورة المرأة في محاولة لجلب الانتباه إلى المشاكل الكثيرة التي تعاني منها المرأة في المجتمعات الذكورية.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### I. Background and Historical Survey

Throughout history, male and female relationships have been under close scrutiny especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The assigning of gender roles has been a constant source of investigation and discussion in all areas of society whether political, socioeconomic, cultural, educational and otherwise.

Traditionally, man has always been, not only viewed, but unquestionably accepted, as holding the ultimate authoritative position of patriarch, the father, the protector, the bread-winner, the man of the house. Throughout many centuries man has been empowered to define a woman's role within the household and within society. A woman's role was defined and limited to protecting *his* household, bearing and rearing *his* children, being submissive in character and valuing and maintaining the physical attractiveness which took precedence over individual character and intelligence. While man was seen as the norm, woman was seen as the "Other".

This label of "Other" connoted characteristics of inferiority. The term "woman" appeared to be almost lacking some distinguishable traits or distinction needed for her completion as an entity. The traditional and acceptable belief that woman is

considered to be “timid, yielding, gentle, dependent, self-sacrificing, emotional, intuitive” was part of the accepted norm (Das 2002, 144).

The early feminists highlighted the need for a greater awareness and understanding of woman’s position in the world. Simone de Beauvoir questioned the traditional notion of woman as a sort of “vessel” and as a “carrier” to man’s posterity, i.e. “woman is a womb” (de Beauvoir 1949). Like de Beauvoir, several feminists argued that in order to fully understand ‘woman’s role’, one needed to fully understand the historical, cultural and societal values embedded and widely accepted in the system of patriarchy. They argued that man looked at woman through a man’s self-constructed paradigms and, by default, woman was also made to look at herself from that same lens.

Feminist criticism sprouted out for a major tool to be used for examining. According to Al-Joulani, “those cultural practices are reflected in or shape literary and critical texts, and traces them within the domains of writing, reading and evaluation. It targets the perception of gender (images of women) that a literary text offers, whose perception (man’s or woman’s) constructs these images, and how these texts are read and evaluated and by whom.” (Al-Joulani, 2007, 18). This is the real crux of the feminist theory. Feminist literary criticism concerns itself primarily with the manner in which it responds to woman with regard to her representation in literature.

The two basic premises of feminist theory consist first of how “woman” is presented in literature by male writers, the language that man uses to describe woman and woman’s place in society. The second premise looks at how woman is presented in the writings of female writers and their use of language to describe her and her place in society. Man’s construction of the woman in literary texts is known as *phallogentrism* while woman’s construction of woman in literary texts has evolved into another kind of feminist criticism known as *Gynocriticism* developed by Elaine Showalter. Modern feminism has tried to bring to the surface the stereotypical images of women in literature as either passive, harmless angels or vicious spirits of evil, and to present a more equitable image of woman in all aspects of social life. Consequently, the historical images of woman as negative and woman as a second-class citizen have been more carefully scrutinized. One does not have to look too far across the borders to note the almost non-existent status of women in some staunch patriarchal societies in some third-world countries where absolute segregation still exists. In such societies woman has to contend with these gender inequalities and stereotypical roles.

## **II. Research Problem**

The central idea that this thesis endeavors to address is how the stereotypical image of woman has been perpetuated in different societies and how historical, social, political

and cultural contexts have played a major role in shaping and retaining those images.

The study examines two stories from two different cultures in order to examine this problem. The first one is a short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the second one is a novel, *Pillars of Salt*, (1996) by Fadia Faqir.

### **III. Objectives of the Study**

Gilman and Faqir represent two different cultures. While Gilman is a mainstream American writer, Faqir is a Jordan-born Anglo-Arab writer. The study endeavors to depict the status of woman or rather the lack of status of woman during late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century but from two distinctly different cultural contexts. The events of Gilman’s short story took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century America; those of *Pillars of Salt* take place in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jordan during the British mandate. Gilman’s short story dramatizes the story of the main character, Jane, as she struggles with depression, writing and living in a male-dominated society, whereas the stories of Maha and Um Saad in Faqir’s novel reflect the struggle of the two characters against the inequalities of their strictly designated gender roles in a male-dominated society.

### **IV. Research Method**

The basic strategy of this study is to apply a descriptive, analytical method in order to demonstrate the application of feminism and how Gynocriticism in particular helps to

show that women's writing expresses a very distinctive female consciousness.

Furthermore, the researcher expects to explore how a woman's image and voice have been subjected to the male-oriented society for centuries in different societies with different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the research will try to show how gender is shaped or misshaped to reflect cultural identity as opposed to a purely biological sexual identity.

## **V. Research Significance**

The significance of this study stems from the fact that it attempts to draw a comparison between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Pillars of Salt* and in this way provides some kind of contribution to feminist studies. Moreover, writing about the novel of an Arab British novelist would be a useful contribution to an area that has not as yet received its due critical attention. This may encourage further future studies and open new venues in the study of Arabic literature and draw more parallels between two different cultures.

Furthermore, this study applies a feminist approach, specifically, a gynocritical approach, to show the depiction of women in two culturally different environments, the American culture and the Arab culture.

## **VI. Questions of the Study**

The main questions addressed in this thesis can be summed up in the following:

1. How do the social, economic, political, and cultural frameworks of patriarchy affect the portrayal of women in literary work?
2. How do these portrayals relate to the issue of gender with regard to the historical setting of the two works which have been selected for study?
3. How do these works depict patriarchal ideology and treat its impact on women's life in their societies?
4. What lessons can be learned about the life of women of these two societies?

## **VII. Limitations of the Study**

The limitations encountered during the course of this study are the limited number of available resources with regard to the second selection which is Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*.

## **VIII. Definition of Key Terms**

The following key terms/concepts will be used throughout this study:

1. **Ecriture Feminine:** The focus in the so-called French school of feminist criticism on the existence of a distinctive 'woman's language'.



2. **Feminism:** A critical theory that is of males and females concerned with the differences in treatment and the marginalization of women in society.
3. **Feminist literary criticism:** Primarily responds to the way woman is presented in literature. One premise is how men construct and present the image of woman. A second premise is how women construct and present the image of woman.
4. **Gender:** Refers not to our human biology but rather to our human behavior as a socially constructed behavior. It is contrasted with “sex” which refers to biologically-based distinctions.
5. **Gynocritics/Gynocriticism:** This term has been coined by Elaine Showalter for feminist criticism focusing on literary works written by women. Such criticism challenges the traditionally patriarchal literary canon by retrieving and reassessing texts written by women. Gynocriticism frequently emphasizes the evolving female consciousness reflected in literature and explores the ways in which women writers have tried to create a literature of their own.
6. **Misogyny:** a man’s strong displeasure of women. It also refers to men who feel and show great apathy towards women.
7. **Patriarchal/Patriarchy:** a central assumption of feminist criticism that culture is ‘father-ruled’, with its institutions and traditions so structured to promote masculine values and to maintain the male in a privileged position.
8. **Phallogentric:** centers around the constitution of masculinity and male dominance.

10. **Phallogentrism:** centers around the ideology of how women are presented by men in literature.

## **II. Waves of Feminism**

### **1. First Feminist Movement – 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

When Feminism first appeared in the early twentieth century in the United States it laid the groundwork for a new type of discourse that looked into women's rights and freedoms. However, society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not speak of this new movement or ideology as feminism. Instead, it was referred to simply as a woman's movement for the advancement of woman's causes and rights. Women's 'exodus' from the sphere of home life was initially perceived and socially 'accepted' as nothing more than charitable undertakings, and/or friendly membership into social clubs/groups. Consequently, between 1860 and 1910 these women groups evolved into study clubs where they quietly and most importantly designed a framework that nurtured the intellectual capabilities of their members. This slow, but steady evolution became an important facet in women's lives because nineteenth century ideology held that "true women had been taught submission, bland and neutral topics may have been the perfect vehicle for teaching them the sound of their own voices" (Martin, 1987, 161). These clubs quickly helped to modify women's thinking about what they could achieve intellectually. They filled the gaps between society's formal institutions and the informal yet growing needs and aspirations of women. Furthermore, these early women's clubs were looked at as latent feminist

organizations representing the unity of the female sex (Cott, 1987, 3).

Many early well-known nineteenth century women reformers (activists, feminists), like Emma Willard, Margaret Fuller, Sojourner Truth and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, served as driving forces which helped to create an awareness for equality, self-development and for addressing the individualistic needs of women (Martin, 1987).

A major shift of emphasis took place in the twentieth century when the word *feminism* came into usage. This important shift occurred in order to distinguish its purpose from its early objective - the suffrage campaign. The new language of feminism marked the end of the women's movement and embarked on a new and a more modern agenda (Cott, 1987).

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the most important documents in the history of women's early movement because it set out to lay the fundamental principles that both men and women are endowed with at birth that is, natural rights of equality. More importantly, she addressed the deplorable situation of women during the eighteenth century, the lack of educational opportunities, the sexual inequalities to which they were subjected and the social stereotypical structures of women. Wollstonecraft wrote "Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she [woman] is not prepared by education [to become the companion of man] she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue for

truth must be common to all” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 8).

According to Mary Wollstonecraft, society held certain views which were detrimental to women’s status. She felt that these false views or perspectives needed to be addressed or changed. For her, the political structures of the day needed reorganization, reeducation in order to create societal values that were more worthily representative of a woman’s character: “To see one half of the human race to be excluded by the other from all participation of government was a political phenomenon that...was impossible to explain” (ibid). With that, the system would then justly validate a woman’s true worth and righteous place in society, as opposed to simply deeming her as an ornament. Furthermore, she believed that in pursuing these objectives, justice and equality could be better achieved.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was an American author, lecturer, feminist and an ardent social reformer. She was an avid proponent of women’s suffrage and their societal hindrances which prevented them from achieving economic independence and she strongly encouraged women to pursue interests outside the domestic sphere. In addition to having produced a variety of essays, articles, poems, her best known work, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), is considered a feminist literary masterpiece amongst critics as it provides insight into 19<sup>th</sup> century women and their forced adherence to the

“The Cult of Domesticity”. It shed light on issues dealing with marriage, medical stereotypes on women’s health, and patriarchal oppression as seen through the main character’s predicaments. This work shows the slow, mental demise of a young woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century America under the watchful eyes of her husband and the medical male profession who prescribes a debilitating treatment for female maladies.

Women’s history has long been a patchwork of incomplete narratives. In her introduction to a historical overview of women’s movement, Spender points out that according to Virginia Woolf, ‘Women have no history’. She writes about how men have been the recorders of their own lives, glorifying their accomplishments and passing on these colorful constructive events of their male history through a male lineage. Yet on the other hand, there has been a silence on the part of women. For Virginia Woolf, “the corridors of history are for women, unlit and the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived” (cited in Spender, 1983, 1).

In *A Room’s of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf’s main argument for women’s absence from recording their own history has been mainly due to the constraints and/or deprivations of education imposed on them by social patriarchal constructions. She further writes that it was not men’s indifference to women’s writing, but rather, their hostility. “The world did not say to her as it said to them, write if you choose; it makes

no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw; Write? What's the good of your writing?" (Woolf, 1929). Furthermore, she ponders over the concept of which one is worse, "how unpleasant it is to be locked out; [and] how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (Woolf, 1929). Locked into a room, a sphere, a space of compelled conformity can serve as an allusion to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper", thereby depriving the woman the freedom of mind and expression, to ultimately contributing to the absence from the printed page.

Historically, the idea or concept of feminism has usually had connotations to some form of radical rebellion, an image best associated with the 1960s. It was seen as a kind of 'unknown', raucous liberation movement where women were seen as flocking out to the streets loudly demanding equal pay, equal rights under an umbrella of 'women power'. Images of Gloria Steinem conjure up rallies of 'self-liberated' women dismissing all forms of feminine roles and labels; and women of the 60s and 70s era burning bras and proclaiming their full emancipation from the shackles of womanhood (Rodriquez, Rueda, Watkins, 1992). But Feminism is more than an activist movement. It is a new philosophy, a new subject, a new discipline of women studies in the halls of academia and it is within this framework that Cott (1987) labels as a more currently and politically correct terminology of feminism which she points has shifted to encompass three major core

components. She defines them as being based on: the belief of sex equality which endeavors to dismiss one's categorical sex control over the rights and opportunities of the other sex. Secondly, a woman's condition is socially constructed, thereby impacting her gains to women's rights and freedoms, for, if woman's conditions were solely constructed on natural or divine origins, then what would be the objectives for change? Thirdly, the idea of gender group identity and how a woman's experiences are reflected and how they affect her position and actions in any given community. This concept of feminism is therefore not to be seen as a bare concept or an ambiguous idea or notion, but rather, it is a formal discipline that addresses a unique and influential individual, a member of society who needs to have its history recorded and also passed on. It is that of woman and her image in our society through the literary process, the media, in essence, in a society's overall framework. Feminism is a discipline that incorporates all the philosophies that concern specific gender issues which had begun to be voiced long before Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949).

Feminism examines how the world looks at women and how many of those perceptions continue to be erroneously maintained by many third-world nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This discipline poses the questions of stereotypical roles assigned to women, the societal expectations of women and most importantly how *society* itself has *constructed* the



image and role of woman and the impact that this notion has created on her psychological, emotional and physical well-being. So essentially, Feminism is no longer to be associated with a cacophony of “a bunch of rebellious women”, rather, it merits to be looked at from a different vantage through a different lens. In the two major works that this thesis will address, “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the *Pillars of Salt*, it is precisely those constructions that society imposes on the major characters that will be addressed. It is how those constructions limit the intellectual freedom in the former work and the physical freedom of mobility and voice in the latter work. We ask ourselves how this discipline, this framework of feminist theory enables to identify patterns of patriarchal oppression as seen in in two different works with two distinctly, apparently different women.

Feminist theory examines women’s social roles and lived experiences as key concepts. Today Feminists have advocated reform from a wide spectrum of issues such as legal rights, women’s rights to bodily integrity, protection from domestic violence, maternity severance, rights to childcare facilities, issues of fertility, against misogyny, the right to equal educational opportunities and many others. (Wikipedia, 2009). Our earlier discussions of feminism helped to shed some light on the early campaigning of the women’s movement and with it, the start of feminism. The establishment of this new ‘idea’ furthered its purpose by creating a more unified cause which provided greater

awareness of the plight of women's situation. Feminist theorists, and scholars soon came to categorize feminism into three distinctive phases. The first feminist wave occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, according to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker. The second took place during the 1960s and 1970s period, and the third one began from the 1990s into the present. (Wikipedia, 2009). The first wave of feminism is characterized by the women's historical commencement of the suffrage movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century. While its initial platform canvassed primarily for equal contractual, property rights as well as opposition to undue ownership of both women and children by the husbands, their activism soon took a different form – that of gaining a much needed political power in order to bring about greater change to their suffrage cause. What began as a movement to obtain basic voting rights for women of both continents had its initial inception in the United States with the first women's convention in New York in 1848. Likewise, in Great Britain, the culminating achievement of these early suffragettes happened with the passage of the People Act of 1918, granting the vote right to women over the age of 30. In the United States, this equated with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution of 1919 also granting women the right to vote in all states. This shifting of the masses created an overabundance of factory workers among the lower working class of women. This new shift in working classes served as a bench

for women who began to question their inequality in their social roles which contributed to furthering the cause of women's movement (Wikipedia, 2009).

