

**TOWARDS A FEMINIST LITERARY PEDAGOGY:  
AISHA TAYMUR AND CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN**

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This paper seeks to explore the intersections of genre and gender in women's writing as represented in a selection of fictional and non-fictional writings by two pioneer women writers of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Egyptian Aisha Taymur (1840-1902) and the American Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). The study aims at presenting a comparative feminist reading of two fictional texts: Taymur's *Nata'ij al-ahwaal fil-aqwaal wal-af'aal* (Consequences of Circumstances in Words and Deeds, 1887) and Gilman's *Herland* (1915). In the light of their non-fictional writing, with particular focus on the feminist issues raised in Taymur's *Mir'aat al-ta'ammul fil-umuur* (Mirror of Contemplation, 1892) and selected essays from Gilman's *Our Androcentric Culture, or The Man-Made World* (1911). As a comparative feminist inquiry, this paper addresses the opportunities and constraints of genre, as well as the literary representation of gender roles towards a feminist literary pedagogy. The study does not follow a conventional comparative study method, but is structured around an imaginary cross-cultural dialogue between the two authors and the cross-generic echoes between their texts.

The paper is divided into four parts. First the two authors are introduced highlighting their position as pioneers of women's literary writing and advocates of gender equality. Then the paper addresses the issue of genre in terms of the writers' knowledge of the conventions of the *maqama* and utopian fiction, as well as their contributions through subverting the conventional. The next part looks more closely at the writers' discussion of gender issues through their critique of masculinity and femininity. The paper concludes with reflections on Taymur's and Gilman's contributions to women's literary tradition and feminist thought, offering potentials for feminist literary pedagogy.

**Taymur and Gilman**

Aisha Taymur (also known as Aisha al-Taymuriyya)<sup>1</sup> is an Egyptian pioneer woman poet and writer. She received her education at home, mastering Arabic, Turkish and Persian languages which not only offered her access to intellectual life, but qualified her to become a translator working in the royal court (Ashour et al, 2008, 502). Her writings establish her as a precursor of modern Egyptian and Arabic literature, a critic of established gender roles, and advocator of women's education. In her pioneering critical study of Aisha Taymur, published as early as 1925, the renowned Arab intellectual, writer and critic, May Ziyada states the five reasons behind her interest in foregrounding Taymur's contribution to the literary scene at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

First, Aisha is a pioneer at the forefront of the women's awakening in the country. Second, the public knows her as 'a poet' without deeper knowledge of her poetics, and without reflecting on her life or analysing her preferences. Third, [...] Aisha occupies a prominent position among the writers of her time, not merely among eastern women writers alone. Fourth, [...] her views on life deserve attention and reflection as they coincide with the views of a large group of eastern men and women; views that were common at her time and not uncommon in our own time. Fifth, this kind of research offers multiple pleasure. Are not all people pleased by fictional accounts, representing imaginary characters? So how about recounting the lives of those who lived before us [...] and experienced an awakening (Ziyada, 1983, 14).<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the predominantly biographical accounts of women writers, Ziyada breaks new ground here as she sees Taymur in the wider context of the intellectual contributions of "eastern men and women". Moreover, as a prominent literary figure of her time, Ziyada's study merges biography with literary criticism, and is consequently described by the prominent Ziyada critic, Olfat El-Roubi, as having offered the first example of "theorizing women's voice in literary writing" (El-Roubi, 2001, 403).

Similarly, building on May Ziyada's study, Joseph Zeidan and Hoda Elsadda place Taymur not only in the framework of modern Arabic literature, but establish her at the forefront of the pioneering generation of Egyptian women writers (Joseph Zeidan, 1995, 59; Elsadda, 2008, 103).<sup>3</sup> Elsadda additionally stresses Taymur's role in having "opened the door that allowed more women writers to express themselves", and acted as a source of inspiration to a whole generation of women intellectuals "who made valuable contributions to the newspapers and journals that shaped cultural life in Egypt and the Arab world" (Elsadda, 2008, 103-105). The significance of these studies lies not only in their assertion of Taymur's position as a pioneer of the Egyptian renaissance, but also in their concrete critical concern with Taymur's literary production.

