THE “MADNESS” OF WRITING: A FEMINIST READING OF SOMAYA RAMADAN’S LEAVES OF NARCISSUS
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Introduction
Somaya Ramadan’s novel, *Leaves of Narcissus*, was published in Arabic in 2001 under the title *Awraaq al-narjis*. It is Ramadan’s first novel, following the publication of her earlier two short story collections, *Khashab wa nuhaas* (Wood and Copper 1995) and *Manaazil al-qamar* (Phases of the Moon 2000). Somaya Ramadan’s writing has received critical acclaim due to its intellectual and stylistic specificity. It was, therefore, no surprise that she was awarded in 2001 the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, presented annually by the American University in Cairo. This highly prestigious recognition included the translation into English of the award-winning text, *Leaves of Narcissus*, and its publication in 2002 by the American University in Cairo Press.

As quoted by Samia Mehrez in her review of the novel, the committee of judges serving on the award-giving committee declared *Leaves of Narcissus* as their award-winning novel for the year 2001 on the following grounds:

The author expresses the inexpressible, and articulates that which cannot be said directly, by creating confrontations between revealing and holding back. Somaya Ramadan has carried the subject matter of her novel to new aesthetic grounds in refined language and innovative form, by embedding the informative within the imaginative, the ambivalent within the allegorical. Marked by a hallucinating and captivating narration, this is liminal writing par excellence: writing while gazing at the abyss of being (Mehrez 2001).

Samia Mehrez further defines the novel as “a pseudo-autobiographical narrative” characterised by its “multiple layers of narrative” reflecting a “quest for understanding”. On the other hand, the inner flap of the front cover-page of *Leaves of Narcissus*, in its English version, introduces the book as a “novel of home and homelessness, of exile both physical and psychological”. In its translated version, the novel is described in the following terms: “*Leaves of Narcissus*, like earlier Arabic novels about East-West encounters by male writers such as Tawfiq al-Hakim, Taha Hussein, and Tayeb Saleh, is about a young Arab student going West in search of education. Here, though, the protagonist is a young woman and her destination is Ireland….” (Ramadan, front cover inner flap). This categorisation, in turn, seems to be influenced by the targeted non-Arab readership, and it therefore situates *Leaves of Narcissus* within the tradition of “male” Arabic fiction, adding to it a feminine and post/colonial dimension. On the other hand, Mohammed Breiri looks at the author within the writings of contemporary Egyptian autobiographical women writers, sharing the theme of writing as a life-giving force, (Birairi 2002, 94-96), while representation so far the man woman in contemporary Egyptian women’s fiction have been discussed (as early as 1994, prior to the publication of Somaya Ramadan’s book) by Dinah Manisty in the light of Foucault’s “critique of institutional power” (Manisty 1994, 154), arguing that madness in the case of the three female protagonists came as a consequence to attempts at silencing their voices through class and gender oppression.

I will attempt in the following pages to present a feminist reading of Somaya Ramadan’s *Leaves of Narcissus*, not urged by an attempt to establish it as a feminist text as much as to highlight its negotiation of the aesthetics of women’s writing. Thus, the following sections of this article will explore the feminist literary critique of female madness; as well as Somaya Ramadan’s representation of her protagonist, Kimi, as she deconstructs the idea of “madness” and relates it to unconventional forms of expression in general, and women’s creative use of words in telling and writing. I will also relate “madness” to the notion of “experience” in its feminist sense denoting a process of identity-construction through knowledge, interpretation and expression. This will be followed by a glimpse at the various threads used by the author in weaving her narrative, including memory, experience, myths, fairytales, as well as her frequent allusions to literary figures and use of feminine symbols and metaphors. In the conclusion, I will bring together all the aspects discussed throughout the paper to argue for *Leaves of Narcissus* as an example of a creative Arab woman’s (re)writing of female “madness.”

Women’s “Madness”
In her entry on “Insanity” in the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*, Sara Quay states that insanity has been used “to contain and silence women” whose behaviour does not conform to the mainstream patriarchal model. Quay specifies the three ways in which women have been described in terms of insanity: women whose body and mind are in a state of constant imbalance and instability; women who create their own world and a space
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beyond the limitations of the male-dominated world; women who openly resist oppression and seek their rights. Women writers, she adds, have portrayed their protagonists in a way that challenges the notion of madness, to question the motives behind connecting women with madness, “using such connections to form their own style of writing, to validate their experience, and to subvert the culture that oppresses them” (Quay 2009, 212-213). And feminist critics have fought the stigma of “insanity” by using this same accusation as a means to analyse the implications of women’s madness in terms of gender power relations.