## **2. The Second Feminist Movement – 1960s to 1970s**

The Second Wave of Feminism extended through the period in the early 1960s and lasted through the late 1980s. It is a wave characterized by the *ideas* and *actions* undertaken by women. It soon came to be known as “the women's liberation movement”. The specific aims during this phase concentrated on reform in women's legal and social issues and rights. During this period, feminist activists fought for major changes in social changes as seen lacking in the social, cultural and political frameworks. During this period, the famous feminist of the era was Kate Millett, who wrote her classic and controversial first feminist textbook of literary criticism, *Sexual Politics* (1970). This literary and intellectual work set out to mark another important groundwork that epitomized the main message of second wave feminism.

In her book, Kate Millett discussed divisive topics such as the inequality of the sexes, and she argued that “sex has a frequently neglected political aspect”. She also pointed out the role that patriarchal societies play in the roles of sexual relations. Millett defined the term “politics” in the sense of power-structured relationships, arrangements, whereby one group of persons is controlled by another group (Millett, 1969, 1). She argued that our

societies, since times immemorial have been established by patriarchal systems of control. Moreover, the differences in gender roles have been socially and culturally constructed and reinforced through our childhood experiences and parents' expectations of what is deemed appropriate in "temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gestures, and expression" (Millett, 1969, 8). Additionally, she pointed out how male writers such as Arthur Miller, D.H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer for example, presented their literature in a patriarchal and sexist manner. This point of view synthesizes with those views of Elaine Showalter's feminist critique which examined the male – produced literature and male – oriented texts. Again this echoed an earlier idea set forth by Virginia Woolf in her ponderings over the absence of women's written history *by women* as the writers.

Thus in her epoch-making 1968 essay (later published as a formal book in 1970), Millett referred to how power structure relations take on a political aura. This theory of politics is precisely what Millett deemed as the trickling effect in a society where one group will have a strong political representation in its traditionally male political structure while the lesser one will inevitably be continually subjected to patriarchal control and governed by another group. What develops ultimately is the dominant versus the subordinate. Again this occurs when a whole group of subordinately placed people are

governed by another more dominantly stronger group (Millett, 1969). This same analogy can be applied to Fadia Faqir's, *Pillars of Salt* with Maha, the story's protagonist struggling for justice in her attempt to acquire what is lawfully seen as her claim to her father's property.

Another foremost feminist figure of this second wave of feminist movement is the French author and philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir. Among her many famous literary works, she is best known for her powerful treatise, *The Second Sex* (1949). In this feminist work, she provided a detailed analysis of women's oppression and established a benchmark to contemporary feminism. Her main theology on the subject centers on "one is not born a woman, but becomes one" (*New World Encyclopedia*, 2008). In her work, she argued that a woman's oppression has its basis in the social constructions of women and this in turn is what led to viewing, "Woman as the Other". Simone further argued that historically women have always had the stereotypical image of being seen as abnormal, deviant, different, indecisive, whereas men were traditionally seen as the ideal representations of certainty and truth anchorages in the face of uncertainty. Simone de Beauvoir argued that a change in society's attitudes would bring about a change in society's gendered constructions of women. Her theory provided further credence to how women's images were socially constructed in that women were seen as

incapable of keeping their emotions under control, to be hidden away. In effect, this resulted in the idea that man needed to control them, to take charge, and to ultimately establish order out of a state of disorder.

Apart from Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), examined the internal and personal spheres of domesticity. She looked at how women of that time period were indoctrinated into believing that domesticity was their only and true vocation. *The Feminine Mystique* is regarded as a major influential feminist work because it impacted the social threads of that era's belief system with regard to women's roles in society and in their microcosmic domestic world. Friedan contested women into questioning their traditionally conforming roles of 'housewife, mother'. In her book she hypothesized that women easily lost their identity and objectives in life when submersed only in domesticity.

### **3. The Third Wave of Feminism – 1990s to the present**

The Third Wave of feminism had its beginnings in the early 1990s. The significance of this phase is twofold. First, it showed a clearly distinctive developmental change in the aims of the women's movement and secondly, it arose as a response to the setbacks that second – wave feminism failed to address. Third Wave feminism's point of departure occurs however, when it avoided addressing central issues which became more apparent

in society with regard to race-relations. Moreover, an increase in internal debates also contributed to multi-perspectives over how there were important differences between the sexes, while others contended that these differences were not inherently present but rather socially constructed gender roles. As a result, the internal shifts in these feminist paradigms led to readdressing and redefining the unique differences that existed among women in a response to their shifting roles and ideas toward feminism.

In summary, the first wave of feminism served to establish an early women's suffrage movement to secure equality of voting rights. The second wave looked more deeply to important ideas and actions associated with women's movement in terms of addressing women's legal and social rights. The third wave served as a continuation and reformation to those ideologies commenced with its predecessors. Some achievements in these waves of feminism has been the attainment towards establishing more open forums of discussions that deal with important women's issues at both the political, social and cultural levels.

Third World feminism is one example which has sprung from this movement in which women from third world countries have begun the slow yet tenacious process of establishing a voice of their own within their political institutions in order to bring about some element of change that addresses pivotal women's issues. On the other hand, some setbacks have also occurred in that many critics of women's movements claim that

feminism is a movement which has overlooked many important issues regarding race and class. They claim that by not fully including these 'sisters', many issues will continue to keep a divide among women. Consequently, this 'new wave' of feminism will need to re-define feminism and the many new challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman.



## Chapter Two

### Review of Related Literature

Several articles and books have been written on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's works and in general and her "The Yellow Wallpaper" in particular. One of these studies is the article "Love and Economics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the 'Woman Question'" (2005). In her article Cynthia J. Davis delves into the difficulties that Gilman experienced in her own personal life over her constant efforts to reconcile the demands of a woman's situation on both marriage and work. This internal conflict was symbolically memorialized also in her classic, "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a result of conforming to society's expectations of a securely rooted domestic life as opposed to living a life that offered a more economic and social independence. In her book *Women and Economics* (1898) Gilman advocates intensely against the reduction of a woman's identity; and her unpleasant experiences during her first marriage enabled her to argue vehemently on behalf of women's rights to economic independence. Gilman also questioned why men's professional life overshadowed women's domestic life. As an advocate for women's rights, she felt a strong sense of urgency to reform the disappointing state of economic opportunities allotted to women besides those limited ones such as a governess, house

servant, or a lady's companion. Gilman felt that this point further created and sustained a hierarchy of segregated roles within a marriage. She believed that by giving women greater intellectual and economic freedom, this would bring them closer to achieving an equal footing with that of men. Moreover, she believed that if both partners in a marriage met on a more equal standing, then a stronger union between them would result, thus fostering greater harmonious, satisfying roles within their relationship.

In a brief synopsis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's life, Kelly Gilbert (2003) points out how "The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts a sprinkling of Gilman's autobiographical life. In her opinion, this is a work that exemplifies the suffocating nature of life for women of the Victorian era as Gilman herself experienced it. Gilbert sets out to show how Gilman exposes a woman's emotional and psychological feelings of rejection from a society that was strictly structured along male ideology. It was Gilman's intent throughout this story, to bring to light (and gain some kind of personal satisfaction) the plight that nineteenth century women diagnosed or associated with "hysteria" were subjected to under Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell's infamous 'Rest Cure' treatment. In this article, Gilbert also discusses how, despite the fictional nature of this classical feminist story, Gilman weaves into it a testament to her own life experiences and most importantly how life's decisions can affect one's emotional and mental well-being as was in Gilman's

case.

Shelley Green's article "Women's Encounters with the Mental Health Establishment":

Escaping the Yellow Wallpaper (2003) is a modern perspective on how to create a more careful examination and awareness of women's mental health issues and how health professionals should pay closer attention to those women whose voices have been silenced, ignored, or robbed as decisions concerning their care and treatment have been taken. Green goes on to further illustrate other examples of women (writers) whose fates were wrongfully decided by the mental health profession such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Virginia Woolf who in particular found the courage to challenge the indignity of being silenced. Deborah Thomas states in "The Changing Role of Womanhood: From True Woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (2003) that this short story is truly symbolic of the "Cult of True Womanhood" which bound women to the sphere of domesticity – that of home and family. During this age of "True Womanhood" men perpetrated the minds of women by subjecting them and silencing their voices through a male-constructed ideology and a politically-designed-male system that acknowledged them as the sole authority and designer of women's lives. Through this culturally and societal sphere, men were thus able to maintain unquestionable control and 'insure the passivity and docility of women'.

In “Managing Madness in Gilman’s Yellow Wallpaper”, Beverly Hume (2002) explores the various elements in “The Yellow Wallpaper” that reveal the narrator’s bizarre and delusional journey of psychological deterioration. Hume vividly describes the narrator’s troubled anxieties over the yellow wallpaper which slowly begins to overcome her judgments, and her sentiments even over her own child whom she vaguely and detachedly mentions. She also reveals her perceptions of the outside world and finally of herself. Hume points out how the narrator’s condition is closely associated with what were the gender biases of society’s demands on a woman inherent in the “rest cure” treatment (as practiced during that era) and of its detrimental effects as well as the expectations of the domestic obligations as both wife and mother during the American Victorian culture.

Hume points out the various aspects that further create and contribute to the narrator’s psychological deterioration. Elements of a dark and gothic setting can be detected in the various descriptions such as, “a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, a haunted house... there is something queer about it” (“The Yellow Wallpaper”, 3) create an ominous, sinister-like atmosphere. More so, the description of the bedroom as having, barred windows, “rings and things in the wall”, a stripped off paper, a heavy bedstead nailed to the floor and

fairly gnawed; as well as her recollection of a familiarity in the strong odor of the wallpaper are disturbing images of her frail mind. Her slow descent into madness is also seen in her dark thoughts over “seriously burning the house – to reach the smell” (“The Yellow Wallpaper”, 15) further creates an imagery of a madwoman and the house as a reminiscent thought of a mental institution.

Hume suggests that the already disturbed narrator’s mind is further aggravated by these images and through the patriarchal oppression of the male figure, John. Her subjugation as a woman, as a writer, and through the process of her victimization, all contribute to the final collapse. Hume points out that throughout the narrator’s “journalistic masquerade of her narrative”, she makes an effort to managing/controlling her disturbed and fragmented mind. This, Hume, suggests is what leads to a type of “paradoxical emancipation”. She further adds that “The Yellow Wallpaper” not only serves to reject Gilman’s intentions about the maladies of the gender-bias ‘rest cure’ of the nineteenth-century, but it also shows how Gilman’s character, who falls apart in the end, ironically seems to reinforce that same gender-bias ideology of the emotionally and physically frail nineteenth century woman.

Lisa Galullo (1996) examines several components on the “Gothic and The female Voice: Examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”. In this

study she emphasizes the need to look at the social and historical contexts of feminine literature (Feminine Ecriture) in order to better interpret the significance of the text's themes and messages. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", she explores the feminist interpretation of the story by looking at the importance behind the literary text's social and historical context in order to better grasp and interpret the implications of its feminist themes and messages. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", Galullo explores the feminist interpretation of the story by looking at the impact behind the narrator's voice as a means by which the writer exposes the Victorian female voice which has been silenced and assigned to specifically defined gender roles. In addition, it attempts to show how society attributed a woman's medical problems to the biological imbalances of her reproductive system.

In the article, "The Yellow Wallpaper": A Poetics of the Inside" (1999) Dr. Synder-Rheingold examines the internal narrative space of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and how its inner structure – mainly the bedroom-emphasizes and supports the idea of patriarchal authority. The idea of exerting dominance is reaffirmed in the silencing of both the narrator's voice and body. The idea of being 'shut in, shut inside, shut out or shut off' from the exterior (the outside world) again reinforces these thematic motifs so indicative of nineteenth century women's writings as pointed out earlier in Reynolds (1999).

According to Rheingold, “The Yellow Wallpaper” represents a reconstruction of the powerful domestic ideology which is seen clearly in the story’s usage of essential recurring objects such as: woman, man, room. The concepts of space, domestic containment and its limiting boundaries punctuate the silencing of female voice, in this case, that of the narrator.

Rheingold further points out the important symbolic wallpaper that emphasizes the powerful patriarchal grasp over the narrator. This central iconic object in the story acts as the story’s focal image which controls and contributes to the further fragmentation of the already fragile mental state of the narrator. Rheingold presents another interesting perspective by suggesting that not only does the confinement of the room’s interior space reinforce male authority through John’s ever-watchful gaze, but also on the other hand, Jane’s journal is also seen as a dominant male object keeping surveillance over the narrator’s impulsive urges to write. This inability to write is seen through her covert and feeble attempts to desperately find refuge in her writing which is constantly subjected to her husband’s authority: “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me...having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (“The Yellow Wallpaper”, 4). Rheingold concludes by stating that the story’s strong internal structure represents the suppression of the narrator’s interiority by the male’s exteriority.

In her book, *Victorian Renovations of the Novel*, Suzanne Keen (1998), looks at the Victorian novel and the norms of representation of its characters. She states that “Victorian novels surround characters with spaces, places, homes, and geography in a variety of ways” (p.66). This framework is clearly seen in “The Yellow Wallpaper” where the narrator describes the summer home as “a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate”, “The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village...there are hedges and walls and gates that lock” (“The Yellow Wallpaper”, 4).

The significance that these houses and geographical locations play, represents important components that create the somewhat haunting, mysterious, gothic-like atmosphere to the fictional novel. These enigmatic representations further support the image of a woman committed to a hidden, isolated “institutional-like” structure, but superficially presented as a place of beauty and comforting solace. According to Keen, “the location of these subjects on the ground or inside walls constitutes a new field of representation” (67).

They are often shown as the image of an isolated, hidden away woman so frequently depicted in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. Another important component of this representation is the concept of narrative annexes. For Keen, 19<sup>th</sup> century women writers utilized this



convention to “manipulate the language of norms and boundaries...so often used in her border-crossings, daring excursions, and representation of impossibilities as necessities of action and self-discovery” (70) In other words, Keen states that through the use of these narrative annexes in Victorian writing, it allowed the writer’s characters to “step outside” their gendered boundaries and exert their power of imagination” (69-70).

In “The Yellow Wallpaper” the gendered limits of the narrator are clearly shown through the figuration of boundaries, the spatial constraints placed on her as a remedy to placate not only her physical mobility, but her mental ability as well. However, from a gynocriticism perspective, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s narrative annexes allows her character, Jane, to “venture” into a realm of imagination from what she sees hidden within the yellow wallpaper. The yellow wallpaper can be seen to serve as a vehicle by which the narrator embarks on a daring and imaginative excursion in which she sets out to explore and discover its puzzling and defying patterns. As such, she defies the overtly prescriptive social conventions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian culture as seen in her main character’s extreme confinement. Gilman furthermore dramatizes a kind of “Bildungsroman” of the character through these narrative annexes. The narrator appears to go through this developmental passage and exerts some effort to get out of the conventional stations inscribed upon her. Through these narrative annexes, Gilman

openly critiques the gender roles and exposes the abuses of patriarchal power as seen in the narrator's desire to be taken away from the home, but the husband's insistence for her to remain there, to stop from walking about simply because as a doctor, he knows what is best for her.

Finally, Keen's narrative annexes exemplify the difficulties of the female character in having to resort to some independent action by breaking down those barriers and allowing her protagonist to see and experience a sense of accomplishment. For Gilman's narrator, the main objective is "liberating" herself from the symbolic patriarchal representation of the yellow wallpaper by freeing the many other women trapped behind it: "that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her" ("The Yellow Wallpaper", 17).