Taymur published her poetry in Persian, Turkish and Arabic – the languages of the Egyptian and Arab intellectual elite; and despite the fact that she had burned her poetry following her daughter's death, in an act

expressing her sense of guilt, sorrow and total desperation at the loss of her daughter whom she mourned for seven years, she has still left behind a significant corpus of poetry. Additionally, she published in 1887 a work of prose fiction entitled *Nata'ij al-ahwaal fil-aqwaal wal-af'aal* (Consequences of Circumstances in Words and Deeds), which appeared in its second edition only in 2003. May Ziyada establishes this text as the first work of prose fiction in Arab women's literature. Her other work of prose is an epistle published in 1892 under the title *Mir'aat al-ta'ammul fil-umuur* (Mirror of Contemplation), the second edition of which came out in 2002.

At more or less the same time as Aisha Taymur was establishing her distinct voice in Egypt and the East, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was gaining recognition in America and the West as a social critic, lecturer, essayist, and literary figure. Gilman's scholar, Ann Lane, points out that Gilman's reputation developed throughout the 1880s and 1890s, while it is her book on *Women and Economics: Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898) that brought her international fame (Lane, 1990, xvi), particularly following the translation of the book into German and her invitation to Berlin in 1904 to the Congress of International Council. Gilman was asked to give a series of speeches to an audience of three thousand women coming from various parts of the world including "delegates from India, China and Japan; and one tall, handsome Turkish princess" (Gilman, 1990, 298-299). Gilman sought women's emancipation in terms of both class and gender, and has been, therefore, considered a social theorist who combined socialism with feminism, subverting patriarchy and advocating equality (Golden, 1996, 182). Although currently defined as a socialist and feminist writer, Gilman described herself as a humanist, stating in the opening essay of her *Our Androcentric Culture or The Man-Made World* that "[w]e have been so taken up with the phenomena of masculinity and femininity, that our common humanity has largely escaped notice" (Gilman, "As to Humanness", 1911).

Gilman's major work of fiction, *Herland* (1915), was republished in 1979, and appeared with the subtitle "A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel" – an addition probably made by Ann Lane, who presented both author and text to contemporary readership, in her "Introduction", in which she states the following:

Gilman had an enormous reputation in her lifetime, but she is almost unknown to ours. A serious critic of history and society whose intriguing ideas have never been adequately examined, she tried to create a cohesive, integrated body of thought that combined feminism and socialism. She struggled to define a humane social order built upon the values she identified most closely as female values, life-giving and nurturing (Lane, 1979, ix).

And again, similar to Taymur, Gilman's work has been revived by critics and republished by feminists after decades of oblivion, as part of feminist literary critics' and historians' efforts to recover women's writings, rewrite women's history and establish a feminist literary tradition. Tracing further recognition of Gilman's intellectual contribution, one can refer, for example, to the renowned feminist literary critic, Elaine Showalter, who devotes a chapter of her book *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Showalter considers Gilman to be the "most influential American feminist at the turn of the century", and *Herland* as "her own version of feminist ethnography" (Showalter, 2002, 93, 116). On the other hand, Denise Knight sees in *Herland* "a forum through which Gilman was able to demonstrate the majority of her reform theories at work" (Knight, 2009, xv).

Both Taymur and Gilman emerge as pioneers in women's literary and social history. Their contributions have survived periods of marginalization and forgetfulness, and are now receiving increasing attention in Arab and Western feminist studies. One of the most significant features of their writings is the fact that they have expressed themselves in various forms, leaving behind a legacy of fictional and non-fictional work which reflects their belief in social change through the written word. It is therefore of great interest to read their work cross-generically as well as cross-culturally towards an understanding of their use of various literary genres in addressing gender issues and creating a literary space for an alternative vision – a vision that we now consider reflective of feminist thought.