In his groundbreaking book, *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault uses Diemerbroek’s example of “profound melancholia” to discuss the two levels of madness: the state of visible “melancholia,” and the “judgements and reasonings” of discourse. Thus, “under the chaotic and manifest delirium reigns the order of a secret delirium,” manifesting itself in “a kind of reason in action” (Foucault 2001, 91). Foucault considers language as one of the structures of madness through which madness is articulated in a discourse that involves the silent language of the mind, the image created by passion: “It is in this delirium, which is of both body and soul, of both language and image, of both grammar and physiology, that all the cycles of madness conclude and begin” (Foucault 2001, 95). It is in the light of Foucault’s idea of the reason in madness that I approach Somaya Ramadan’s language of madness in this paper.

Feminist cultural scholars of mental illness have focused on women’s madness as an expression of resistance. Devoting much of her analysis to the discourses on women and madness since the nineteenth century, Elaine Showalter argues that it is possible to perceive women’s madness (often also named “hysteria”) as a form of women’s unconscious protest. She adds saying that the prevalent psycho-cultural point of view “sees an equation between femininity and insanity” while feminist research tools seek to dismantle this biased binarism:

Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists have been the first to call attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between ‘woman’ and ‘madness’. They have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind. They have analyzed and illuminated a cultural tradition that represents ‘woman’ as madness (Showalter 1987, 3-4).

This feminist exposure of essentialist polarising categorisations of rational men and insane women points out that a feminist reading of women’s madness moves beyond the traditional view of the mad woman as a victim of the disease or of her society at large. In her analysis, Showalter transcends the notion of women’s madness as a form of failed rebellion,1 relies on a cultural historical approach to madness, and commends feminist thought for challenging the representation of (“mad”) women. She further lauds the feminist literary critical attention to “spaces or silences that could now be seen to mask forbidden sexual feelings or equally forbidden anger and protest”, combined with poststructural methods that trace “marks of repression or resistance that the critic was meant to decipher” (Showalter 1997, 88). In the light of both Quay and Showalter I wish in the following to explore Somaya Ramadan’s proposed definition of women’s madness through her portrayal of an insane female protagonist.

The Representation of Kimi’s “Madness”

Somaya Ramadan opens her novel *Leaves of Narcissus* with a moment of the protagonist’s resistance preceding her submission to “treatment”; and describes her ordeal in the following:

The instant before submission is the most difficult of moments. This might be the secret to its vital attractiveness – the irresistible finality of it. The edge of resistance, a breaking point, when your being has stretched itself to its utmost and your consciousness has spun itself thin, tensile, to the finest and most transparent thread. The chasm before you is featureless: absolutely new, wholly defiant to all powers of imagination. (*LN* 3)²

Kimi begins her story with a description of the moment of “submission” to what others consider the cure to her madness. The novel, thus, brings us from its outset into the centre of struggle between submission and death on the one hand, and resistance and madness on the other hand. Madness, here, is not concomitant to failure in dealing with reality, nor is it a state of mental paralysis vis-à-vis the tasks of everyday life; but to Kimi, madness is a state of awareness, rebellion and an act of resistance. Kimi’s “madness” is presented throughout the novel as a mental state accompanying the character’s sensitivity and delicacy; her conscious response to each and every
The protagonist is far from being in such a state of “evanescence”, and her memory is strong. It is the memory of all her experiences of constraint, of lines and borders drawn in front of her ever since she was a little girl: her fixed route to and from school; the chosen direction of her education and prevention from choice; and all the straight lines set for her by her society. When Kimi describes what others define as her “madness”, it has nothing to do with the deterioration of mental power and memory, as she carries us through a journey across lived moment and scenes engrained in her memory. At the same time, we witness her in a continual process of collecting, analysing and trying to put these memories into some kind of an order that would enable her to understand her own self in its relationship to the world around her – a state of mind described in the following terms: “It’s as though my moments of madness, the voices in my head, the clamor of my delusions, the panting of my terror and the whispers have grown and swallowed the world to become the world” (LN 72). Thus, her madness is the outcome of her previous experiences together with her distorted present, due to the social, cultural and political changes that have inflicted her society, and intensified by the East/West cultural dichotomy. It is here that the moment of madness becomes a moment of awareness of historical and geographical intersections. Madness, in Kimi’s case, is also closely connected to fear overcoming her mental capacities, and is also the tool of madness and creativity: “a chisel that you can use to sculpt and carve your existence” (LN 97). So her main seemingly paradoxical concern becomes not that of freeing herself from fear, but her fear of losing fear, which would in turn entail the loss of her ability to live, understand, capture meaning and express herself.