In his article, "Escaping the Jaundiced Eye", John S. Bak (1994) uses the framework of the Panopticon to create and connect the image of Bentham's beautiful yet, oppressive structure of surveillance. Unlike Beverly Hume's interpretation of the various aspects that contribute to the narrator's victimization, Bak focuses on the yellow wallpaper's psychologically damaging effects. The concept of the Panopticon is seen as an instrument of great power, authority and observation. Its premise is two-fold: to make the subject visible and the observer's presence potently unquestionable. The paranoia that

results from this constant surveillance would eventually affect a confined person's psychological health. Bak interprets the yellow wallpaper as a symbol by drawing upon the Foucauldian concept of panopticism and discusses how the paper becomes a kind of male panopticon, "an instrument of power and observation" which subjects Jane to constant surveillance. This constant observation eventually contributes to her descent into madness and her eventually becoming the woman behind the wallpaper. Bak characterizes the yellow wallpaper as a kind of 'jaundiced eye' which slowly begins to take control of her mind and soon begins to take a life of its own with its "bulbous (panoptic) eyes" defying resistance. It transforms into weapon of disciplinary power which serves as an instrument of restraint for the narrator (Bak, 1994, 4). Bak seems to concur with other critics like Humes and Elaine Hedges in that Gilman's narrator's encounter and struggle with this panoptic wallpaper greatly contributes to her descent into further madness, yet she achieves a paradoxical freedom that liberates, yet destroys her in the end.

Catherine Golden's "The Writing of 'The Yellow Wallpaper': A Double Palimpsest" (1992) provides a feminist reading of the story. It points out how the pattern of the yellow wallpaper serves as the main focal point to exemplify the story and how the narrator responds to the delusional images of the wallpaper. Most significantly, Golden shows how the textual details in the story provide a kind of "self-consciousness"

displayed through the usage of punctuation which conveys a secondary positioning of Gilman's narrator which is "used in order to keep Gilman's narrator in a subjugated position. Golden shows this through the shifting and increased usage of specific nominative pronouns such as 'I', 'he', 'we' to reveal and compromise the character's sanity and eventual slow descent of her mind into madness.

Furthermore, Golden goes on to state that this "placement of pronouns...reveals the narrator's growing sense of awareness to her former submissive state". These conclusions can be seen for example, in the introduction of herself and of John as "myself" and "John", other examples like, "ordinary people like John and myself", "John laughs at me", "John is a physician", "He does not believe I am sick", all these illustrate her acquiescence to John's authority and her subordinate position as a woman.

By the same token, Golden further reasserts a feminist reading of Gilman's language through the narrator's anonymous reference to herself as in "one"; disguised as "I", "I am sick and what can one do?" This latter expression merely shows the narrator's helplessness and inability to change her predicament or to challenge male authority. Upon further examination of the language and its uniquely muted- positioning of pronouns throughout the story, Golden concludes how this text allows Jane "to fictionalize" herself as the audience of her story" thereby presenting a woman's positioning in a patriarchal society.

In her critical afterward to the Feminist Press edition, Elaine R. Hedges (1992) examines the different critical interpretations of Gilman's short story. She points out the story's ceaselessly debated ending over the narrator's paradoxical final triumph and/or her defeat. She refers to studies of the story that have been generally grouped together ranging from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Annette Kolodny's "A Map for Rereading: Or Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts", Jean Kennard's "Convention Coverage or How to Read your Own Life". Hedges concludes that they all agree on a feminist interpretation of the story as "the narrative of a woman's efforts to free herself from the confining social and psychic structures of her world". In addition, the wallpaper is seen as the story's fundamental symbol of patriarchal oppression. For example, Hedges notes how for Gilbert and Gubar, the wallpaper represents a kind of patriarchal text by which the narrator not only frees the woman trapped behind it, but also frees herself in the process. In doing so, she assumes a rightful authorship to her freedom of expression. However, Kolodny chooses to present a contrasting view in which she perceives the wallpaper as the "narrator's own text, a text of herself" which fails to be recorded because at the end, she falls victim to the male devices of ownership. Yet again, Hedges illustrates another contrasting view in Paula Treichler's (1985) interpretation of a "woman's struggle to author her own story" and

succeeding although even if in brevity. She, too, looks at the usage of language to show defiance to a male's control and her climatic relationship with the wallpaper.

In another example, Hedges points out Judith Fetterley's perspectives on how the story emphasizes a male control of textuality and how the narrator utilizes the wallpaper as a vehicle of her own writing, thus writing her own expressions. The wallpaper's pattern assumes a dominant position whereas she identifies herself with the trapped woman within it and this in itself makes her a subtext of the paper. Yet again, another critical approach is debated by Susan Lanser's "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Politics of Color in America" (2001). In this essay, she presents an over-read of Gilman's story by suggesting it to be a product of the politics of heavily laced race issues (specifically, a less than favorable opinion toward Asians – the reason for the paper's yellow color) and therefore making it a textual product of culture. In conclusion, this article shows that Hedges' main objective was to demonstrate the multitude of interpretations to Gilman's feminist classic and how these interpretations can be seen and will continue to be seen as products of a dynamic shifting of social changes.

All these sources provide the springboard for a critical analysis of Gilman's short story based on a feminist approach. The cross references to Fadia Faqir's novel, *Pillars of Salt* also provides another perspective to look at this story.

In “Alienation in the Lives of Arab Women- An Experimental Approach to Ancient Questions”, Leavitt (2002) discusses how the concept of ‘alienation’ defines the lives of Arab women. Most importantly, he points out how pivotal it is to establishing a forum that will explore, stimulate, discuss and diffuse the mysterious and often romanticized image of the Arab woman. He looks at five literary works, *Pillars of Salt* being one of them and discusses how Faqir’s female protagonists experience alienation as a means of oppression from the men in their society.

Nichole, M. Tuma’s (2003), “Search for the Arab Woman: An Errand of Folly”, looks at how to deconstruct the historical, social, stereotypical, and cultural constructions of Arab women. She attempts to enrich the gender discourse about Arab men and women and addresses how the variation of portrayal inevitably leads to important implications in the literary circles of Western feminism.

In “Language and Style in Fadia Faqir’s, *Pillars of Salt*” (2004), Yasmeen Bouterra discusses how the plight of Arab women is portrayed in five important literary works. In particular, she looks at how political, social and historical contexts play an essential role towards the presentation of the female characters in these works. Foremost, Bouterra examines the strong and violent language and style employed by Faqir to show how the main characters reside in a society that mandates very strict and harsh codes of behavior

upon women.

In Colin Hull's (2003) "Expression of Desires in Arabic Women's Novels", he examines how the current plethora of Arab women's novels and stories explore and address a broad range of themes which focus on Arab women's issues. He points out how this literature has given the Arab female writer the opportunity to express her individualistic creativity and to describe her ideas and desires that have been historically suppressed by the patriarchal structures and cultural taboos of her society. Through their writings, these women exercise a freedom of expression in dealing with sensitive topics on female sexuality, domestic violence and social and political abuse. Specifically, Hull explores how Faqir utilizes her creative pen to create a strong-willed character like Maha who refuses to have her voice suppressed by the male protagonists in her story. Um Saad's dreams and desires are also captured in Faqir's narrative by giving her a voice that painfully recounts the cruel and humiliating treatment to which she is subjected. By doing so, this character reveals the merciless male characters who destroy any possibilities for her achieving any kind of self-fulfillment or dignity.

In an interview with Neil Quillian, (JO Magazine, 2002) Faqir discusses the reason that prompted her to write about women issues in Jordan, and this applies to *Pillars of Salt*.

Faqir points out that having lived abroad has "helped [her] to observe, study and under-



stand [her] country in a better way.” Furthermore, she states that women in the Arab world are burdened with a double jeopardy. They are the last colony to be liberated, and theirs is a double fight, as they struggle for rights in countries where human rights are still “circumspect” (2). Faqir illustrates this “double jeopardy” by clearly depicting in her novel the abusive and physical actions inflicted upon them by not only the male figures in their personal lives but also by the foreign male political institutions under whose “care” they are passed. For example, the English doctor in Fuheis Mental Hospital, Dr. Edwards, insists on silencing these women’s much-needed therapeutic conversations by subjecting them to forcefully-imposed electrical shock treatments.

In an article abstract titled “Pillar of Tolerance” (1997), Kate Worsley writes that Fadia Faqir, a Muslim writer and lecturer, says that “her novel about the plight of Islamic women, *Pillars of Salt*, was inspired by the film “Lawrence of Arabia”. The lack of women, [she says] in the film prompted her to begin writing about the lives and experiences of Arab women”. In another example, *Pillars of Salt* has been anthologized in *Colonial and Post-Colonial Fiction* (1999) edited by Robert L. Ross. This work contains a brief introduction which refers to the motives that prompt writers of non-British background to write in English. Fadia Faqir is one such writer.

In a discussion forum, “Proactivity Group on *Pillars of Salt*” (2006), Eyad posted his comments by observing “that novels and stories all have essential elements of time and place, and it is from these elements that a reader can gain a better appreciation of one’s cultural past by obtaining a deeper insight into these important contexts. He specifically comments on *Pillars of Salt* stating that Faqir succeeds in writing the story about two women who struggle not only against the historical and foreign conquerors of Jordan’s past, but against the male figures of their society. These latter points are reinforced by Faqir’s viewpoints as expressed in her interview with Quillian.

Obviously, there are not many sources on Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* as it is a recent work. However, in the chapter in which this novel will be discussed, reference will be made to studies on several other Arab female writers and to feminist theory as a whole.

## Chapter Three

### Woman's Image in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is considered to be one of the most highly and critically acclaimed literary works and widely anthologized feminist literature. In 1973, a new publishing house – The Feminist Press – reprinted the story (first published in 1892) which had been out of print for half a century. For Susan Lanser (2001, 415)

"The canonization of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is an obvious sign of the degree to which contemporary feminism has transformed the study of literature". By the same token, Elaine Hedges points out that since the rediscovery and republication of "The Yellow Wallpaper" "it is regularly assigned in women's studies and literature courses and is by now firmly established in the literary canon...and an array of significantly disparate array of [critical] interpretations [have ensued]" (Hedges, 1992, 141). Its placement in such a category is due to the nature of the message it conveys. It solidifies Elaine Showalter's theory of Gynocriticism as it reflects the evolving female consciousness by exploring the ways in which women writers, in this case Gilman, have tried to create a voice through a literature of their own. As such, "The Yellow Wallpaper" also endeavors to depict the status of women during the mid-to late nineteenth century in early America. Women's

roles during the Victorian period were succinctly defined by a society which severely subjected and relegated women to strict codes of conduct, behavior, ideologies and thoughts as well as a denial of self-expression not only in the outside function of societal roles, but also within the marriage itself.

This social ideology is elucidated in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". The social construction of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society perceived them as a weaker sex, fragile and emotionally unsteady. Not only were they visually seen as physically smaller, but also the monthly cycle of their menses contributed to the 'temporary insanity' of their mental condition. This concept of fragility served only to further justify their inferiority as compared to men.

Because the Victorian period strictly viewed and connected a woman's state of being to her reproductive system, physicians ultimately accorded all female ailments to the 'center' of a woman's being. It is this socially-constructed ideology in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" by which the physician prescribes such a dramatic 'cure' to the narrator of the story, which yet ironically serves to only aggravate her psychological state and to support society's already erroneous notions of a woman's 'hysteria'.

In order to gain a better perspective of the feminist interpretation of Gilman's story, it is vital to have some background about both its historical and biographical contexts and

the important ideologies that prevailed during the late nineteenth century. The portrayal of women in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is closely connected to the prevailing phallogocentric ideologies that kept women “boxed in” through the patriarchal cultural constructions of a woman’s sphere. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist messages represent a strong resistance to the prevailing notions of women’s “nature” that were deeply embedded in her society.

In addition, Gilman’s short story juxtaposes closely with her own painful autobiographical reality through a fictional character (Jane) by using a first person narrative voice in order to further underscore her feminist message. This particular choice of narration provides the reader with a more realistic, first-hand account and insight into the trappings of the main character’s dilemmas. It also serves to dramatize the intense sufferings that the young woman struggles with by living in a male-dominated society. This point is significantly illustrated in Gilman’s short story through John’s insistent control in keeping the narrator confined to the room. Furthermore, his insistence on prohibiting her to practice her writing inclinations, his disapproval of her engaging in social affairs and his maintaining a vigilance over all aspects of her time all reflect his obdurate determination to control her life and future. More so, this example supports what Thomas points out (2003) regarding the medical male profession adopting and exercising a “god-like attitude”

as demonstrated throughout the story. John's somewhat threatening tone is shown when he tells the narrator to get better faster or else he would send her back to Weir Mitchell. Thomas discusses how Gilman's work portrays male institutions in this feminist story conditioning women and binding them to a particular man-created ideology. She also shows how Charlotte Perkins Gilman's portrayal of women has effected response and the slow changes for a new resurgence of a new type of womanhood.

This strict first- person narration also leads the reader into the inner consciousness of the protagonist, revealing her feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of the male world around her. It is the story of a woman subjected to a severe, almost prison-like confinement of "rest" prescribed by the ominous male figures of her society and within her marriage as well. Consequently, Gilman's narrator is denied participation or any decision-making as to the proper treatment of her 'hysteria'. In addition, the children's nursery room in "The Yellow Wallpaper" appears to be patterned according to Bak's (1994) ideology on 'houses of authority'. In this short story, Jane, the narrator, finds herself confined to a room where she too, is kept under surveillance of the ever-present watchful eye of the male authoritative figure.

Prior to the appearance of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", the women's suffrage movement on both sides of the Atlantic had been campaigning for women's right

to vote. By the mid nineteenth century, however, a second wave of feminism began to emerge. This second wave addressed the limited nature of woman's participation in the workplace and the existing notions (The Cult of Domesticity) which propagated a woman's confinement to the home. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an example of early contemporary efforts to address feminism in literature in order to depict the subordination of women not only in marriage but also how society as a whole contributed to the definition of this role. It is a story where feminism is transformed into a real, living voice of self-expression worthy of recognition.

Throughout history, women have had to contend with gender inequality and stereotypical roles. During the Renaissance and throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were subjected to horrific forms of punishment if they were suspected of being witches. Many were banished, imprisoned, tortured, mutilated and executed in order to "confess" to crimes. Witchcraft was believed to be associated with the sinister practices of women in league with the devil from whom they gained supernatural powers. During this very superstitious period, it was believed that about 80% of the people who were accused of witchcraft were women (Beyer, 1996). A popular notion was that the devil tempted people who were weak and inevitably women were seen as such. The belief and fear that witchcraft evoked became so widespread that it was

regarded in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as a way of discouraging women from living alone outside the authority of the male-dominated household, a belief that further supported the distinction of gender roles.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century women had no choice or voice concerning matters regarding their social, economic and emotional welfare. Women had very limited access to education and without it they could not follow a profession. For the unmarried woman, the only available occupations were usually very low-paid jobs which provided a meager subsistence as “governess, social parasite, or a lady’s salaried companion” (Black, 1973, 186). Married women, on the other hand, did not do any better. They held no rights to financial resources as these resources automatically became the sole property of the husband at the moment of marriage. These women were simply stripped of all their assets.