## **Genre: subverting the conventional**

### **1. Taymur's *maqama***

Aisha Taymur's *Nata'ij al-ahwaal fil-aqwaal wal-af'aal* (Consequences of Circumstances in Words and Deeds, 1887) is a text of fictional prose which follows in its style the conventions of the traditional form of fictional prose which preceded the emergence of the modern Arab novel towards the end of the nineteenth century. *Nata'ij* opens with a five-page long untitled introduction, which includes an autobiographical account of

the author's abhorrence of feminine activities and interest in reading from her childhood; followed by her own summary of the text's five chapters – an account that is not typographically separated from the beginning of the fictional text. The language she uses, however, is typical of the traditional pre-modern Arabic literary style: heavily rhymed, repetitive and hence classified by critics as a development of the *maqama*. The “*maqama*” tradition goes back to over a thousand years, and is said to have originated in Persia, established by Al-Hamadani and then Al-Hariri (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively). In his book on the *maqama*, Shawqi Daif defines it as a form of fictional narrative that “is not a story in the modern sense, yet it includes elements of the story, not in terms of extended exchanges between characters alone, but also in its content and portrayal of evil and corruption in the society” (Daif, 1964, 9). It is dominated by one central narrator, and one protagonist; a loosely structured episodic narrative with stories within the frame story, and relies on a combination of humour and preaching. Daif adds that since its inception in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it has been used as a means for teaching young learners elements of style and language. Thus, due to its educational function, the *maqama* is marked by its heavily rhymed prose, rhetorical extravagance, with frequent use of poetry as well as Quranic verses and moral sayings (Daif, 1964, 8-9).

Taymur's *Nata'ij* is among the earliest examples of fictional prose written in Arabic by women.<sup>4</sup> And although she is said to have been influenced by Al-Tahtawi's Arabic translation of *Les aventures de Télémaque* by the French didactic writer Fénelon (published in 1867), Mervat Hatem, dismisses such direct influence, in the light of the difference in the two texts' cultural and political frameworks, and states that “there is a general similarity between the two [texts] in their concern with justice as the founding block of modern ruling systems, but there is a total difference between their respective definitions of justice and its role in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled” (Hatem, 2003, 15). *Nata'ij* follows the conventions of the *maqama* in its flowery language, episodic structure and educational purpose, combining narration with dialogue, poetry and moral teachings. However, one cannot miss Taymur's innovation in characterisation, narrative technique and the message conveyed to her readership. It is about a young prince's (Mamdouh) journey of exposure to hypocrisy, deception and betrayal, as well as his experience of friendship, patience and justice. The idea of justice is introduced from the outset, as the King is called Al-Adel (the Just), who is advised by his loyal Wazeer (Prime-Minister) and Nadeem (his Companion and Confidant) to start educating his son, Prince Mamdouh, in preparation for his role as a future monarch. The process is however interrupted by the two representatives of evil: Dishnam and Ghaddur (who occupied the positions equivalent to minister of finance and minister of armament, respectively, in Al-Adel's court). Aware of the King's trust in Wazeer and Nadeem, and seeking to discredit their rivals, the young prince becomes their target and means to attain proximity to the throne, through their initially successful attempts at ruining his education. Having lost his way, suffering years of exile, poverty and a series of hardships, the prince finally finds his way back to the kingdom and throne, guided by his wife's wisdom, Wazeer and Nadeem's loyalty, as well as his own realisation and understanding of good and evil.

Although Taymur's *Nata'ij* is considered to be a woman's text written in a style reminiscent of the *maqama* tradition, one should not fall into the trap of trying to establish the text and its author strictly within the framework of this tradition, in an attempt at asserting women's contribution to this genre. While *Nata'ij* is written in the style closely related to that of the *maqama*, in its flowery language and rhymed prose, yet Taymur's style in general (in both her poetry and prose) carries specific features which Nabila Ibrahim lists as three characteristics of Taymur's poetics. First, Taymur opens her book with a lengthy preamble, which is a typical rhetorical introduction in traditional Arabic prose. Second, she supports her arguments by relying on familiar lines of Arabic poetry, Quranic verses, moral sayings, and fables. Third, Taymur's writing is marked by what is known in Arabic criticism as “the necessity of the unnecessary” (*luzuum ma la yalzam*): the heavy use of rhymed prose and excessive employment of metaphorical style, which she uses to reveal her linguistic and stylistic mastery of the conventions of writing in Arabic (Ibrahim, 2004, 100-105). Although Taymur's writing here coincides with the stylistics of *maqama*, yet Ibrahim states that it is the purpose behind Taymur's poetics that turns *Nata'ij* into an early example of feminist poetics; namely that Taymur consciously adheres to the conventions of the predominantly Arabic literary tradition in order to prove her excellence in accordance with the prevalent literary taste and to assert her literary mastery among the male masters of writing. Moreover, and on a deeper level, both Ziyada and Ibrahim point out that Taymur's silence in her writing about the sorrows and crises in her personal life – especially the loss of her daughter at an early age – might have led her to the use of the prevalent conventions that prevent her intimate emotions from seeping into her writings had she let her writing flow without abiding by those traditional stylistic and linguistic boundaries (Ziyada, 1983, 128; Ibrahim, 2004, 105).