Additionally, her employment of the fairytale and folk tale traditions reflects her own position where Western and Eastern cultural influence merge and converge. However, seen from a feminist perspective, these motifs gain further prominence in the novel as a woman’s work of creative production. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out the “traditional (patriarchally defined) association between creative women and monsters”, and explain the subversive use of such motifs by women writers’ in the following:
In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self–definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them … From a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences have been seen as terrible objects … But from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self–articulation (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 79).

Gilbert and Gubar include the “madwoman” among the various representations of monsters prevalent in women’s literary production. In the case of *Leaves of Narcissus*, Kimi appears as a “madwoman” – from “a female point of view”. Her obsession with The King of the Atlas Mountains as mediated via her nanny Amna, is one example where the monster emerges as a projection of the protagonist’s attempts at making sense of the reality via the world of fantasy.

Somaya Ramadan turns “madness” into an act of resistance to silencing. Madness is linked to awareness and the struggle with death, in order to achieve self–expression through telling and writing. When the author situates the “mad” among the wizards and witches, writers and artists, she thus insists on madness being positive action rather than submission, and hence we hear Kimi saying: “you find white magic in the spaces that words leave between the lines; and that black magic is the lines themselves, made by the words; and that the black days are those in which the evil sensible people succeed in preventing the wizards and witches from filling the white pages” (*LN* 103). I therefore see Kimi’s resort to madness as a mask she wears to enable herself to cross the boundaries of silence imposed upon her, and to plunge herself into the madness of black magic – the act of writing. On the other hand, when Kimi takes the minute pink pill, she reminds us that swallowing the medication for madness is an act of killing the creative self, so she consequently objectifies herself in terms of a useless “thing”, saying: “I am the blue delft mug that has been emptied of every trace of those sips of writing, the mug with the bone–dry inkwell and the space where there is no longer any paper … I myself have become a thing … Without voice, without story, indeed without language” (*LN* 62). Reading these lines in the context of a culture promoting silence and seeking silencing others, it becomes obvious here that the author is indirectly referring to the difficulty of being creative, especially for women, when creativity becomes synonymous to madness – and act of resistance and a means of unconventional expression through the power of the word.

**Experience**

Throughout the text, action takes place mainly inside Kimi’s mind, who is aware of all the cultural, social and daily–life contradictions governing her reality. This in turn, imposes upon her a very special perspective influenced by the fact that she herself is a character imbued with an artistic sense, a cultural sensitivity, and an inclination towards knowledge and writing. It is thus, through her representation of Kimi’s experience that the author seems to foreground the idea of “experience” not in the common sense of a series of actions and events in her protagonist’s life, but more in line with feminist notions of experience. Extending the generic boundaries of the text by looking at it as a fictional narrative and a biographical account of an individual experience, the author’s depiction of Kimi resonates with Joan Scott’s reference to experience as “the origin of knowledge” where the “vision of the individual (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built,” while insisting on its “discursive nature” stating that: “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation” (Scott 1998, 59, 69). In this light, I wish to reveal in the following the way in which the author’s narrative entails an implicit critique as well as a counter discourse of the conventional notions of both female “madness” and “experience”.

Somaya Ramadan constructs her novel out of twenty chapters, scenes, fragments, papers or “leaves”, moving across time and place through the alleys and mazes of Kimi’s mind. The text opens with the chapter “It Might Be” presenting the moment of Kimi’s resistance to “submission” to treatment for what the people around her consider a nervous breakdown or “madness”:

The pill is barely inside my mouth when I spit it out. Here it is, they whisper, just a tiny disk, and then you’ll sleep so soundly! That’s all you’re required to do. And they do require it: my friends, my family. The nearest relations are arranging a kind little conspiracy after which you will sleep so very soundly!