Between 1820 and America’s Civil War period, the country saw a growth of new industries, businesses and professions, and along with these dramatic changes, a newly-created middle class sprung out from its social structures. Men’s roles had changed as they held jobs in which they produced the necessary goods and/or services while the women remained at home as caretakers of the children. Moreover, the fact that men went out to work created the perception that they were the sole supporters of the family and therefore it was their duty to provide all the necessary financial security and stability of



the nuclear family. The family's internal structure, as a result, came to be considered a private sphere, a domain relegated to the care of the woman while the man ventured out to deal with worldly matters. The outside was seen as a world of brutality, temptation and trouble. Because woman was considered weak and delicate, she ran the risk of easily falling prey to the negative forces of the outside world if she ever ventured out of her prescribed domain. On the other hand, those few women who did work, were expected to hand over their meager wages to their husbands. For those who did not work, their roles were relegated to the strict parameters of household duties. In either scenario, woman found herself bound by the strict boundaries of role designation imposed by a patriarchal society. As a result, she found herself denied access to both education and employment opportunities, and completely stripped of her financial assets and relinquishing of all rights as a wife with matters regarding the reproductive rights in marriage. All these were factors that characterized a woman's role at the time. Women were primarily seen as vessels whose only purpose was to procreate. "The Victorian woman was the repository of virtue. She was the home maker, the mother, the custodian of culture and value. She also had severely limited options in life" (Black, 1973, 186).

Moreover, society itself sanctioned these norms through its exclusively man-made laws, religious institutions, customs, culture and history.

## **The Cult of True Womanhood**

In this new context, the middle-class family came to be seen as a fundamental pillar and model of an ideal family unit. If man was seen to hold the ultimate responsibility of securing the necessary means by which he provided for his family, then, by default, woman was charged to protect man's home, man's property, and man's domain. As a consequence, middle-class men forcefully perpetrated a prison-like ideological belief that subjected and rendered women silent. Out of these new transformations in society, a new ideology known as "The Ideal Womanhood" or *The Cult of True Womanhood* – where women were victimized 'legitimately' under the law of a patriarchal society – came into focus. This new philosophy that arose out of the overall attitudes of society created what was called "The Cult of Domesticity". Society had established and catalogued the cardinal virtues of what a "true womanhood" meant. According to Lavender (1998), this dogma consisted of four parts which outlined important characteristics that a proper young woman had to cultivate and adhere to. They were as follows:

1. The Cult of Piety
2. The Cult of Purity
3. The Cult of Submissiveness
4. The Cult of Domesticity

The first one centered on "The Cult of Piety". Nineteenth-century America believed that women held a greater propensity to instilling and upholding spiritual values in the home. This was considered of utmost importance because these morals would then be reflected in the overall society. Woman was considered a kind of "protector" against evil, and was kept in the privacy of her sphere – the home. The second ideal was that of "The Cult of Purity" which meant that female purity was very highly revered. Victorian women were expected to remain virtuous, pure, modest, and submissive to their husbands in their designated roles as wives and care-takers of the husband's home. Through this creed men believed that women could therefore be compelled to conform, remain docile and passive. Because religion played an integral role in society, it was easy to see how this ideology reinforced the "sacred" obligations of a woman in maintaining moral order not only in the home, but also in society. A "fallen woman" was unworthy of the love of man and therefore of any hopes of securing the financial security found in marriage.

Another 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal centered on women's submissiveness. Indeed, submissiveness was considered to be the most feminine of all virtues because woman was seen as a passive bystander, submitting to fate, duty, God and man. Popular nineteenth literature also reinforced this ideology. As Lavender, (1998) points out, a young ladies book known as "Godey's Ladies Book" was one of the most popular lady's book of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Each issue contained articles targeted for women and emphasizing the importance of these passive virtues. These virtues instilled the significance of being a true woman and how she needed to know her true place, duties and what qualities were required of her. These qualities consisted of having a spirit of obedience, submission, flexibility of temper and humility.

Lastly, “The Cult of Domesticity” simply reinforced the philosophy that the outside world was defined as male and the inside world (the home) was defined as female. “The Yellow Wallpaper” can be seen in the light of the so-called Cult of Womanhood. In her article, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, A Poetics of the Inside” (1999), Rheingold-Snyder refers to the physical attributes that the two contrasting dichotomies create with regard to the interior/exterior dimensions of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. For example, the house, the room to which the narrator is confined, is seen as an external physical structure. Furthermore, it is this exterior which symbolizes the man’s control over the narrator’s mobility. The interior, on the other hand, symbolizes the internal conflict of the narrator’s mind. It represents the suppressed domains of her world where she must remain docile and submissive. According to Snyder, these elements establish and further support the clearly-defined roles of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘trapped’ female narrator in contrast to John’s independent mobility. For

Synder, these contrasting elements serve to support the binary oppositions found within the story such as the house's physical setting, along with the internalization of a more psychological element which is seen in the narrator's troubled mind.

As mentioned earlier, the *Cult of Domesticity* defined the parameters of behavior for the woman. Privacy for nineteenth-century families was a crucial element to allow for the wifely duties of maintaining a peaceful, cheerful haven always ready to receive the male protector. This evolution furthermore contributed to the eventual spatial development of single family homes in isolated suburbia, thus maintaining a system of keeping woman inside the home as a kind of cultural hostage. This continual shift in geographical patterns later led to the rise of American middle-class suburbs and ultimately to a woman's questioning the validity and importance of her role, a question that was later addressed in Betty Friedan's feminist classic, "The Feminist Mystique". (1963). (Wikipedia).

According to Catherine Lavendar, (1998) another important concept soon took shape, that of the scientific spheres of sexism which stressed the separation of male and female spheres. This thought was rooted in a biological basis. This sphere of sexism is crucial to identifying the feminist components of "The Yellow Wallpaper" because it reflects how the nineteenth-century male medical profession saw woman as both a

product and prisoner of her own reproductive system. This system was seen as the basis for identifying a woman's behavioral characteristics. In addition, it determined whether she was deemed to be 'fit' or 'unfit' in maintaining appropriate social roles. According to the physicians of the time, it was a widely popular belief that many of women's ailments resulted from an unbalanced reproductive system. Accordingly, many women were subjected to a strict method of confinement as a presumed 'cure' to addressing a woman's ailments. The male doctors of that era often concluded that a woman's suffering from any kind of medical or emotional problem always stemmed from a woman being "out of sync" with her reproductive organs (Galullo,1996).

This popular male belief parallels Gilman's own personal painful experience.

Gilman seems to have passed through this same experience in her own personal life. It is no wonder, then, to find obvious parallels between the writer's own experience and that of her female protagonist, Jane. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the protagonist, through whose perspective the story is narrated and the events are seen, appears to be suffering from the same emotional instability that the writer was deemed to be suffering from in her own life. This nervous condition was identified at the time as coming in the form of waves or attacks of "Hysteria" which was seen as being closely connected to women's femininity and female sexuality. Women were believed to be prone to such strange and unusual

bouts of hysteria due to what was considered their fragile and emotional condition.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a descendant of the prominent Beecher family of New England. As a by-product, what she inherited was the special talent for preaching and the “urge to social service”. With this in mind, she believed that a reformed society, which advocated the positive development of the human race could be attained rather than be theorized or simply preached about (Knight, 1997, 3). Gilman’s purpose thus was to communicate this message in a variety of ways whether through lecturing, preaching or writing. As a matter of fact, Gilman did not regard her writings/works as literature, but rather as an attempt on her part to present real life and social issues important to the whole human welfare.

The writing of “The Yellow Wallpaper” came about as a result of Gilman’s strong desire to promote new social reform and to change some of her society’s beliefs whose credibility she viewed with great displeasure, suspicion and strong doubts. Through the writing of this short story and many similar other pieces of writing, Gilman wanted to uncover her society’s ailments and to find a way of better addressing them and improving them particularly those dealing with women’s social reforms.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” was first published in a New England magazine in 1892 and is now regarded as an important literary work of an early American feminist illustrating

the male attitudes prevalent in 19<sup>th</sup> century America toward women's physical and mental health. Commenting on Gilman's essay, "'Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper?'" written in 1913, Knight (1997, 16) states that through her story, Gilman was enabled to recover some measure of power by reclaiming an identity independent of that thrust upon her by her husband, Walter Stetson. Knight further stresses that for Gilman "Coming out of the closet...evokes images of suffocation, constraint, and secrecy [a] concealed identity and breaking the silence" were stigmas that she wanted to expose and address" (Knight, 1997, 16).

Gilman also had to fight against another social traditional belief that was closely connected to Darwin's famous book *The Origin of Species* (1892). This work incited new attitudes and controversies about the theory of evolution as well as women's roles and related issues. Darwin's Theory contributed to the current belief that woman was the hardier sex, her ultimate role as a mother was vital for the preservation and survival of the species. Darwin's Theory also served to promote a new concept known as the "Woman Question" which questioned a woman's ability to being both a mother and a professional. Of course, the overriding opinion contended that motherhood was indeed a role of greater priority in a woman's life. With this conclusion, woman was seen as a vessel, a container, a carrier of man's continual lineage. It is this ideological ascendancy



that joined science and medicine (alongside the continual spread of industrialization) and further promoted the “sexual division of labor” because it was based on the assumption that biology was destiny. In addition, the close association with such biological notions only helped to propagate a host of psychological attributes such as, dependence, moodiness and passivity (Barterian and Evans, 1998).

For Gilman, these popular cultural ideas during her era greatly shaped her views as a feminist and an activist who advocated for specific social reform regarding women’s issues. In her writing, Gilman argued profoundly that women’s secondary status in society was not based on parameters of biological “inferiority”, but rather, on a phallogentric framework of socially and culturally constructed and enforced gender roles that were accepted as the norm. Moreover, economic or political success was also attributed to the biological ideas of masculinity and femininity where men were viewed as naturally, physically suited to positions of authority and power. Women, by contrast, due to their physical nature were viewed in positions of subordination. In “Sorties” (1975), Helene Cixous for example, examines the hierarchy of oppositions as related to man/woman. She looks at how “the hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man. It is a male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between activity and passivity” (288). As such, Helene Cixous views

patriarchal culture such as Lacan's symbolic "phallus" and Derrida's "logocentrism" as two pervasive and oppressive aspects of "phallogentrism".

This idea supports the physical patriarchal structures that Rheingold-Synder presents with regard to the notions of interior/exterior parameters as she saw them in "The Yellow Wallpaper". Most importantly, it supports the nineteenth century's highly idealized notion of woman being passive versus man being active, a notion whose origins are rooted in the "Cult of Domesticity". These differences are manifested in "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the mental instability of the narrator as opposed to the mental stability of the male character in "The Yellow Wallpaper". Through this particular presentation we see the portrayal of the "internal" (female) voices and "external" (male) spatial oppositions associated with a patriarchal society that suppresses the woman's desire to engage in intellectually, artistically, stimulating and fulfilling pursuits.

In 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman boldly pronounced that the politics surrounding "The Woman Question" focused on endowing woman with economic independence. In her article "Love and Economics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman on 'the Woman Question'" (2005), Cynthia J. Davis argues that "The Woman Question" was an end product of woman's social and financial dependence on man, thus making them "more feminine and less human". Several of Gilman's letters from this time also reveal her very volatile and

highly emotional state that led to her conflicting feelings about the kind of social role she was expected to fulfill – that of an independent worker versus a dependent wife. Gilman felt that she had a higher purpose in life by bringing reform to women's economic and independent status. She saw herself placed at crossroads, forced to choose between “two lives”: either as a woman or as an independent worker. Gilman's feeling of entrapment in her marriage to Stetson only heightened her anguish and convictions and eventually formed a crucial element of “The Yellow Wallpaper” where she presents her critique of the role and place of women during the nineteenth century.

According to Reynolds, newspapers, journals, and literature at the end of the nineteenth century seemed more concerned with addressing issues of mental and physical symptoms. This new concern came as a result of a shift from a culture of morality towards a culture which emphasized the notion of feeling good, especially from a psychological viewpoint. This shift was reflected in the writer's concentration on psychological issues like the newly identified mental crisis known as “neurasthenia” (Reynolds, 1999, 11).

Among these writers was Gilman whose “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) shows great interest in the protagonist's mental and psychological condition. Actually, the story contains striking images of isolated rooms, sick rooms, bedchambers and living rooms of this new ‘neurasthenic bourgeoisie’ where women suffering from this condition were

confined to these type of rooms as a method of treatment (ibid).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” reflects a combination of the mental frailties and the powerful patriarchal presences stemming from the writer’s own personal experience. Readers can see how the narrator in her narrative dwells on the imagery of being subjected to medical inspection or diagnosis prompted by the male medical establishment of her time. The reader also notices how the heroine’s ability to produce any kind of creative writing is severely circumscribed by the patriarchal world she lives in and to whose rules, conditions and traditions she is forced to adhere.

Her husband likewise, severely curtails her need for mobility and her experiential right to create art through her writing. Expressing her strong desire to write and create, the protagonist exclaims fearfully: “There comes John, and I must put this away – he hates to have me write a word”( 5). Likewise the protagonist’s mobility and her desire to move freely and to have a room or a space of her own, as it were, are greatly restricted and dismissed: “I wish he [John] would let me go and make a visit to cousin Henry and Julia, but he said I wasn’t able to go, nor able to stand it” (10). Her freedom of movement is constantly under surveillance by her husband. Clearly this feeling on the part of the heroine highlights male authority and the suppression of the female’s freedom of movement and verbal expression not only by the narrator’s husband but by her brother as

well. Both physicians scoff at her and dismiss her queries as being mere symptoms of female hysterical tendencies: “And what can one do? ...I disagree with their ideas...but what is one to do?” (3) From a feminist perspective, the only visible authority the character can exercise is through her usage of a first person-narrative. Through this point-of-view, Gilman is able to forge a distinctive female voice of the text, in essence, thus taking ownership of her own text, of *her* role as an important experience in the cultural conditioning of a patriarchal world. She reveals her defiance by opposing their authority, “I did write for a while in spite of them” (3); “I am sitting by the window now [in this atrocious nursery] and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please” (5). Some form of identification between the character’s voice and that of the author can be noticed; Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s literary and narrator’s voice becomes a unified, individualized expression which is continually negotiating some attempt at acknowledgement and recognition by the male voice. Most importantly, Gilman’s main purpose for writing her story was to point out and to challenge the erroneous misconceptions that surrounded the prescriptions of the “rest cure”. In his introduction to Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Shulman observes that the writer challenges the culture of professional medicine, the authority of the male physician, his assumptions and practices, particularly of those prescribed by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell’s cure which holds an

underlying assumption “that women are intellectually inferior to men, that the source of their ‘neurasthenia’ or ‘hysteria’ is the overuse of their minds” (The Yellow Wallpaper, introduction, viii). This in itself is what creates and sustains a woman’s complete dependency on the will and authority of the ominous male physician. The most detrimental message behind the story is Gilman’s strongly-felt contentions over the lack of serious treatment and sensitivity to dilemmas experienced by the middle-class women of her day. Besides being a literary intellectual and a feminist, Gilman considered herself to be first and foremost a reformer who wanted to bring about change in a human’s life – a woman’s life. By writing literary works such as this short story that aims at introducing a female protagonist who is keen on being engaged in a creative and meaningful activity she deems she can solve many of the problems or ailments she may be suffering from.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” holds a powerfully historical and cultural significance in that it is both a “summation of the nineteenth century’s elaborately-constructed ideology and the conflagration of that ideology” (Reynolds, 1999, 19). Gilman’s story presents a feminist view on the basic reduction of a woman’s spatial schema: man-woman-room. The story shows how Gilman is drawing upon the nineteenth century notions of the ‘ideal’ model of “home”, “wife”, “domesticity” and its suppressive patriarchal authority, and control that man constructed around women in order to maintain the idea of “the

angel in the house' and the idea of honorability and docility associated with the ideal woman. Moreover, "The Yellow Wallpaper" in itself serves as a powerful metaphorical symbol of imprisonment, not only of the mind but of the body as well. Throughout the story, the protagonist suffers from physical and mental confinement of which she is actually aware of all the time. In a sense, the yellow wallpaper becomes a kind of patriarchal "big brother" surveillance mechanism that once again reinforces the social code of domestic conditioning.