However, this view should not prevent us from recognising Taymur's specificity in writing her *maqama*. In the light of the *maqama* conventions specified by Daif, and Nabila Ibrahim's reading of Taymur, I wish to look more closely at aspects of innovation in Taymur's *Nata'ij*. Ziyada was perhaps the first critic to stress Taymur's innovation in *Nata'ij*, stating this in the following:

Aisha's story, with all its defects and archaisms, is a pioneer experiment in the innovative trend, particularly concerning women's literature. As far as I know, there is not one Arab woman before Aisha who has produced a complete story. This experiment of hers places her among the pioneers of this new method (Ziyada, 1983, 159).

Ziyada is critical of Taymur's adherence to the conventions of Arab fictional style, describing it as both defective and even "exhausting" in its use of the "language of *maqamaat*" (Ziyada, 1983, 158). Still, she admits Taymur's groundbreaking contribution to the tradition of women's literature as a pioneer woman fiction writer. She also acknowledges the "moral significance" of the text in its exposure of the damaging consequences of improper upbringing and inadequate education (Ziyada, 1983, 159). Although Ziyada here stresses Taymur's contribution to the genre of fictional prose and her laying the foundations for women's literature, Ziyada fails to address Taymur's groundbreaking effect in establishing a distinct voice and paving the way for women writers.

Unlike the typical *maqama* writers who specialise in the genre, and produce a series of such texts which hence become known in their plurality as *maqamaat* Al-Hamadhani, Al-Hariri or even Al-Yazaji (in reference to Nasseef Al-Yazaji of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>5</sup> it is worth noting that Taymur's *Nata'ij* is her only text of fictional prose. This in itself suggests that, unlike her predecessors, she does not seem to have wished to define herself as a *maqama* writer. First, unlike the *picaro* type protagonist of the *maqama*, Taymur's protagonist is a young future prince on a journey towards acquiring sound judgement and training in justice to become like his father, Al-Adel, a fair and just king. Moreover, as for narrative technique, each of the three *maqama* writers relies on a central narrator who is a character in the *maqama* exchanging dialogues with the protagonists: with Al-Hamadhani's Abul Fath, Al-Hariri's Abu Zayd, and Al-Yazaji's Maymun ibn Khuzam. Yet, Taymur's central narrator is not identified, as she uses an omniscient narrator whose voice merges with the author herself; additionally Taymur interweaves narration with dramatisation through the frequent use of dialogue, thus directly and intentionally giving voice to her characters. Second, while the educational value of the *maqama* lies in its elaborate style, the educational value of *Nata'ij* is not restricted to the linguistic aspect, but dominates the storyline itself. Hence instead of focusing on tricksters' successful ways of evading and avoiding trouble, Taymur's protagonist is not trained in tricksters' skills, but is rather educated so as to recognise deception and acquire the traits of nobility, equality and justice. Education is thus not merely an element of form but content as well; not limited to linguistic and stylistic prowess, but extends across moral and ethical dimensions. This leads me finally to the gender dimension in *Nata'ij* which reveals itself through the parables, fables and stories within the story, as they frequently address directly and indirectly issues of gender equality, (as will be elaborated later on below in the section on gender). Thus through a close reading of *Nata'ij*, and in the light of the *maqama* tradition, I see Taymur as a distinct voice rather than a follower; an innovator rather than an imitator. She proves to be more than an imitator writing within the confines of the *maqama* tradition, and emerges as an innovator in terms of genre, a literary educator and a pioneer of feminist poetics.