Negotiations commence and I exhaust the conspirators. (*LN* 3–4)

It is a moment in which Kimi regards submission equivalent to a death sentence and to being “led to the gallows” (*LN* 3). Her inner voice merges here with the conspiratorial voice of the people surrounding her, while...
his consciousness is established from the very beginning as resistant rather than submissive, and as powerful rather than victimised. Yet, it is an experience of an intense encounter with death, where the characters of Kimi and her nanny Amna converge: “Di-ana!/ Die-I-ana!/ Or, am I saying/ Die Amna!” (sic) (LN 7). In a later chapter titled “Doubt”, Kimi pursues judging and punishing herself, so she sentences herself to death “in the trial of the self” based on the following self-accusations:

my death, mine, ya ana, liar you are, hypocrite! Arrogant, conceited, treacherous, neglectful, stupid, ugly, naive, evil, reckless! You aren’t good at anything, you’re a Narcissus, you’re not moved by others’ wounds… You – only you – are the cause of all the evil in the world… and you’re afraid, as well – a coward with no strength at all. (LN 100)

Again these lines mark the converging characters of both Kimi (“I” or “Ana” in Arabic) and the nanny (Amna). Amna and Kimi are two sides of the same coin, and as such represent different facets of one character – with all the contradictions, parallelisms and intersections implied. This adds to Kimi’s suffering and her struggle with her internal experiences and drives – hence intensifying Kimi’s ordeal and empowering the narrative.

Kimi reveals her confusion and questioning of the notions of homeland, identity and power during the periods she spends studying in Dublin. She considers the experience of exile and alienation, and the concomitant process of “yearning for a homeland of the imagination” sustained by the overwhelming sense of nostalgia and longing (LN 32). When Kimi returns to her father’s house after many years, she walks into her room where she discovers another contradiction, expressed in the following reflection: “All homelands are mine and so I am without homeland or nation. All languages are mine and so I have no language” (LN 62-63). At the same time, Cairo and Dublin intersect, so Kimi introduces herself at another situation saying: “And I’m a Sa’idi, a southern bumpkin from Dublin” (LN 82). In another section, Kimi reflects on “the impress of those lessons so far back in childhood … Men are in charge of women. That’s because women have half a brain for a whole body, and so their faith, too, is only half that of men” (LN 75). While at the same time she finds herself involved in a process of defending – all in vain – an aspect of her identity: “My passport is Egyptian. I defend it. What is it that I am trying to defend? Whatever loyalties I have are judged suspicious in advance. What am I defending? My passport? My language? My faith?” (LN 76). Kimi, moreover, reveals her awareness of the degree of her submission to male power and authority; so while her father’s personality is portrayed in positive and amicable light, retrieved from the memory without the least touch of power, there are two other figures controlling her life. These are her professors: one “entrapped me in affection and jealous protection, preventing me from speaking to anyone. And a few steps away was another professor who said nothing, who extended no helping hand” (LN 75). Yet, it is this professor who takes her to Saint Patrick’s mental hospital where Kimi experiences “the odor of insanity … the smell of rotting memory, fear, and humiliation” (LN 47).

Structurally, the narrative expression of experience does not follow a traditional plot, but is stylistically reminiscent of the stream-of-consciousness technique, established by the pioneer feminist writer Virginia Woolf. It is a technique which relies on a seemingly spontaneous flow of ideas, observations and comments in the protagonist’s mind. Somaya Ramadan has succeeded in portraying both the narrator and Kimi with great sensitivity, as Kimi’s voice predominates within the narrative through the first-person method of narration (the narratorial “I”), and merges with third person method of narration presented in the voice of the narrator who tells us Kimi’s story (in the third person pronoun “she”). And although the narrator is not identified in the text, and it is not even clear whether the narrator is a man or a woman, yet the interweaving of the two voices and the proximity of their perspectives suggests that the narrator is a woman who is involved in weaving the threads of the narratives hand in hand with the author and protagonist. Thus, the events stretch along twenty “leaves” of Kimi’s intellectual world. The journey takes her to her childhood memories – their parallelisms and intersections between the British culture to which she was exposed at school and the Egyptian folk culture carried by nanny Amna. These were memories replete with the pain of consciousness and awareness of the contradictions between the books of fairytales of “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Sleeping Beauty” as well as the tradition of Greek mythology on the one hand, and the story of “al-Malik al-Atlasi” (King of the Atlas Mountains), told to her by Amna. She also takes us on a journey through the experience of studying and living in Dublin; again full of political and cultural parallelisms and contradictions between the two (former) British colonies: Ireland and Egypt. The narrative highlights Kimi’s difference from her schoolmates – a sense of difference which takes a stronger slant leading her to a state of semi-seclusion in her youth. It is this difference that leads the people surrounding her in the opening scene to the assumption that she needs “rest” and treatment for her “exhaustion”.