The story's title is fraught with symbolic meanings. For one thing, the nature of the wallpaper and its crucial implications reveal how the paper seems to come 'alive' for the character; and it slowly begins to take a disturbingly haunting shape of a figure appearing trapped, imprisoned within the confines of its flamboyant patterns. The narrator is intrigued by this unknown and mysterious shape which appears intent on provoking the narrator. Thus it becomes a compulsive and puzzling object of desire that lures the narrator into a web of intense frenzy into deciphering and freeing it and yet haunts her every minute. "[It] is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irate and to 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". (5)

The symbolic significance of the yellow wallpaper is central to the narrator's existence, or rather, lack of realistic existence. It becomes pivotal to the story's important theme of the subordination of the female and its maddening effects. It symbolizes the focal point in the character's mind, that self which becomes distorted similar to the variation of images that the patterns seem to create. The wallpaper represents "her (the protagonist's) 'repressed other' or 'suppressed self.'" The wallpaper initially serves as a descriptive element of her surroundings. It is described as being a dull yellow color, ripped, spoiled, unclean. As the plot develops, so does the wallpaper – at least in the character's mind. It comes to life, it begins to acquire human characteristics which appear to mockingly stare back at her and defy her desperate search to make some meaningful sense out of the pointless pattern. Ironically when the wallpaper comes “alive”, so does the narrator. The wallpaper becomes an object, a form of text with which the protagonist slowly becomes obsessed and must ultimately interpret in order to free herself from the “bondages” of her patriarchal environment.

The elusive and hidden patterns eventually come into focus as a woman desperately crawling, stooping and creeping for a way out from behind the patterns that resemble the bars of a cage. The narrator slowly begins to realize that the many other patterns represent strangled women who were trying to escape from their oppressions. This wallpaper



comes to represent the patriarchal structure of a society's family, marital, political and medical confines in which the narrator finds herself entrapped. The wallpaper also comes to symbolize the humble furnishings of a house – a symbol of domestic life which many women felt trapped in. In actuality, the wallpaper represents the narrator's trapped self behind the patterns. It is an expression of the predicament of a confined woman who feels the pressures of the outside world on her personal life and freedom. The narrator finally comes to realize and identify herself with the woman trapped in the wallpaper and begins in a desperate search to assist her “other” self to break free from the patterns that trap her, from the masculine oppression. The ultimate transformation occurs when she creeps over her fainted husband and exclaims, "I've got out at last...and I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (19) and she continues to creep over him for some time. From this, the narrator now firmly installs herself in the realm of imagery, the realm of the haunted house. Now she is transformed into a free woman, the significance of the wallpaper allows her the mobility through which she achieves a sense of freedom.

Gilman's personification of the wallpaper as a sickly, revolting yellow paper is a crucial element because it somehow defies discovery. This defiance can be interpreted to symbolize the male authority creating the bizarre patterns which simply reaffirm its smug control over the hidden figure. Moreover, the wallpaper serves as a reminder of

the woman's inability of ever 'escaping' the sphere of womanhood, and the subjugation to man. The woman is thus forever, 'creeping', searching for an identity, an escape from this confining and controlling paper. The wallpaper appears to be almost mockingly, vindictively and physically challenging her quest for identity and freedom. "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream" (12). On the other hand, through the paper, the narrator ironically finds a determination inside her to overpower that male authority, to "free" this "unknown" entity – a woman, who like her, shares a common cause, a re-awakening of a new and independent woman which is precisely the image that Gilman wanted to discover and establish in her own personal life and in the lives of other women like her.

The narrator also finds the color of the wallpaper a foul, an unhealthy shade of yellow and the intimidating patterns which appear to change depending on how daytime light or night time light plays on the paper and how the oddly familiar odor seems to always hover over her, always hiding and lying as if in wait for her. This "synaesthetic disorientation" (Garcia, 1996, 2) seems to increase her fear of her immediate surroundings. She spends hours trying to analyze its source. To the reader, the foul odor is an allusion to the antiseptic smell indicative of hospital wards. It almost suggests the possibility that

perhaps the main character may have once been institutionalized. Furthermore, the writer's diction helps to create a slow, yet, continuous atmosphere of suspense and crescendos to a climax of psychological horror and tension in the reader's mind as illustrated in her increasing compulsive obsession with the distorted figures that she sees hidden within the yellow wallpaper, "*because of the wallpaper...It dwells in my mind so! [I lie here...] I will follow that pointless pattern...I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction*" (9). All these examples contribute to creating the imagery of an institution used for housing an insane person (Garcia, 1996).

Gilman thus illustrates the evils of institutionalization arising from the "resting cure" treatment imposed on many women during that period. Thus, the connection between a woman's subordination in the home to the subordination seen in the doctor/patient relationship, where John represents both the husband/doctor/warden helps to create these symbols of male authority over silent female subjects.

By and large, "The Yellow Wallpaper" revolves around important themes which focus on the subordination of women in marriage, the importance of self-expression, and the misguided evils of the "Resting Cure" as dictated by the male medical profession during the Victorian period. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman uses a combination of psychological, Gothic horror and a socio-political allegory as a way to depict and critique

the secondary position of women within the institution of marriage, especially as practiced by the "respectable" classes of her time. The story also points out the conflict of roles experienced by women who struggled with meeting the demands and expectations of marriage and a woman's need to be an independent working woman.

Like the narrator, Gilman, sought desperately to retain some remnants of intelligence through active work which she believed provided satisfaction, growth, joy and service. The narrator's dilemma parallels the realism of Gilman's own life when she too is prohibited from working or engaging in any type of intellectual, physical activity: "So 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" (3). This treatment is not only prescribed by Gilman's own, Dr. Silas in her personal life, but is also shown in the actions of the narrator's husband and brother. Moreover, like Gilman, the narrator too, believes that "congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good" (3) rather than her being confined and forbidden to engage in her writing.

Throughout the story, Gilman depicts the rigid distinction of gender division between the domestic, complacency of the female and active work of the male. Her protagonist often finds herself alone and expresses a need for the outside world, "I don't know when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone, I am alone a good deal just

now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases..." (9). Again, the narrator's husband, John, insists on her absolute alienation from human company and a complete rest from any activity and reprimands her for questioning his better medical judgments.

John assumes a position of superior wisdom, maturity and control which inevitably leads him to misjudging, patronizing and dominating his wife into accepting his decree, all for the sake of 'helping her'. Additionally, her repeated requests to be moved from her bedroom to another more comfortable one in the house are also met with indifference and scoffed at by her husband who claims that "there is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so? So of course, I said no more on that score..." (12).

The narrator is reduced to acting like a child unable to express herself or speak her mind without sounding 'disobedient or disloyal'. She finds herself incapable of voicing her opinion or having some control over the smallest of details pertaining to her life. This imposition of gender authority creates the effect of keeping women in an ignorant, child-like status thus forcing them to become totally dependent on men and not having the ability to express themselves firmly, to question, to react, and to act independently of male restrictions, thus preventing them from achieving maturity.

As a result, the narrator withdraws into the obsessive fantasy which has begun to take

control over her – the twisted patterns of the dreaded yellow wallpaper in her room which she hates. Through her forced confinement, however, she finds an odd sense of consolation in exercising some form of control and power by defying the intimidating figures that somehow come out at moonlight to torture her: “The wallpaper's color is hideous enough, unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing” (12).

Gilman portrays the mental anguish that the narrator is subjected to even more so than the physical limitations of her mobility. The narrator is forced to play the role of a complacent, dutiful, understanding, and obedient wife. It is the falsity of this façade of a 'happy marriage' by which she is forced to hide and repress her true anxieties and fears.

The story embodies many motifs and symbols that allude to its main themes of subordination. From the beginning of the story, the narrator's description of the summer house in which she and her husband John will temporarily reside as she recuperates from her nervous condition suggests an old ancestral hall: "A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" (3) reminiscent to some kind of colonial nobility. But to her, it appears no more than a haunted house, a daunting, mysterious place hidden among a veneer of external tranquility. Despite the natural beauty of its surroundings, its gardens, box-bordered paths and benches placed under arbor trees, the narrator perceives a ghostly strangeness to the house. Its obvious isolation, and its being placed as far away from the main road "three

miles from the village" and its walls and gates with many locks, indicate an isolated place, away from the city (4). The house's structure also suggests some form of institutional-like prison or a mental ward in an asylum. Moreover, the interior of the house particularly that of her bedroom is depicted as being grave and gloomy. There is nothing pleasant about its description; rather it is described by the protagonist as having "bizarre" fixtures like "the rings and things" on the walls, the nailed-down heavy furniture, the bars on the windows and the hideous, most revolting yellow wallpaper to the fact that the house had been used as some type of nursery for keeping children safe- an ironic description to how she is being treated as a child (5). All in all, the narrator is pointing to her loss of identity. This is actually reminiscent of the writer herself who also was locked into the "rest cure" which ultimately reduced her to a helpless, submissive role. This ordeal not only deepens and creates psychic unrest, but also contributes powerfully to the slow demise of the human mind.

Another important perspective of the female voice to discuss here is the significance of the narrator's brief journal writing. Gilman makes use of the epistolary technique of narration – where the narrator writes to herself. The significance of this narration is to further emphasize the great alienation that she experiences not only from her physical surroundings but also from her internal state of mind which clearly depicts her internal

conflict of confinement. It is a reflection of her repressed feeling which she is unable to share with her husband because he simply dismisses her with childish gestures and patronizing expressions, "What is it little girl? Don't go walking about like that – you'll get cold." "Bless her little heart!...she shall be as sick as she pleases!" (12). For her, writing represents a kind of paradoxical sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance.

Her brief journal writing symbolizes her hesitant and nervous means in which to express her fears, anxieties and relieve her perplexed state of mind: "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"(4). This use of inconsistent journal writing also contributes to creating an atmosphere of intense secrecy, intimacy, and urgency which the narrator must quickly conceal in order to hide all signs of repressed activity. Instead she is given the responsibility of concentrating all her energy into improving her 'nervous condition' so that she may be "allowed" to rejoin society. Not doing so will only force her husband to elongating the 'treatment' which she dreadfully repudiates and fears.

However, the irony of the situation and the treatment is that the male figures *are* the reasons for her slow demise. The many interruptions while she writes in the solitude of her room greatly illustrate the restrictions placed on her by male authority who urge her to think about her condition by simply stopping to think altogether. The paper she writes on



is 'dead paper' that holds forbidden thoughts and desires which haunt her and force her to conform to the social norms of her society (Garcia, 1996, 22). This text also helps to create a somewhat 'stream of conscious' narrative where the reader gets the opportunity to take a deeper look into the intimate and bizarre thoughts of the narrator's mind over a daily account of her day. In conclusion, what makes "The Yellow Wallpaper" an exemplary feminist literary writing is that it reflects the challenges of the "Cult of Domesticity" prevalent during the nineteenth century era and how, from a feminist approach, it exposes and examines the issues of patriarchal systems. The defining of gender roles and how the narrator fits into these traditional gender roles are important messages and themes that Gilman wanted to convey to her society in an attempt to change its attitude towards women and to create a wider and realistic awareness about their issues.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" typifies Elaine Showalter's alternative feminist literary theory termed – gynocriticism- simply because it provides a provocative cultural interpretation of women's oppression in the male psychiatric circles of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it focuses on the historical themes of subjugation, genres and on the structures of literature by women of that epoch based on important female experiences so often dismissed in male literature. In addition, it provides a critical insight into the historical and cultural female subculture context of these women writers who sought to have their

voices heard, inscribed and most importantly recognized. In her “A Literature of Their Own”, Showalter presents how the development of American women writing has evolved through a wide selection of literature which ranges from Margaret Fuller, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, in order to bring to the surface the important issues of gendered roles as is clearly seen in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”. These underlying perspectives are also well-illustrated and clearly exemplify Kate Millett’s argument in the power struggle as shown between ‘two groups’ – the main protagonist (the female narrator) and her oppressor – man. This perspective is clearly shown in the protagonist’s desire to set herself both metaphorically as well as literally (physically) ‘free’ from her male oppressor.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” represents a good example of late 19<sup>th</sup> century feminist writing that tried to discuss women’s issues and bring them to the forefront in order to highlight these significant issues and eventually to drive society into adopting a new and different strategy to women and their moral and material concerns.

## Chapter Four

### Woman's Image in *Pillars of Salt*

Virginia Woolf spoke and wrote vehemently on rewriting and recording women's past. She emphasized the importance of giving a voice to the many women whose history needed to be recorded and most importantly to be acknowledged. Fadia Faqir, centuries later, would make that same plea by stating that "the voice constructed is a voice conscious of its place within history and language, a voice negotiating a 'pact' with the listener or reader" (Faqir, 1999, ix). Bouthaina Shaaban, professor of comparative women's literature at Damascus University likewise reaffirms that "the literary contributions of Arab women have not been properly recorded or fairly acknowledged" (Shaaban, 1993). From an Arab feminist perspective, she urges the Arab woman to begin by not merely contemplating this important area, but to actively address and explore this uncharted domain. In this way, a more active participation will ensure the closing of the gap with regard to Arab women's absence from literature. She urges for the Arab woman to exercise a more forceful self-determination in redefining themselves and becoming more involved in the social and political systems that may hinder both their personal and professional growth. Likewise, Faqir points out *In the House of Silence*

that Arab women “choose writing as a means of survival and resistance” to the patriarchal structures of religious institutions, and cultural systems. She urges the Arab woman to begin to explore their repressed identities by writing more openly about their female experiences “in relation to the wider political and sociological arena” of their social and cultural contexts (1998, 180).

In “Search for the Arab Woman: An Errand of Folly”, Nichole M. Tuma (2003) demonstrates the multi-faceted view of Arab women and tries to deconstruct the historical, social and stereotypical perspectives of these women. She also attempts to enrich the gender discourse about Arab men and women and to show the variation of portrayal which inevitably has important implications in the literary circles of Western feminism. In her discussion, she seeks answers to questions such as: “What is the historical image and portrayal of Arab women? How do these images represented by these authors challenge the historical image?” Most importantly, the article points to the rich diversity that Arab women writers infuse in the characters of their novels in an effort to establish a strong sense of their identity by presenting the Arab woman’s “myriad of experiences, dreams, hopes, needs and aspirations” (Tuma, 2003, 5). It seems appropriate to begin our discussion of Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* by looking at the stereotypical image that the Arab woman seems to typify. In order to understand the present, one must look at the

past. The Arab woman's role and place in society have been largely defined by Arab societies' interpretation of Islamic laws and beliefs. These ideas and practices have thus further reinforced society's perception of parameters that defined a woman's role in society. For example in Jordan, in the early first two decades of the Jordanian state (1920s-1940s) there were strict interpretations of gender roles in the Jordanian society. According to Massad (2001, 90) Jordanian women were expected to wear appropriate dress garb which would not contradict the Islamic religion's conventions nor offend a woman's honor. By and large, an Arab woman was expected to remain at home, only to venture out veiled in order to do errands (ibid). This socio-historical background provides a suitable base for any significant discussion of Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*. It is in this restrictive society that Faqir's character, Um Saad finds her freedom regulated by both society and her husband; "I stopped looking out the window. Abu Saad allowed me to wear a veil and sit on the veranda" (*Pillars of Salt*, 130). Um Saad's life has been reduced to "twenty-five years of...incubating and boiling caraway" [a traditional drink prepared after birthing] (130). In narrating her life story, she tells Maha that women are seen by men as "just vessels, this is what men care about" (159), an allusion to de Beauvoir's concept of women's primary role as nothing more than a 'vessel'.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a growing interest in the Arab world

among Arab women writers on the hidden role of women's literature. However, during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, political instability caused censorship of not only male writers but also notable female writers like Nawal el-Saadawi. Her feminist-Marxist writings raised serious and controversial questions on women's rights, concerns and political issues related to systems of power. Amidst this activity, modern Arabic literature continued its evolution and saw the incorporation of many Arab women writers whose works had begun to be published (Mikhail, n.d., 3).