## 2. Gilman's Utopia

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* appeared in 1915, at a time when the author was already a recognised poet, writer and intellectual not only in the United States but in Europe as well. While Gilman wrote three novels in the utopian tradition, (including *Moving the Mountain* in 1911 and *With Her in Ourland* in 1916), Gilman's contribution to the genre is mostly attributed to *Herland*, which is generally considered as the "first truly feminist work in the American utopian tradition" (Lucy Freibert, 1983, 67). Similar to Taymur, Gilman was writing within the framework of an established literary genre – with all the constraints imposed by a tradition and the opportunities for subversion. *Herland* belongs to the American 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of utopian fiction, reflective of "a burgeoning sense of America as a potential utopia" with the main difference that *Herland* is set in a remote fictional place, unlike her other two utopian novels which are both set in America (Hudak, 2003, 455). In her study on feminist utopian fiction, Ann K. Mellor identifies two main modes of utopian writing: abstract utopias creating a totally imaginary inconceivable world of fantasy without seeking to promote "a programme for social change"; concrete utopias on the other hand, which present a closer-to-reality world, criticise the present society and offer an achievable vision of a better world (Mellor, 1982, 242-243). Feminism shares with utopian literature the centrality of advocating an alternative vision of the social structure, given shape through the written word: "the protest against injustice implies a vision of justice"; and by satirising the present conditions, the author is actually rejecting them as well as influencing the reader to adopt an alternative (Patai, 1983, 150). Feminist utopian writing lies at the intersection of utopian thought and feminist theory; and while Mellor considers concrete utopias to be "inherently revolutionary", she identifies feminist theory as "inherently utopian" for being "grounded

on the assumption of gender equality, a social equality between the sexes which has never existed in the historical past” (Mellor, 1982, 243).

Looking at *Herland* from this perspective, one tends to classify it as a concrete utopia, in the way in which it represents an alternative fictive world that is not absolutely unreal. Gilman, moreover, relies on the utopian literary technique of satire and, thus, offers a critique of her own (and our) patriarchal world in which equality between the sexes is undermined, while offering a prophetic vision of an ideal alternative world where human, rather than masculine, values prevail. The twelve chapters of *Herland* are about three young men whose adventure carries them to *Herland*, a country inhabited exclusively with women whose last encounter with men goes back two centuries into the past.<sup>6</sup> The three men’s attitudes towards the adventure vary greatly in accordance with their different personalities: Jeff the romantic doctor, Terry the macho businessman, and Van the scientist and narrator. Apart from the common qualities of order, intelligence, solidarity, and friendship, the Herlanders’ individuality is presented through the characters of the men’s three tutors as well as their three companions/lovers. Education and acquisition of knowledge dominate the relationship between the three men and the women of Herland, although Gilman’s scholar, Ann Lane, describes the encounter between the three men and the Herlanders strictly in terms of a “dramatic confrontation: “In *Herland* women have created a utopia without men at all. Again this world is unfolded through male eyes and a male consciousness, not in the traditional manner of dialogue, but through the dramatic confrontation that occurs when three American men stumble on an all-female society” (Lane, 1979, xiii). These lines bring to light Gilman’s emphasis on the three men’s responses to their experience, as though the Herlanders world were the norm, “unfolded” through the material, verbal, emotional and intellectual encounter between the two sexes – thus implicitly between two worlds:

Gilman presents the first encounter between the three young men and the women of *Herland* through Van’s eyes, who emerges as a reliable narrator: admitting his reliance on memory, giving voice to other characters through dialogue, and incorporating scientific evidence.<sup>7</sup> Van’s objectivity is furthered as he acknowledges the differences among the three men, as well as in relation to the women, and recounts the events from a distance – the distance created by reliance on thoughtful reflection rather than deceptive immediacy:

It makes me laugh, knowing all I do now, to think of us three boys – nothing else; three audacious impertinent boys – butting into an unknown country without any sort of a guard or defense. We seemed to think that if there were men we could fight them, and if there were only women – why, they would be no obstacle at all.