The Madness of Writing
However, Somaya Ramadan presents Kimi as belonging to the eccentric group of men and women of literary prowess, who have been subjected to all sorts of accusations from the people around them. Kimi is portrayed as living in Dublin in house number 17 on Westland Row, sharing a wall with the house in which “the gay master of irony, Oscar Wilde, was born” – the writer who was tried and sentenced to prison for breaking the social and “moral” rules of his time. Moreover, Kimi seems even more aware of Oscar Wilde’s mother, Esperanza: at a moment of her confusion she makes a connection between Esperanza’s giving birth to Oscar and between her own birth – thus aligning herself with this eccentric woman. The author describes Kimi’s character during her stay in Dublin as follows:

Here there lived, for an entire and consecutive four years, an eccentric woman … She did not use the house’s communal kitchen, nor did she come down to the common room to watch television. In the beginning they would try to start conversations with her, but with the passage of time they no longer bothered … She was a cold, distant, self-protective woman, yet on accession a bout of human warmth would overpower her aloof demeanor. (LN 29-30)

It is worth noting in these lines that we get the people’s perspective of Kimi together with the narrator’s commentary. It also suggests that Kimi’s “eccentricity” is an expression of the (ignorant) society’s misjudgement of people with intellectual sensitivity and delicate temperament: “The noise that had now subsided distilled a single, terrifying insight … That my senses and my comprehension of life are not those of anyone else, of anyone else but me” (LN 25). However, this description of Kimi’s personality is meant to draw parallels between her and other philosophers, and writers, both men and women. Kimi’s world is a world of reading and writing, as the novel is replete with references to writers and poets: Joyce, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Beckett, Sartre and Gide, in addition to her “neighbours” Oscar Wilde and his mother Esperanza. Kimi, moreover, identifies with Sylvia Plath, in her repeated indirect reference to The Bell Jar (Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical novel), as both text and metaphor. On the narrative level, however, the text is influenced by Virginia Woolf in its employment of the stream of consciousness technique, in addition to Somaya Ramadan’s infatuation with the relationship between creativity and “madness”.

**Aesthetics of Women’s Writing**

If madness is presented in the novel as an awareness revealing itself through self-expression by means of telling and writing, I would like in the following to reflect on the elements which have given shape to Kimi’s story and Somaya’s novel. In the light of memory theory, we find that according to theorists of memory such as Martin Conway, remembering past events and retrieving memories is a process that involves both fact and fiction since it reproduces a past that is inevitable “partly constructed and partly remembered” (Conway 1990, 101). Memory goes back from the present moment, retrieving the past, while at the same time projecting on this past interpretations rather than factual events. Thus, looking at Somaya Ramadan’s narrative, Kimi’s mind appears to be involved in a process of collecting scattered threads of her memory and experience, myths and fairytales, in an attempt at weaving her own self – at a crisscross of the past and present, and beyond. Her memory takes us back to her childhood years, with all their straight lines, lessons in reading and “reckoning sums”, as well as the experiences of oppression and failure to understand. It is here that the process of memory emerges as one of conscious selection, ordering and rewriting.

Myths are another thread of narration, and particularly through the mythical figures who create and form aspects of Kimi’s awareness of her lived reality. Narcissus, for instance, is a leading figure in that respect, in his constant self-examination; his metaphorical predominance in the novel begins from the title itself (Leaves of Narcissus), while his relationship to Kimi is expressed overtly in Kimi’s comment as she notices her reflection in a mirror – an image reminiscent of Narcissus staring at his reflection in water: “I turned and caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror above the dressing table. The waters of the mirror are wavy” (LN 116). Another powerful mythical presence is that of Penelope, who weaves her way through the narrative. She is the mythical representative of eternal weaving and fraying, whose presence in the novel reflects Kimi’s character and projects her predicament as an artist overpowered by the art of reworking and rewriting.