Among some of these writers, the earliest can be traced back to early poetry written by al-Khansa and Layla al-Khyaliyyah of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The major roles that these early female poets played helped shed light on the hidden world of female literature that existed at that time. Nazik al-Mal'aika, a critic and a poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wrote in her powerful poem, "Insignificant Woman" about the plight of the Arab woman and society's indifference to her fate:

To the end of the road  
 Only a memory of a lifeless form  
 Passing in some lane...  
 A moon mourned in silence (Mikhail, n.d., 3)

Since early 20<sup>th</sup> century Arab women's writings have begun to reflect a multitude of social, cultural and political ideologies that have placed constraints on them. Writing

about these patriarchal constructions and how they impeded their freedom of physical mobility and expression provided these women writers with a venue by which to express their opinions on the dilemma of their situations. As a result, this period between 1892 witnessed many Arab women writers writing literary pieces that found their place in journals, thus allowing their work greater public circulation and awareness. These writings at the time reflected the already-growing concern over women's issues. Most importantly, these journals served as an important platform on which the early beginnings of Arab women's literature began to find a voice and slowly take shape (Shaaban, 1993). In 1892 for example, the Syrian writer Hind Nawfal, launched her first journal entitled "al-Fatat" ("Young Girl") in Alexandria, Egypt. Their writings helped to usher in critical editorials and articles that demanded a more serious attention to women's literature, women's rights and future reforms over women's social and economic status. Moreover, the growing number of women's contributions to these journals also helped to create awareness and adopt relevant ideas from the women's movement in the West. However, they maintained their own unique and common identity to their Arab roots and religious foundations which was a vital element to preserve the richness of their Arabic culture.

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were no Arab women writers whose writings could be included as a basic part of Arabic literature which has been largely dominated by male

writers. This situation was even aggravated by the fact that the idea of education was a very remote possibility. According to the male systems, women's only dutiful aspiration was to being a nurturer within the bounds of her home. She was not to contemplate on achieving anything greater. Faqir's novel is a good testimony to this view and can be seen in Um Saad's limited education. Indeed her father quickly removes her from school and deems it necessary for her to remain at home instead with her mother because she is growing up (39). With this ideology, the concept of segregation, alienation, isolation served as a system that men created in order to institutionalize women as a way to control their freedoms, and the political, social, and religious sanctioning of these methods kept women confined. But, most imperative to this notion was the idea of safe-guarding a woman's chastity which Maha's father does by keeping her secluded in the house.

Committed to the metaphorical and physical boundaries of enclosed spaces, of secluded rooms, of high walls, as evident in Maha's and Um Saad's description of their hospital quarters, Arab women found themselves speechless figures lacking in identity other than gaining one through the male lineage. Fatima Mernissi, for example stated that writing and analysis were considered two tools that belonged exclusively to males. Therefore, the lack of education for women greatly hindered women's accessibility to the outside world and to freedom of expression.



Further examination and development of Arabic fictional literature allotted women a rightful ownership of individuality as opposed to being simply treated as symbols. Despite these settings Arab women's literary efforts and strong desires to transcend these limitations led to their early creative and artistic expressions at finding the female voice and recording it on printed text. This yearning for the pursuit of finding herself, of creating her own unique history, of dismantling the shackles of centuries-old male societies was an essential element by which she established her own unique identity. This craftsmanship is best illustrated in *Pillars of Salt*. Faqir presents her main character, Maha, as a 'fighter', a fearless woman 'warrior' fighting against the patriarchal limitations that her society enforces on her. Her fiery and defiant personality defies the gendered role into which she is forced by the male-dominated village as well as by her brother, Daffash. Although she is a simple, uneducated Bedouin woman, she finds the courage to stand up and fight to the end in order to protect her individuality as opposed to stepping back and thereby reinforcing the erroneous symbol of a 'docile, subservient woman'.

Although Maha succumbs to an unfortunate end in the story, Faqir succeeds in illustrating how women are courageous and strong in dealing with the many unfortunate and devastating pitfalls of a male dominated society. Maha is shown as a very resource-

ful woman who cares for the land that her brother chooses to ignore and abandon. Faqir shows Maha's strength, love and devotion to her beloved land, the orange groves which she tirelessly fertilizes and eventually brings back to life. Her return to her father's land and home brings life back to a once empty, lifeless place. The imagery that Faqir paints through Maha's agricultural accomplishments also creates a kind of "nature writing" that illustrates the close and caring relationship that Maha has with nature, the earth. Upon her return to her father's house, she quickly sets to work in bringing order to a place of disorder. "It took a while for me to clean the house, the store-room, and the yard. The two palm trees were still standing erect in the front of the house. Their beds were full of stones, weeds and dirt. I cleaned the bed sands, sprinkled the dry soil with water". (132).

The imminent birth of her son is also blended into the natural movements and sensory sounds of her ecosphere. The natural environment also acts as a force of nature to coincide with the natural onset of her son's birth which she awaits with great anticipation. For example, when Maha places her head "on the freshly turned soil, the smell of wet fertile field filled her nostrils"(136), and the commencement of her son's birth is also made analogous to "the warm water of the Dead Sea as it massaged my body...I sighed and waited for the second wave. The plain of the Dead Sea opened up under the moonlight like mother of pearl. The water glittered under my eyelids. She tightens her grip on a handful

of soil as if to find comfort when suddenly she witnesses the birth of her son as he falls onto his grandfather's land"(137). The imagery conveyed in this pivotal moment parallels with the natural beauty of Maha's environment. Also, it reinforces the deep emotional connections that she cherishes with her memories of Harb and the consummation of their marriage in the Dead Sea.

On the other hand, Faqir chooses to illustrate Um Saad as a very pitiful, miserable character to show how *because* of the powerful patriarchal structures that prevail in her community, she becomes easily 'swallowed up' by these forces without any hope or recourse to any form of human justice. In contrast to Maha's life, Um Saad's own is described as nothing more than a defeating existence of mundane servitude. Unlike Maha who shares a connection, a bond to the land, Um Saad expresses her great displeasure over the sprawling city of Amman. She spends her time cleaning "the flood of guts, intestines, and stomachs" (149) that her husband brings from the butchery on a regular basis. She tells us that her husband only gives orders to which she meekly obeys (151). Sadly, she realizes that she has always been and always will continue to be "a container into which he could get rid of his frustrations"(151).

May Bouteghou's article entitled, "Emergent Female Voices" (n.d., 3) reinforces Faqir's interpretation of her characters in *Pillars of Salt*. The idea of how Arab

women are portrayed as marginalized figures and characters. Bouteghou adds that the representation of these characters serves to uncover the “initial discovery [of] and reflection on female characters in the nineteenth century” (n.d., 3). Furthermore, she states how these female characters are portrayed as “figures of transgression, although rooted in their traditional cultures, they act in and from the margins”. She states how Arab feminine voices are subjects who have traditionally been relegated to the obscurity of subordinated positions in colonial, culturally demanding societies, and how their voices have long been muffled. In her article, she demonstrates the attempts by Arab women writers to make their texts more visible and representative of feminist portrayals of women. She adds that by making these texts more visibly accessible, they gain a wider circulation and recognition worldwide.

Faqir portrays Maha’s spirited character as an outspoken, newly emerging character whose voice is not easily silenced. She challenges her brother Daffash as well as the village. On the other hand, Faqir empowers Um Saad, by giving her a voice through her personal narrative. In this way she is granted the freedom to speak of her dismal life, to share her lost and wasted dreams, and hopes for a life that she never had the opportunity to experience as a result of being subjected to the male forces that severely dictated her life. By giving these characters an emerging voice, Faqir shows the importance of women’s

roles as depicted in post-colonial Transjordan. According to Faqir “some common characteristics of criticism of women’s writing in the Arab world are based on women’s writing having a gossipy quality, women’s writing is too personal in its content and therefore has no literary value”. Consequently male critics approach these women’s writing with preconceived notions of their own male superiority which they believe only exists in male writing” (*In the House of Silence*, 1998, 176).

Recently, Arab women’s writings have witnessed a remarkable progress towards making women’s voice heard inside the Arab world and abroad. The evolving face of these female writers have now begun to experience their literary persona elevated and further developed. As a result, this new generation of Arab women writers has begun to present a more visible and more conspicuous image of real Arab women through compelling stories that have been skillfully told with literary finesse and which have transcended national and cultural borders. These marginal voices have now begun to emerge and to tell their own unique stories. Faqir’s is just one good example of such new generation of Arab women writers.

A pivotal aim of this paper is to illustrate how a feminist reading of *Pillars of Salt* would reveal the image of women in the Arab world at a certain period in history and how this traditional image is now paving the way for a greater role for Arab women in modern

social life. In her novel, Faqir exposes the strengths, tribulations and continual oppression that the Arab woman had endured and the unjust judgements passed over them. She presents her female characters as tragic figures, products of transgression whose purpose in life was deeply rooted in the distorted patriarchal and cultural productions of their post-colonial society. Through her work, she shows how these female characters were seen as marginal constituents placed within the larger male context of a story. Moreover, Faqir presents a kind of satirical representation of men who feel obliged to 'save' these women from their 'madness' by sentencing and confining them to a mental institution without considering or evaluating the circumstances of their psychological plight that brought them there to begin with. Yet ironically it is really the men whose insane actions display their limited experience and knowledge of what these women really needed – justice, understanding and human compassion. *Pillars of Salt* thus illustrates the sad and tragic lives of Maha and Um Saad through the unfolding events of a largely tragic and moving story.

According to Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity, there is a relationship between language, thought and culture. It theorizes that human behavior is determined and/or partially influenced by the construction of language. This is clearly evident in Faqir's use of diction in her construction of the language in *Pillars of Salt*. The fatalistic, graphically detailed images of male subjection of its female characters in post-colonial

Jordan depicts the harshness and reality of these women's lives. Some examples can be seen in the descriptions of these women's treatment by the male characters. Um Saad suffers severe physical pain not only at the hands of her father and husband, but also through the cruel treatment by Kukash, the male hospital attendant. It is Kukash who flings "Um Saad's old body onto the bed and tied her legs and hands to the iron bedposts" (6) in an effort to restrain her. We are told that "her heart inside her ribs was weeping" (7), and that "My heart too ached", "If I had spans and spans of bandage, I could not have dried the tears of Um Saad that night, her first night in the madhouse" (8).

This particular construction of language thus takes on a definite purpose, that is, to show us how women writers and their writings have become more independent in expressing their suppressed emotions and their dilemmas. The subject matter and the important themes of oppression are depicted in their truest and rawest form. Faqir's characters reveal an intense desire to expose their suffering, to reveal the victimization or the abuse of their sexuality and the plight of their culturally-defined circumstances.

In "Language and Style in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*", Yasmeen Bouteraa (2004) discusses how the political, social and historical contexts in five Arab literary works present the plight of Arab women in these settings. She examines the strong and violent language and style, in particular in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, to show how the main character,

a Bedouin woman, Maha must struggle for her survival and independence in a society that mandates very strict and harsh codes of behavior upon women. Um Saad, another primary character in the novel, is paralleled along with Maha to show how she too must endure the methods of domestic violence as imposed upon her by the male figures in her life.

Bouteraa examines carefully the connections between these two women in terms of their violent ordeals as dictated by the men in their society and also, the repressive male cycle of authority, abuse and control in which these women are kept and the emotional turmoil that they both must sustain.

*Pillars of Salt* is just a good example that shows Faqir's narrative style in dealing with a variety of themes that deals with the patriarchal systems of restriction and suppression of Arab women. Through her characters, Faqir explores the inequality and injustice that such female characters are subjected to in their society and cultural environment. Through a feminist perspective, Faqir presents sensitive issues such as female sexuality, emotional and physical abuse that these characters endure. *Pillars of Salt* employs a multiple narrative method in which the narrative keeps shifting from one narrator to another. Thus, there is an omniscient narrator, the storyteller "Sami al-Adjnabi, the best storyteller in Arabia and the oldest traveler in the Levant [who] reveals to us the tale of Maha" (3), and a number of characters such as Maha and Um Saad who narrate their stories. Impor-



tant to this narration is the significance of the male storyteller. From a feminist viewpoint, this narration suggests the ever present male control of the narrative. For example, he refers to Maha's story as "the accursed story", "a damned woman who turns whatever she treads on to basalt", God chastises her by turning "whatever Maha touches into waste" (2). Furthermore, he describes Maha as a "shrew who used to chew the shredded flesh of mortals from sun birth to sun death" (2). From his perspective, she is a "restless soul who haunts the desert calling for revenge and why no man can trust his wife, no Lord his mistress" (3). Through these descriptions, the storyteller suggests that Maha is a disobedient, mad woman who dares go against the will of man by being a defiant, non-conforming woman and therefore her village is inevitably cursed by her spirit. Again, this type of narration is a significant literary element that Faqir utilizes in order to once again remind the reader of how male structures continue to wield their dominance into the story. The novel's structure as such represents the elements of good vs. evil between the various narrators, the protagonist (man) vs. the antagonist (woman) who dares to rebel against the male figures in her society.

The physical boundaries and the culturally built environment in *Pillars of Salt* serve as a major patriarchal symbol. For example, the inhabitants of the village where Maha lives monitor and demand her compliance to the village laws with regard to her movements.

Harb wishes to see her one night to which she responds: “Are you mad? For a girl to be out at night it is a crime of honor. They will shoot me between the eyes” (10). Another example of such compliance is the required proof of Maha’s chastity on her wedding night: “The whole tribe went mad when they saw my virgin blood... another woman of their tribe had proven to be sealed...the honey in the jar was safe; I was pure” (46).

Maha’s father is reluctant to let her work in the fields because it was “shameful [and] a woman’s place was in a well-closed room” (20). Above all, Maha’s brother Daffash inflicts a series of devastating beatings on her whenever he thinks that she has violated the traditional rules of social behavior. Likewise, in Um Saad’s narrative, she too bears the social stigma of having been seen in the shop of the storekeeper with whom she is accused of ‘illicit, immoral’ cavorting (101). This incident later results in her father’s wrath and in her being forcefully married to a much older man. Fuheis Mental Hospital is also a symbol of the continual sinister and imposing patriarchal presence imposed on these two women. In addition, the forceful use of straitjackets as a means to ‘control’ their fits of laughter, or their angry outbursts which serve as the only means of channeling their personal traumas, the humiliating shaving of their heads, and the forced series of shock treatments used to sedate them all serve as aggressive and disturbing images which Faqir uses to point to the continual overarching symbols of male presence in the story and the

patriarchal dominance which suppresses these characters' narrative voices and restricts their freedom of movement and self-expression.