Jeff with his gentle romantic old-fashioned notions of women as clinging vines; Terry with his clear decided practical theories that there were two kinds of women – those he wanted and those he didn’t; Desirable and Undesirable was his demarcation...

And now here they were, in great numbers, evidently indifferent to what he might think, [...] , and apparently well able to enforce their purpose. (Gilman, 1979, 21)

Van here is recounting the incident based on his memory of the event together with his own analysis and reflection on the situation that brought the three men face to face with the women of Herland. Gilman makes them aware of the diminished stature, guardless and defenceless “boys” facing their own image of easily conquerable women. Added to this he comments on Jeff’s “romantic” yet masculine conception of women as subordinate creatures, and Terry’s classification of women as “desirable and undesirable.” This stereotypical representation of women is soon shattered by their realisation that Herlanders were “indifferent” in the sense of being totally free from preconceptions and prejudices, and thus approached them in the Herland spirit of female power. This subversion of the notion of male adventure is further reinforced as it is the three men who end up detained by the women, rather than falling in their hands. Later on, in “Chapter Five: A Unique History”, following their escape from detention, they realise that “[t]here were no adventures because there was nothing to fight” (Gilman, 1979, 49). Gilman here clearly subverts not only the gender power structure prevalent in the mainstream writing of her time, but as importantly subverts the genre itself in her representation of the idea of adventure.

Gilman’s innovation in as far as utopian literature, and in fact literature at large, is concerned can be further understood when reading *Herland* in the light of her essay “Masculine Literature” included in her book *Our Androcentric Culture, or The Man Made World* (1911), in which she points out women’s historical exclusion from literature both as readers and writers, stating that: “It is only lately that women, generally speaking, have been taught to read; still more lately that they have been allowed to write [...] writing was ‘masculine’ – sewing ‘feminine’”, which led to the condition where men have monopolized literature (Gilman, “Masculine Literature”, 1911). It is this masculine control that led to, according to Gilman, the predominance of two “branches” of literature: “the Story of Adventure, and the Love Story” which she describes elsewhere in the same essay in terms

of “the Adventure of Him in Pursuit of Her” (Gilman, “Masculine Literature”). Thus we can see Gilman’s effort in *Herland* to subvert these notions of adventure and love, by turning the action from one dominated by men’s successful attempts to control women, into an alternative in which the men’s adventure changes from the initial exploration of Herland, into learning about the feminine values of education, cooperation, sisterhood and motherhood, which lead to the creation of a perfect world represented by Herland. Gilman’s vision of such an alternative world is not based on gender binary opposites as much as a way of reclaiming women to humanity which includes both worlds in one. As a writer concerned with literary production, she launches criticism against men’s domination not only over the image of men in literature, but through their false representation of women, stating that “Fiction, under our androcentric culture, has not given any true picture of woman’s life, very little of human life, and a disproportioned section of man’s life” (Gilman, “Masculine Literature”). Gilman’s humanism thus comes to the forefront, revealing itself through her critique of literary genres, which she considers to have been dominated by men and having excluded women. Hence, Gilman asserts her distinct voice as a utopian writer, as well as a literary critic seeking, through the establishment of a tradition of women’s writing, to counter the marginalisation of women in history and their exclusion from literature.