In addition to myths, Kimi relies in her story (as much as Somaya employs in her narrative) other elements, namely folktales and fairytales. When Kimi seeks a language to express herself, oral storytelling emerges as a means of communication and a way to overcome illiteracy, through the story of The King of the Atlas Mountains which she hears from Amna, and keeps waiting for its end so as to rewrite it and retell it herself. Somaya Ramadan does not limit herself by this Egyptian folktale, but in her exploration of parallels and intersections she captures
the world of fairytales. But since most of the female protagonists of those fairytales appear passive and reflect patriarchal values, Kimi rejects those characters; she refuses to be as helpless as Sleeping Beauty, and turns Red Riding Hood into “Black Riding Hood” – as part of her symbolic use of the colour black as standing for the powers of magic and writing.

The threads of Somaya Ramadan’s narrative do not use mythical and imaginary elements only, but she also employs different motifs, such as the repetition of her reference to lines and circles. There is the straight line and the “parallels” which never meet, as well as the circles and spirals which reflect Kimi’s vision of the intersecting circles of life. Yet, it is worth noting that these straight lines sometimes turn and take circular shapes through Kimi’s desire to find a logical meaning of her existence. The idea of parallelism and intersection is further manifested in the image of the dysfunctional pair of scissors, due to the loss of their connecting screw. The mirror is another motif used throughout the novel via the frequent appearance of various reflections, suggesting a multiplicity of the self looking at these mirrors, and its fragmented image. Looking at the mirror and beyond it is an attempt at gathering the smithereens of the self, but it is also a process necessarily subject to an interpretation of the self according to a point of view and an intellectual perspective. Thus the final product resembles a series of successive rings and multiple images of the self – the way it is reflected in mirrors, in water, in memory, in life, as well as in the faces and voices of others. So instead of witnessing Kimi as she succeeds in identifying and defining her own features and identity, we find out that her quest for the essence of her identity leads her to a discovery of a multi-faceted self and a fragmented identity that transcends the ideal image of a complete and perfect self.

As we see Kimi in Leaves of Narcissus involved in a continual process of weaving and fraying, of writing and erasing, she becomes a Penelope totally absorbed in the weaving of threads: she is in her room where “for days on end the lamp hardly ever went out. She was writing. No one read what she wrote” (LN 30). Kimi’s “madness” is actually a creative process during which she collects the threads of her memory and life, gathers her parallel stories, and hence conceptualises her self-identity. Once she approaches the end of the line of thread, she begins to fray it – weaves and frays and weaves endlessly. Similarly, on the narrative level, the novel is stylistically governed by telling and re-telling – writing and erasing for the sake of re-writing. Thus, at the end of the novel, Somaya Ramadan links writing as an act of madness to writing as an act of creativity and resistance to death. So, since completion is an omen of death, the novel takes the form of a process of writing, erasing and re-writing: “How can something be complete unless it dies? … Being demands that we erase and return to writing and life once again, a writing and a life that might be” (LN 111).

Leaves of Narcissus does not directly belong to feminist literature in its theoretical definition which refers to the kind of writing concerned with feminist issues and based on a feminist consciousness – a consciousness defined by Gerda Lerner in the following terms:

I define feminist consciousness as the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but is societally determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternative vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination (Lerner 1993, 14).

Yet, Leaves of Narcissus is marked by obvious aesthetic characteristics that locate this novel among writing which carries the specificity of women’s experience. This manifests itself to me in the novel’s themes, content, characters, narrative voice, symbolism and style. The novel deals with the experience of a woman, Kimi, in her relationship with her self, and in a surrounding of other women: Amna, the mother figure at the background, little Mariam towards whom Kimi harbours a sense of guilt, her teachers at school, and even her colleagues in Dublin. It is an experience of circles of relationships, each exposing an aspect of the tensions, parallelisms and contradictions prevalent throughout the text.