The catastrophic lives that these characters reveal, as Cameron argues that Arab women writers use the “power of language to the power of imagination” (Cameron, 1998, 30) in revealing how Arab women writers are no longer hiding behind the shadows of obscurity, but are becoming bolder in showing how the image of woman is portrayed in a society's culture. In this respect, Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* is a good example of a work that is concerned with revealing the hardships and the suffering of some Arab women in their own society.

The historical setting of *Pillars of Salt* also provides an important element to the novel's plot as it behaves like a patriarchal panoptic lens which reinforces the male's domains that these women characters must continually withstand. *Pillars of Salt* is set in post-colonial Transjordan in the 1920s. During that time the prevailing population consisted of influential and rival Bedouin tribes which were divided in two major geographical regions – the Northern and Southern tribes (Massad, 2001).

Faqir's tempestuous character, Maha is a Bedouin woman from the Jordan Valley living during this period of great political upheaval. Upon a closer analysis of this text, one can further theorize as to why Faqir presents this female character as a highly and

verbally outspoken, unrestrained and fearless woman. One reason is perhaps to illustrate how this character, despite being a woman fights for the need to be put on equal footing with that of the fiercely tempered and powerful Bedouin male. The fierceness displayed in Maha's desire to fight alongside her husband Harb further illustrates her as a fiery independent and free-spirited character.

According to Massad, "nomadic Bedouins constituted almost half (46 percent) of the Transjordanian population in 1922 numbering 102,120 people out of a total of 225,350 according to the estimates of the Tribal Administration Department (Niyabt al-'Asha'ir). This estimate included all nomadic Bedouins within the 1921 to 1925 borders of Transjordan" (56). These nomadic Bedouins were highly distinguishable from the rural and urban population because they represented a uniquely individualized culture which was deeply rooted in tribal customs and heritage (51). The rigidity of these spatial spheres clearly illustrates the specificity of gender roles as seen in the Bedouin society Transjordan and shown in Faqir's novel. Bedouin women were socially bound to the realms of the domestic sphere unlike Bedouin men who roamed the outside - the desert. Faqir presents how, despite the contrast in settings and familial background of her characters, they are equally held accountable to their society's strictly-defined gender roles. For instance, Um Saad, who despite living in a 'modern' postcolonial state, is nonetheless also severely

subjected to the country's traditional and highly protective male structures which insure absolute privacy of the woman's domestic sphere. In this way, she is similar to Maha, who comes from a completely different cultural background, the Bedouin life that sharply contrasts with life in the capital city, Amman where Um Saad lives.

Faqir's incorporation of political turmoil during the British mandate helps to create the dynamic power of the novel's main character – Maha, an uneducated Bedouin woman whose tribe resides in the Jordan Valley where she lives within the marginal space of her patriarch village. Faqir portrays Maha as a woman whose fight is three-fold. First, she must battle the political injustices that she sees as the aggressors, the 'foreign' men who have taken her beloved husband – Harb. Secondly, she finds herself fighting her brother – Daffash who voices his male entitlement to dictating her future. Despite these overpowering male forces, Maha demonstrates her intense efforts to secure her rightful place in an oppressive, domineering male society which is deeply embedded with strictly prescribed social norms to which women must uphold. Maha thus asks herself: "How could I leave my son and house? I must fight Daffash...the land belonged to me" (215). Her future is callously determined by her brother Daffash who is bent on controlling her opinions, and her ideas. Thirdly, she finds herself fighting a community which suppress her like "crowding cockroaches" (216), ready to bring her unconventional actions and

outspokenness to the all-knowing male “justice”.

Another important element that makes this novel a powerfully driven feminist work are the ignorant attitudes that the males have in their manipulation of religious scripture to justify their methods of control. For instance, we are told that “ Imam Rajab winked at Daffash and reminded him, ‘Allah said in the Wise Book, ‘beat them up’” (217).

Moreover, the cruel and degrading tone that Daffash employs in an effort to play ignorance to Maha’s presence: “‘First of all,’ Daffash barked at the top of his voice, ‘I don’t talk to women. No brain and no faith...second, what is the use of talking to crazy women?’ The men laughed in unison” (217).

Likewise, Faqir presents her other main character, Um Saad, as being engaged in a struggle with the patriarchal figures in her society such as her father, her husband, Abu Saad and afterwards the male physicians and attendants at the Fuheis Mental Hospital. Faqir illustrates the injustices that these male forces inflict on Um Saad by subjecting her to cruel, emotional and physical abuse. Most importantly, their actions toward her simply serve as reminders of their over-abuse of power as men and how they force and coerce her into carefully-constructed spaces. It is images like these that Faqir paints for us to illustrate the immoral and erroneous injustices to which Um Saad and Maha are subjected.

The full force of the emerging female voice is addressed in Fatmeh Kassem's article, "Allah, al-Malik, al-Watan", (n.d.). In it, she echoes Kate Millett's powerful discourse on the male political systems that creates, perpetrates and keeps women locked into oppressive gender roles, a system which in effect explains the absence of these women from the written text. In her article Kassem states that there are three factors that she sees as "intrinsically repressive institutions: tribalism, Islam and nationalism" which helped to shape a woman's identity and place in post-colonial Jordan.

Furthermore, she points out how any questioning regarding this structured pyramid is seen as a serious implication of a society's institutionalized beliefs. In addition, Kassem adds that since these institutions were man-constructed, their social and political structures "caused women to be trapped in the pincers of patriarchy" (Kassem, n.d., 4).

Kassem reiterates this same ideology and discusses how "present day institutions [do] not constitute a focal point for change and progress in women's status, but women are trapped in a triple oppressive and chauvinist discourse that reproduces gender power relations in society" (Kassem n.d., 3). As a result, despite these hierarchies of power relations, Arab women writers have been encouraged to produce fictional writings that dealt with the representation of women's image and her self-determination to become a more visible and serious producer of literary texts and, most importantly, to create an

essential awareness that reveals the Arab woman's experiences. This attitude is reminiscent of Kaplan's ideas in this regard. In "Language and Gender", Kaplan, likewise, states that the control of high language is a crucial part of the power of dominant groups" (Cameron, 1998, 55).

Leavitt's article in "Alienation in the lives of Arab Women: An Experimental Approach to Ancient Questions" (2002), is an effort to convey a greater understanding of how the concept of 'alienation' defines and characterizes the lives of Arab women. Most importantly, he points out the significance of creating a forum of exploration, stimulation and discussion by diffusing the mysterious and often romanticized image of the Arab woman. Furthermore, Leavitt's aim is to provide some insight and understanding about why there is so little written about this subject. Moreover, Leavitt endeavors to explore the various devices that define alienation in the world of the Arab woman. He examines the multi-dimensional aspects of how alienation is represented in five literary selections from five different Arab female writers. Faqir is just one of the writers he studies. Through these writers, Leavitt discusses how alienation is an aspect that exists in the lives of Arab women in the Arab world. He also addresses how it is vital to add to our understanding the diversity of their lives; and more importantly, how these Arab women writers show alienation as a means of oppression by the men in their society. For example, Leavitt



discusses one form of alienation in which escapism from self may help the Arab woman to cope with external dilemmas. This is shown through Um Saad's escapism. She finds herself alienated not only from her society, but also from her family, her husband, and even her own children. She finds refuge in the kitchen which becomes her own domain, her world, her dismal reality inside her own home. Her only hope to salvage what little remains as her only remnants of self-worth and pride was the privacy of her bedroom from which her husband removes her when he announces the arrival of his new wife. He then proceeds to harshly throw all her belongings on the floor.

Early literary circles have always been dominated by men simply because educational opportunities were more readily available to men than women. In spite of this, in the West for example, a growing number of women managed to carve a niche in which to explore and exhibit their writings and to receive some exposure to rudimentary educational pursuits. However, when exploring Arab women writers, questions have emerged pondering over the identity of these mysterious women, and what they may be writing about? In *“Arab Women Writers: ‘Are there any?’”* (Shaaban, 1993) dispels the myth about the nonexistence of Arab women writers. She points out the many achievements of these early women writers who took brave steps in establishing a ‘room of their own’, or to coin Showalter’s famous ‘a literature of their own’. She goes on to point out how “most Arab

women writers have begun to explore the intricacies of their lives and women, of their families and of family relations” (Shaaban, 1993).

*In the House of Silence*, Fadia Faqir (1999) brings to light an anthology of literary selections representing the writings of thirteen leading Arab women writers such as Lina Badr, Salwa Baker, Hoda Barakat, Nawal El-Sadawi, respectively, to name just a few. In this collection, Faqir presents these women writers’ testimonies over the struggles, difficulties and tribulations they all faced in the writing of their narratives. Experiences of confinement, subjugation and pressures to silence their voices are recurrent motifs throughout their writings. More importantly, this book helps to reinforce the need for creating a wider awareness and understanding of Arab women’s issues as depicted through these important and selected narratives.

In “Expression of Desires in Arabic Women Novels” (2003), Colin Hull observes that a very essential message of these Arab female authors is creating an awareness of the fundamental concepts of freedom and equality – an ongoing battle which continues to be at the core of Middle East women forums. Hull also points out how this struggle is clearly demonstrated in *Pillars of Salt* through the main character – Maha. He contends that Fadia Faqir is “able to allow often repressed sexual desires to surface with this character”, a topic considered taboo and most likely to meet with opposition from the more conservative

population. However, she vividly and freely writes as she describes issues of sexuality and virginity which are at the center of her novel. She writes about them to show how the deeply- rooted Arab patriarchal society places a huge price and role in safeguarding a woman's sexual purity. A woman is seen somewhat as man's property initialized first under the guardianship of the father and later passed on to the husband. Again, Faqir conveys this ideology through her presentation of Maha's wedding night where the village population anxiously wait for the sign of her virginal purity. Another example is illustrated in the unfortunate rape of Nasra, Maha's friend over whose misfortune she expresses her deep sorrow and sadness: "My friend had lost her virginity, her honor, her life. She was nothing now" (11). These are some examples which once again demonstrate the harsh judgements that society passes over women.

On the whole, *Pillars of Salt* depicts the socially limiting and the psychologically confining environment where women were supposed to live. Throughout the novel we notice how the writer is keen on expressing the repression and subjugation that these women had to endure. In this way, the writer is using the novel to depict the low status of women in a male-dominated society and the need for an expression of women's voice if they want to be equal to their male partners.

Since the 1960s Arab women writers have become bolder in writing about subjects

that dismiss the stereotypical images of subservient women. Faqir's work illustrates this feminist response by unveiling women's experiences, creating thereby a 'sister bond' of possible shared experiences and eliciting empathetic responses from female readers who will understand the scope of these characters' dilemmas. By doing so, the female image is removed from the realm of the male's spheres of interpretation and empowers women by providing them with the opportunity to creating their own uniquely constructed female spheres in the text.

Keddie points out that (2007, 1) the subject and study of the Middle Eastern Arab woman has always conjured up images of mystery and mysticism: the face behind the veil, the unspoken word, the fleeting persona, figure and shape. However, an interest in the study of this Middle Eastern woman has quickly developed in the past few decades as human rights organizations, women's interest groups and academic institutions have taken a greater interest into understanding who this woman is, how her image has been prescribed, presented and interpreted, how her life and accomplishments have evolved and to what degree. This surge of interest has been largely based on the past thirty years of extensive scholarly work in order to shed insight into the individual coverage of their personal narratives through historical books, articles and a variety of written work.

By doing so, one can begin to better understand how the cultural, societal and political

institutions have played an important role in formulating, defining and maintaining the destined roles of these women, that of mother, wife and caretaker.

Keddie's study provides a historical and cultural perspective through the writings of several modern feminist writers can be seen. The significance of these traditional roles forms a crucial element which has always defined the Arab woman, but more so because their importance is deeply rooted in the religious context because it is seen as a woman's primary obligation to her home, family and to her ultimate social responsibility and the spiritual upbringing of the family.

Another important factor that has led to the revival of women's studies in the Middle East can also be attributed in part to the rebirth of women's feminist movements. Most importantly a greater number of "books and articles from Western and Middle Eastern authors have appeared in a growing stream, reflecting an intensive interest in Middle Eastern woman in all areas of social science and the humanities." (Keddie, 2007, 9)

Now, there is a growing interest in the study of Arab female writers such as those of Faqir, Ahdaf Soueif, Nawal Sadawi, Hanan al-Sheikh, Fadwa Toukan and several others. Undoubtedly, Middle Eastern Centres in the Arab world and in the Western world have also contributed a great deal to this surging interest in the literary works of these women writers. In addition, the feminist organizations around the Arab world have also played a

central role in this direction by promoting a more serious attempt to address women's issues and to improve the current status of Arab women. *Pillars of Salt*, a typical novel of these feminist writings, reflects a great concern with women's problems. The historical and social background in which the novel is set provides a focus of interest for those who are dealing with this matter.

As *Pillars of Salt* shows, men were considered the primary caretakers of not only their women, but also of their offspring. So safeguarding the purity of their paternal lineage led to their controlling practices over women's public actions, movements and inevitable "protective" measures over the forced seclusion of women. The structure of these social practices assumed a very similar pattern as seen in the West's Cult of Domesticity prevalent during the Victorian period as indicated in our discussion of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the previous chapter. Similarly, the setting of *Pillars of Salt* is heavily embedded in the tribal, Bedouin culture of Maha's village, as well as in the early urban setting of Amman where Um Saad lived.

Issues of fertility also play a detrimental role in which primary responsibility falls under the woman's jurisdiction. In Maha's case, it becomes a communal concern that allows an interference in Maha's marital life, requiring her to produce a male heir. Her initial inability to conceive thus creates a deep fear and a constant worry over her possible

infertility and possibility of her husband (Harb) leaving her. She expresses her deep concerns by stating that she needed to work very hard and be an obedient and perfect wife and mistress and also by taking good care of her husband (69).

The formulation of a woman's image in *Pillars of Salt*, typifies these strict cultural contexts which Faqir weaved into her story and serve as the backdrop in the society of post-colonial Jordan. Furthermore, this social sphere greatly supported and reinforced the male political systems of patriarchal laws and customs of the society and defined the strict gendered roles of Maha and Um Saad. These factors are what produce a feminist interpretation of *Pillars of Salt* in addition to the fact that its features of post-colonialism further support the patriarchal ideology prevalent during that period. Most significantly, Faqir's narrative style and representation of these two Arab women gives the reader insight into the devastating effects that an oppressive patriarchal system creates by its marginal treatment of women.

The social contexts of both characters differ with one coming from the village and the other from the city. Nonetheless, we are shown the engrained dogmas to which they must strictly conform. The community's patriarchal by-laws stipulate and dictate the actions, movements, and behaviors these women had to obey. In this society, men are seen as being allotted greater freedom of mobility in time and place whereas women are restricted

in mobility with regard to strict dress codes, acceptable places that she can visit and the purposes of such visits. All these components further help to support the patriarchal themes of control prevalent in the realistic fictional features of Faqir's story. They all show an Arab woman's life as being based on "The organization and culture of agriculturists, urban dwellers, and nomadic tribes involved specific features in the treatment of, and attitudes toward women on the part of the dominant males" (Keddie, 16).