Reading Taymur and Gilman along each other, both writers emerge as pioneers of women’s writing in their respective literary traditions; and it becomes clear that both of them were intentionally involved in the process of establishing a tradition of women’s writing. They both make the best use of the opportunities offered by genre, while at the same time succeed in crossing generic boundaries, and thus emerge more as innovators than imitators. Moreover, their texts reveal a critique of mainstream fictional prose: while writing from within the traditions of *maqama* in Arabic literature and utopian fiction in the United States of America, each of them expresses a distinct voice of her own. While both writers rely on narrators in their texts, their ideas and personal convictions permeate their fictional texts. Taymur is visible in *Nata’ij*, as she asserts her authorial presence first in the preamble introducing the author (and text, and then throughout the narrative as her anonymous narrator frequently quotes her poetry on several occasions, preceding the quote with phrases such as: “Here I quote Al-Taymuriyya as she says...” (Taymur, 2003, 48); “Thus says the author...” (Taymur, 2003, 79); “Consider Al-Taymuriyya’s words as she says...” (Taymur, 2003, 141, 176); “I’ll give an example from Al-Taymuriyya’s words as she says...” (Taymur, 2003, 199); and “Let me remind you of Al-Taymuriyya’s words in that respect” (Taymur, 2003, 200), among many other examples which are then followed by lines of her verse or words of wisdom explicitly attributed to her. Similarly, though more implicitly, Gilman is present in *Herland* through the sections included in her novel which move beyond the fictional into the non-fictional, particularly in the lengthy scientific commentaries made by Van, reminiscent of Gilman’s own essays and non-fictional writing. One striking example can be found in “Chapter Five: A Unique History”, where Van presents the history of Herland, and by doing so we can almost hear Van as though he were reading from a history book authored by Gilman, and reflecting her own version of the theory of evolution. Again in the light of Gilman’s humanism, while reading Van’s account of the three men’s discussion of “Human Brotherhood” and “Human Motherhood”, one hears echoes of Gilman in his conclusion that “these women were working all together at the grandest of tasks – they were Making People – and they made them well” (Gilman, 1979, 67, 69). In this sense, both Taymur and Gilman seem to use the genre of fictional writing as an accessible vehicle through which they express and disseminate their feminist thought to a larger readership and on a wider scale. It is, thus, in their choice and employment of the *maqama* and utopian fiction that both Taymur and Gilman, respectively, subvert the conventions of genre in the service of their propagation of social change.

## **Gender: masculinity and femininity revised**

### **1. Taymur’s representation of gender roles**

The story within the story structure of Taymur’s *Nata’ij* allows for a series of subplots to be introduced within the frame story. The book includes a number of stereotypical representations of men and women, mostly in the subplots which reflect dominant mainstream representations of the two sexes, in terms of masculine power as opposed to feminine passive resistance in the form of deception, cunning and covert opposition. Yet the striking example of Taymur’s alternative representation of masculinity and femininity reveals itself in her characterisation of Mamdouh the prince, and his future wife, the Persian princess Buran, whose qualities are expressed in the commentary on the process of selecting a future wife for the prince:

Marriage for a young man is the best source of distraction and the sweetest desire. Buran, the daughter of the King of Ajam (Persia), is famous for her clarity of thought, intelligence and proper management; while it is known to us how graceful and handsome he is. So, once he is captured by her love, and she by his, he

will follow her orders, and hence she becomes the best helping force in prohibiting evil and demanding reform” (Taymur, 2003, 77).

These lines’ significance lies in their portrayal of the intellectual and practical attributes of the wife to be. The selection of Buran as a future wife for the prince is not limited to her family background being herself the daughter of a king, but focuses more on her personality. This description gains particular effect in the contrast drawn between the prince and princess, as the passage presents him as “graceful and handsome” rather than the typical masculine features of courage, authority and physical strength. Furthermore, love is seen as capturing both man and woman, rather than the stereotypical image of men chasing women and capturing them into marriage. And finally, Buran is seen as a potential guide for the future king; an assistant in “prohibiting evil” and securing “reform”.

This remarkable picture of masculinity and femininity, as presented by Taymur, conveys the author’s understanding of women’s potential. One cannot however see it confined to this particular text, because a broader knowledge of the writer and her writings suggests that it is a message that she has repeatedly expressed in her other writings, and reveals her use of gender-role reversal as a technique towards an accessible way of advocating a revision of power relations between the two sexes through the striking reversal of gender roles. A similar example can be found in her epistle *Mir’aat al-ta’ammul fil-umuur* (Mirror of Contemplation, 1892), in which she again merges fiction with no-fiction, by including in her analysis of society the following parable:

A lion was too lazy to go out hunting, and was restrained by his cowardice. So he ordered the lioness to go instead of him and come back with prey. She followed his orders and things went on this way for a while. When this state went on for too long, she started hunting and eating the best portions of the food she got, while giving him whatever was left behind. The lion was furious, and considered her a source of insult and shame. So he ordered her to offer him first the best of her prey, the way things used to be in the old days. The lioness answered saying: ‘You’re in an illusion and all wrong ... That was the way things went when you were yourself and I was myself, but now the situation is reversed, so I became you and you became me. You now get what you used to give me, and I get what you used to have.’ The lion lost his argument and blamed himself for what has become of him (Taymur, 2002, 33).