From an artistic point of view, Somaya Ramadan employs several symbols and metaphors pertaining to and derived from women’s world. On the one hand, the sewing-box stands for the universe, so we see Kimi contemplating the contradictions of life and portraying the disconnection between matter and spirit through the metaphor of the “scissors” having lost the little screw that connects its blades, leaving it dysfunctional. Having returned to her father’s house after years of absence, Kimi is overwhelmed by a paradoxical sense of change and stagnation: “Something has stricken the spirit of things. Something vanished when that little screw dropped from the sewing scissors and no one replaced it. … When time and place stand on parallel lines, never meeting, the coordinates of existence are refuted … codes and blades lose their sharpness, and nothing happens” (LN 65-66). Parallelism here suggests stagnation, just as the broken pair of scissors whose blades do not intersect – due to the
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loss of their connecting screw – symbolises the loss of meaningfulness: “poets do not write of places and times but rather of where place and time meet in the soul. Poets write from the location of the tiny screw that transforms the two ‘jawbones’ of the scissors into a working jaw that creates meaning” (LN 71). Later on, while reflecting on the moments of futility, her experience again is expressed in metaphorical terms: “The tiny screw that turned the scissors into a weapon – where words gathered and met, waiting for the codes to emerge between one sentence and the other – drops and is lost” (LN 92).

In addition to the metaphor and symbolism of the scissors, Somaya Ramadan uses another feminine metaphor in reference to Kimi’s philosophical reflections on the process and progress of life moving in lines and circles. In a powerful image, the author portrays Kimi while peeling an onion and interpreting her childhood experience as having been restricted by an image of the (patriarchal) straight line rather than the circular structure suggested here by the feminine experience of peeling onions. The flow of ideas and memories, instigated by the ongoing onion-peeling, further develops into another symbol; namely, the symbol of death, and particularly the death of Kimi’s childhood friend, Hisham:

When I had finished my peeling, I stared at the layers of skin, these golden and silvery transparencies between my hands. In my head, the whole issue emerged in a few words. There are people. They are born and die and that’s all there is to it …

For three days they kept the news of Hisham’s death from me. And in the instant that I was taking it in, the sharp sting of raw onion filled my nostrils. I found myself remembering the onion I had peeled… (LN 89-91)

While peeling the onion, Kimi sees life in those onion rings and sees death in the peeling of an onion till its end. The onion then develops into an even more concrete metaphor of death in relation to Hisham, as we see her thinking of Hisham while peeling the onion; and then remembering the smell of the onion upon hearing the news of Hisham’s death. Later on, when Kimi’s value and “worth” seem questioned, she feels herself diminishing and vanishing – an experience expressed once again in terms of the metaphor of the onion: “I almost let the layers peel off, the final skin drop. After the final layer goes, no one will see me, and it will no longer be in anyone’s power to sting me with words and kill me. After the final layer, I will not be” (LN 101). As her self-criticism and her guilt vis-à-vis her family reach their peak, Kimi seeks to peel herself down to self-eradication – just like an onion being peeled, layer after layer, till there is nothing left of it anymore except withering rings of skin.

Finally, Somaya Ramadan employs another metaphor from women’s experience: weaving and fraying. The novel itself is structurally composed of several narrative threads (as discussed earlier in this paper). It is through this use of threads, weaving and fraying that Somaya Ramadan’s novel emerges as a text characterised by the features of women’s writing expressive of the specificity of feminine experience. Moreover, and on a deeper level, the weaving metaphor is closely connected to the art of writing, as weaving stands for the process of writing, and the threads used in this weaving are but the threads of the narrative brought together to create the novel. However, since the text is far from presenting a final product, the weaving is constantly accompanied by fraying, just as the writing is continuously being erased and rewritten again without reaching a stage of completion: “I write. I erase. I write… Only when we die we are complete” (LN 111).

Conclusion

Leaves of Narcissus emerges as an indirect critique of traditional authorship and conventional narrative. It is characterised by the absence of a unified structure with a tendency towards fragmentation. This is clear in the division of the text into fragments of papers which survived shredding and throwing away: “leaves of paper, leaf after leaf: shredded in careful precision in the space of three days” (LN 45). In this conjunction between the leaves of daffodils and Kimi’s papers, the author detaches herself from the domain of authorship and claims to be merely the mediator who has managed to collect Kimi’s scattered papers and sought to publish them in this book. In this sense, the text reveals a common characteristic feature of women’s writing; namely, questioning and challenging authorial power and intellectual superiority, with a tendency to expose weaknesses, reveal shortcomings, express contradictions, and pose questions. It seeks to trace the experience as a process, rather than exhibit a final achievement.