The novel contains a multiplicity of themes such as domestic violence, gender-based violence, physical and psychological (such as the raping of Nasra, Maha's friend) and the characters' ordeals in the mental institution. Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* displays a combination of essential elements that contribute to the painful lives as seen in the story's plot and the significant components that point to the feminist messages which strongly and disturbingly prevail throughout the novel. Gloria Anzaldua, the feminist writer, "argues that in order for silence to 'transform' into speech, sounds and words, the silence must first traverse through our female bodies". She further states that the female silence is richly - layered and it hides important voices which once discovered lead to women's liberation". ("The Community of Female Voices in Arab Women Literature", n.d). This idea can be exemplified in Faqir's novel. Maha and Um Saad gain some form of liberating voice through their personal narratives. Faqir allows their female voices to be heard amidst the



patriarchal confines of their society. To begin with, Fuheis Mental Hospital serves as a dimly incarcerating, yet paradoxically liberating setting in which these two female “outcasts” give life to their desperate voices. By doing so, the women find a comforting solace, a discourse through which they can share their unique female experiences of tragedy, pain, struggle and a desire for identity.

Likewise, Faqir paints a momentary yet illuminating picture of “female consciousness and community” where the women in Maha’s village meet to speak about their female experiences as an outlet to unload their emotions and tribulations. “The women of the village considered my house their house and they came every afternoon, carrying their embroidery, spinning, weaving, and stories. They would sip sweet tea, weave colorful rugs, and unload the burdens of their hearts” (193). In this manner, Faqir empowers her female characters by giving them a voice that will not be silenced nor forgotten, nor ignored despite the patriarchal symbols that embody her novel. This in itself *is* the feminist message of Faqir’s novel: to show the power of the female voice, to assign it some form of identity and to illustrate the resilience that these Arab women possess, but most importantly to record their experiences in spite of living subordinated positions severely inscribed upon them by the male descriptors of their world.

In conclusion, the Middle East has long had a history of political and social struggles.

It has witnessed several movements and attempts aimed at changing the political and social situation in almost all Arab countries. In *Pillars of Salt*, the struggle for political independence goes hand in hand with the endeavors to change the current social relationships controlling man-woman relationships and the role of woman in society. This social struggle is best reflected in the story through the protagonist, Maha and to a lesser extent through the story of Um Saad. However it serves to emphasize and depict the sacrificing struggle that both women endure in the face of great tragedy by their male oppressors.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

From its early beginnings, feminism was seen as a forum in which socio-economics and political issues served as a platform for women to voice, discuss, debate and question their role in society. For many centuries, women's issues were topics that held no importance. Instead they were simply dismissed as women's talk. However, through its development, feminism has redefined its scope on the multitude of feminist issues that affect a woman's quality of life in the global arena. No longer is feminism confined to western ideology or practices, but rather it has mushroomed into a field that expands beyond a western border.

The scope of feminism has evolved into a multi-cultural model which has assumed a new transnational identity. According to Boutaghou, the idea behind this new term *transnational* "is to signal the demise or irrelevance of the nation-state in the current phase of globalization [a] 'borderless world' ...[which] suggests that cultures are more and more relevant than nations and that identity is linked to cultures more than to nations or to the institutions of the nation state" (Boutaghou, n.d.,7).

Feminists today therefore argue that while feminism encompasses the general idea of

advancing women's role and increasing its 'sisterhood' support mechanisms across global boundaries, it must not lose direction in terms of addressing the uniquely prescribed culturally specific issues that are relevant to women to specific societies.

Today feminism has emerged into a unique theory which examines an important aspect – that of women's writings. From this, feminism has witnessed an expansion of theories that impact the way in which schools of literary criticism have interpreted women's literature. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Kate Millett's powerful *Sexual Politics* (1970) were fundamental literature that paved the way toward starting the process by which women began to re-examine, re-analyze, and re-construct a space of their own, where they carved out a category of female experiences that spoke to other women of their own unique female experiences.

A very important component of this theory is Elaine Showalter's second wave of feminism because with it came this re-evaluation, evolutionary re-definement of women's important literary and historical contributions. It prompted a new era for feminist theory to re-examine women's writings and how their images were shaped by their gender and represented in literary canon. This new era of perspectives is fundamental and serves as the basis to Showalter's model of Gynocriticism. It looks to woman as the writer, the experiencer, the producer of text which draws on a woman's

unique experiences and gives meaning to those experiences in terms of their historical, social and cultural settings and value systems so long overlooked and undermined by the traditional male producers of literature which Virginia Woolf so candidly challenged.

Specific to Gynocritics is the interpretation of female culture. Women can be seen to be a sub-culture of their own. They construct their own coded language. A language which further strengthens female “relationships between women, as mothers, daughters, sisters and friends; in sexuality, reproduction and ideas about the body; and in the rites of passage, purification ceremonies, myths and taboos” (Rice and Waugh’s *Modern Literary Theory*, 1989, 95). This model of gynocritics is an extremely significant model because it serves as the basis of this thesis and most significantly, because it illustrates an important aspect of Feminist criticism prevalent in this study’s comparative works, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt*. For example, in the latter work, the concept of a uniquely constructed female subculture is clearly configured between Faqir’s two main female characters, Maha and Um Saad. The heartwrenching emotional narratives that these women share within the confines of a mental hospital provide the reader with an insight into these women’s devastatingly physical and psychological disturbing traumas inflicted upon them by the patriarchal forces of their society and culture. They become united as ‘sisters’, despite the differences

between their socio-economic backgrounds. Yet they share a common thread of female victimization and bonding. Nancy Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood; Women's Sphere in New England 1780-1835* (as cited in Rice and Waugh's *Modern Literary Theory*, 1989, 96) again supports the concept of transnational multiculturalism in that it supports Faqir's 'femmes fatales' through the "cultural bondage of legacy of pain and submission which help to generate a sisterly solidarity, a bond of shared experience, loyalty and compassion". It becomes apparent then why women's writing is quite crucial to feminist theory. They discuss and bring to light the profoundly culturally-powerful created societies that women share in the narratives of their experiences which transcend global borders and language barriers.

In view of all this, this short chapter brings to light several important factors noted throughout this study. The first aim was to see if there was any correlation between the socio-economic, political and cultural frameworks of a society and to the depiction of women in literary works. This study has looked at two female writers: the American, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Jordanian-British writer, Fadia Fair. Although their stories are set in two distinctly unique cultural environments, (the first one set in late nineteenth-century America and the latter set during the British mandate period of Jordan), both stories share a common theme of staunchly rooted phallogentric male institutions

which the two narratives try to explore and repudiate.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicts the confined female character who struggles to maintain a source of independence within the patriarchal systems which keep her confined to the overriding male ideologies dominant then. Her struggle to extract herself leads to her descent into a world of delusional psychological demise. In *Pillars of Salt*, Fadia Faqir likewise presents two women who live in a very oppressive society which brutally subjects them to a fierce form of confinement. Through their narratives, Faqir sets out to uncover the suppressed facelessness of their gender. She shows how phallogentric forces rob a woman’s identity by appropriating her self-worth and human dignity. Despite their tragic ordeals, Faqir nonetheless empowers these female Arab characters by uncovering the shrouded mysteries of their personas. She gives them accessibility to the printed page by having them “speak” about their inhumane experiences at the hands of their male aggressors. Through her work, Faqir depicts the Arab woman in her struggles to emerge not only from her cultural patriarchal society but also from the patriarchal political systems in a post-colonial setting which further compounds her ordeal and hinders her quests for achieving a sense of freedom. Similarly, in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman sets out to set free the imprisoned woman behind the wallpaper from the male forces dominating her life and existence in order to bestow upon

her with some kind of visible shape and freedom of voice. Innate to human nature has always been the need for a sense of identity. This factor has always been a central pillar which allows for groups to belong to a certain level of social hierarchy. For the women in the two literary works under discussion, their social identity has been marginalized or defaced. The politics of marginalization of identity have taken the form of male control which is clearly seen in the patriarchal communities of *Pillars of Salt* and in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The male figures in these works have thus effectively used their social, political and economic power to control and maintain the delineation/ marginalization/ exclusion and education (as seen especially in Faqir’s novel) of the female characters. According to Fernandes, (2003) the manner in which texts have presented the images of subordinated groups, (i.e. – women), writers and scholars has emphasized the politics of gender.

Both writers’ works focus on issues of feminism, patriarchal themes despite the differences in their cultural backgrounds. Their messages remain the same – the power of male-constructed institutions that has kept these women marginalized and confined to “socially” acceptable norms. The heavily-rooted interaction of religious practice and culture within the politically and socially constructed dimensions of a society are structures which continue to exercise a kind of “liberal” control over women’s lives. The dom-



inant patriarchal attitudes and cultural systems within the Arab women's societies greatly impact a woman's ability to exercising complete freedom of equality. In addition, strongly embedded traditional patriarchal gender relations continue to play a major role in determining a women's status in these societies. Strong male institutions likewise controlled women's status in the West, which thus prompted the early stages of a women's movement in an effort to bring about social and political reform to the inequality in both the public and private spheres of their lives. On the other hand, this has been an area of challenge for the Arab woman as she has traditionally represented a symbol of femininity, a symbol of cultural identity which upholds social order and religious values. This ideology compares very closely to what was America's nineteenth century society's view of "The Cult of the Ideal Womanhood". While the West has engaged in furthering discussions pertaining to women's issues, Arab forums have struggled to bring about more concrete changes on modernizing their societies with respect to the "woman" question. This modern clash of modernity versus the traditional, private spheres of the Arab woman's world meets with much conflicting views in the face of centuries-old embedded patriarchal systems and cultural practices. However, today's modern Arab woman writer is beginning to address these issues by giving a voice to literary texts which aim to present women's images as products of their culturally and socially constructed

characters. Faqir, for example, portrays her characters as fighting two political male systems- first, a society ingrained with very traditional male structures and secondly, a foreign presence as seen in the post-colonial male system which likewise exercises its dominance and medical male “knowledge” by subjecting them to cruel psychiatric treatments.

Through the portrayal of their female characters, both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Fadia Faqir aim to empower women’s ability by creating and defining their own individualistic images and to show how their stories need to be recorded. The construction of gender identity through language is an important element in the quest for all women’s writings particularly in a world where traditional male institutions have continually questioned the authenticity and value of their work. Through greater accessibility to educational opportunities, women have used language as a source of power by telling the stories of both heroic and victimized female stories. Through these stories, woman is slowly integrated within the process of individualization, thus creating a sense of self, of attachment, involvement, and recognition, which empowers her in order to be able to liberate the woman behind the yellow wallpaper, or the women behind the barred windows of “Fuheis Hospital”.

The overall idea conveyed in this study is that feminist theory serves as a model to

emphasize the experiences of female writing and examine how the image of woman has been designated to the traditional patriarchal constructions of a society and how the political and cultural systems of that society maintain control over gender relations, and exert force in maintaining women's conformity to these prescribed norms.

The wake of modern Arab Women's literature has thus provided an opportunity, particularly for Arab women writers, to have their work included for closer discussion in formal literary circles of women's writings. Women writers and feminists like Nawal El-Sadaawi, Fatima Mernissi, Hoda Barakat, Bouthaina Shaaban, May Ziade, Fadwa Touqan and Fadia Faqir, for example, have already begun the slow process of creating awareness and a forum for discussing the "unspoken and hidden" issues that have for so long surrounded today's modern Arab woman. Through these writers' works, they aim to reflect their hidden struggles, desires, and accomplishments within their female narratives as seen in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*. Likewise, the wide spectrum of Western female writers of the early nineteenth century authors such as Virginia Woolf, George Elliot, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Margaret Fuller or more contemporary writers like Sylvia Plath, Maxine Hong Kingston, Alice Walker, for example, have also greatly contributed to producing texts that question the traditional roles created by male institutions.

In a recent interview with Rana Husseini, (2010) an award winning investigative

journalist, human rights advocate and author of *Murder in the Name of Honor* (2009) she stated that her aim behind writing this book was to bring to light an important and sensitive issue that stems from the many patriarchal forces that persisting in Jordan. She hoped that her book would elicit some change in the community's conservative, socio-cultural and political attitudes in an effort to create awareness to this issue, to save lives and to bring hope. This book in particular seems to have close connection with *Pillars of Salt* in underlining the need for a radical change in society's view of the role of men and women.

In another interview with Dr. Tawalbeh, (2009) a forensic pathologist, she pointed out that her choice of profession came about as a way to bring about social justice in identifying the large number of unexplainable deaths that occur with cases of physical violence directed towards women. She said that around 2,000 cases a year in physical violence occur and these include only those cases which are reported. She too, concurred with Husseini's conclusions that society's deeply entrenched culture and man's power relations prescribe and maintain a woman's place in the Arab society by dictating that a woman must accept her primary domestic role regardless of the level of her educational background or professional career. Furthermore, Dr. Tawalbeh noted that a new type of labeling such as "womanism" versus "feminism" can be used within the political structures

of society as a middle ground to address women's issues more seriously especially since the latter term continues to connote a somewhat too liberal model in the conservative Arab culture.

### **Recommendations**

Some future recommendations and conclusions stem out of this study. Firstly, while there exists a magnitude of resources such as critical studies, essays, papers, and articles offering a wide variety of literary perspective, on Western female writers specifically to "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the author herself, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the same cannot be said of Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*. The available documentation such as essays and articles on Arab women writers mainly revolves around issues addressing the overall general status of Arab women writers and the political systems underlying Middle Eastern dynamics particularly with regard to women's socio-economic status. However, a larger variety of literary and feminist literary theory perspectives from the academic world is needed to shed greater light on the works of several Arab female writers, including Fadia Faqir. Also, a closer examination of this Jordanian-British writer is needed in order to have deeper perspectives about her writing. Moreover, greater feminist perspectives and critical academic resources are needed in order to better understand the multicultural dynamics of today's modern Arab women writers, written from both a Western perspective

as well as from an Arab perspective. The burgeoning number of Arab topics listed under “women studies” in western universities is certainly one manner in which these studies will contribute to greatly enhancing a better appreciation and understanding of Arab women and will begin to perpetrate the stereotypical and romanticized images that the West has conjured up over the years about the Arab woman and her role in society.

As a result, this has led to a formidable surge of interest in Arabic literature and the important messages that these works express both nationally and universally. Also important to this development is the impact that globalization has had on the widening expanse which these texts have created. In doing so, international literary circles have witnessed a large number of important literary works written by many Arab writers, Faqir being one of them. Most formidably, notes Peter Clark, is the importance of how Arab writers are gaining momentum in addressing and writing about issues that deal with Arab themes. Consequently, the effect that these two stories, “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Pillars of Salt* has had on society have greatly impacted the field of women studies by enriching a forum of critical discussions. This is evident in the numerous studies done over the years on Gilman’s story. On the other hand, Faqir’s story has likewise affected society by bringing to the forefront literary works that deal with specific Arab women issues and themes. By doing so, Faqir creates an important and wider awareness of these

topics and opens the boundaries to begin a more critical discourse on Arab women studies.

This study has supported the hypothesis that woman's image is impacted by the ideology that pervades patriarchal societies because it is implanted and supported by its cultural contexts. My recommendations are that a number of important changes need to take place in the Arab society pertinent to changing the attitudes regarding the "woman question". One, the educational system needs to readdress the way the image of woman is presented in school textbooks. Educators must begin to speak more "politically" correct pedagogy related to women issues. Two, the more conservative and religious members of the community need to differentiate between the religious values and those of a cultural aspect. And finally three, the media needs to re-examine the representation of women in order to dispel the stereotypical images that are portrayed in the type of programs it produces. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman said, "'The woman's century', the century of the great awakening, the rising demand for freedom, political, economic, and domestic, we are beginning to write real history, human history, and not merely masculine history" (Knight, 1997, 118).

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