Moreover, Somaya Ramadan seems to situate her text within the discourse on women’s writing and madness, reinforced by her repeated allusions to Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, whose relevance is prominent by virtue of having expressed, in writing, their awareness of the entailed contradictions and failures on the journey towards an understanding of life. Frequent references are made to Sylvia Plath and her novel The Bell Jar, in an intertextual
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relationship between the two novels (The Bell Jar and Leaves of Narcissus). In her autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar, Plath’s protagonist Esther Greenwood too suffers from mental illness where the bell jar represents her sense of entrapment and her perspective of the world when inflicted by “madness.” Somaya Ramadan borrows this same metaphor of the bell jar in reference to her own protagonist’s experience of madness, as we hear Kimi saying, for instance: “I did not notice them as they crafted around me a large bell of thick glass” (LN 27). We then repeatedly see Kimi trying in several scenes to free herself from her imprisonment inside the “glass bell”. It is through this employment of “the bell jar” that the two texts, the two protagonists come together, with an intertextual poetic representation of “madness”.

It is Virginia Woolf’s presence, however, that seems particularly -though indirectly- felt in Leaves of Narcissus; especially when considered in relation to the author’s affinity with Woolf whose A Room of One’s Own she had translated into Arabic. By employing the stream-of-consciousness technique, developed by Woolf at the beginnings of the twentieth century, Somaya Ramadan’s narrative seems overshadowed by Virginia Woolf’s presence as a yet another prominent artist and intellectual afflicted with mental illness. In his study of Virginia Woolf’s life and work from a psychoanalytical perspective, Thomas Caramagno traces the manifestations of Woolf’s manic-depressive disorder in her writing. He relates “madness” and writing, bringing to our attention that cycles of mood swings (characteristic of manic-depression) “blur the line between sanity and insanity by repeated crossings – paralleling our repeated crossings from one character’s mind to another” (Caramagno 1995, 239). Stylistically, Ramadan employs the stream of consciousness technique and internal monologues reminiscent of Woolf’s style; while Kimi’s moments of self-accusation, guilt and contemplation of death, resonate with Clarissa’s guilt towards her husband and preoccupation with death in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway.

Kimi’s art and life reminds us of Woolf’s description in A Room of One’s Own of gifted women in patriarchal societies where a gifted woman confined to domesticity “would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to certainty” (Woolf 1989, 49). Inspired by Woolf’s description of unfulfilled women artists ending up “crazed … half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at” (Woolf, 49), Somaya Ramadan transforms madness into an excuse for crossing the boundaries of manners, thought and speech, through an imaginary dialogue between Little Red Riding Hood and Grandmamma in a Kimi’s memory of a reading lesson. The author here covertly echoes Virginia Woolf as she says: “everyone knows their limits, the boundaries that they can’t exceed no matter how hard they try … Except for those who are mad. … Wizards and witches and poets and story writers and novelists and all chemists” (LN 102).

Leaves of Narcissus is thus a text involved in an exploration and interpretation of the relationship between creativity and “madness”. The author’s choice to discuss this issue through her novel implies her awareness of the western feminist literary and critical engagement with representations of “the mad woman.” The novel is informed by the writings and experiences of women, whose forms of self-expression have been often related to “madness”, simply because of their independence, difference and choice of a way of life or thought beyond the mainstream or against conventions. And finally, reading the text in the light of feminist literary criticism, Leaves of Narcissus emerges as a poetic critique of the representation of women’s madness: a quest to rewrite madness and an infatuation with the madness of writing.
Endnotes

1 Showalter here refers particularly to Phyllis Chesler’s groundbreaking work of feminist psychological interpretation of madness and hysteria.
2 All subsequent quotes from the novel will appear in the article between brackets as LN followed by page number.
3 In Arabic, the text employs a subtle linguistic shift between “ana” (I) and “Amna” (the nanny). I would have personally preferred the transliteration of the pronoun /ana/ in Arabic (the equivalent of the English pronoun “I”) to have been written in the capital form “Ana” to reinforce the connection between the self “Ana” and “Amna” the nanny.
4 The title of the novel in its Arabic origin Awraaq al-Narjis carries a variety of meanings. The word “awraaq” is the plural of “waraqa” which can refer to a sheet of paper or a flower-leaf. Moreover, “al-narjis” stands for daffodils, but is also the root from which “al-narjisiyya” (narcissism) is derived. Hence the highly evocative and metaphorically powerful title of the novel.
Works Cited