A reading of these two texts against each other unquestionably suggests Taymur’s emerging vision of a society in which masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and maintained rather than being biologically determined. The relationship between the lion and lioness is presented here as based on exploitation; while the lioness is given the opportunity in the text to rebel and expose the injustice enforced on her, and her kind, throughout the years. More importantly, perhaps, the lioness’ attempt at regaining power in the relationship is successful, and the lion is left in a state of lamentation and regret. The unmistakable message conveyed by Taymur’s *Nata’ij* and *Mir’aat* is that gender-roles are neither unquestionable nor irreversible, but prove to be the outcome of socialisation and injustice – a process that deserves reconsideration and reconciliation.

## **2. Gilman’s questioning of assumptions**

Gilman has extensively discussed in her writings the representation of masculinity and femininity in the context of her more general and inclusive concept of humanity. In her introduction to *Herland*, Ann Lane comments on this idea by saying: “Gilman romps through the game of what is feminine and what is masculine, what is manly and what is womanly, what is culturally learned and what is biologically determined male-female behavior” (Lane, 1979, xiii). *Herland* clearly centres round this idea, through the characterisation of male and female figures. First of all, the three young men, despite their intellectual and emotional differences, reflect various aspects of masculinity in terms of courage, adventure and an implied superiority. From the very opening of the novel, and upon stumbling on what they acknowledge as an ideal civilization, we see them constantly (yet in vain) searching for the men whom they believe to definitely exist in such a world of order and perfection. Additionally, the women whom they encounter in Herland prove to be totally different from their stereotypical expectations of womanhood. And while the three of them see their expectations shattered, they react differently: Terry initially rejects these powerful athletic women as “undesirable”, and when he falls in love with Alima, he “made so many false starts and met so many rebuffs” (Gilman, 1979, 87), trying to “master” her leading eventually to his expulsion from Herland. Jeff’s romanticism leads him to an absolute admiration for Celis, though his attitude is driven by his idealisation of women and desire “to ‘protect’ or to ‘serve’” (Gilman, 1979, 89). Van, however, takes a more analytical stance in his relationship with Ellador, and expresses his reflections on masculinity and femininity in the following:

When we say *men, man, manly, manhood*, and all the other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities ... of men everywhere, doing everything – ‘the world’.

And when we say *Women*, we think *Female* – the sex.

But to these women, in the unbroken sweep of this two-thousand year-old feminine civilization, the word *woman* called up all that big background, so far as they had gone in social development; and the word *man* meant to them only *male* – the sex (Gilman, 1979, 137).

These lines present Van’s comparison of the notions of manhood and womanhood between our male-dominated mentality and Herlanders’ point of view. Gilman, here, cleverly juxtaposes these two worlds to question our assumptions of masculinity and femininity through the technique of reversed perspective, leading us, together with Van, to an eye-opening realisation; namely that masculinity and femininity are not fixed realities but social constructs.

Gilman’s philosophy in that respect finds direct expression in her article “As to Humanness” in which she reconsiders the notions of femininity and masculinity, arguing for the common ground shared by the two sexes – humanity:

We have been so taken up with the phenomena of masculinity and femininity, that our common humanity has largely escaped notice. We know we are human, naturally, and are very proud of it; but we do not consider in what our humanness consists; nor how men and women may fall short of it, or overstep its bounds, in continual insistence upon their special differences. It is "manly" to do this; it is "womanly" to do that; but what a human being should do under the circumstances is not thought of (Gilman, “As to Humanness”, 1911).

Reading the two extracts along each other, one gets a better understanding of Gilman’s concept of “humanness” as an alternative to the social constructions of masculinity and femininity which impose certain forms of appearance and behaviour on men and women. Such forms, Gilman argues ignore the shared qualities of humanity. Although Gilman, as well as Taymur, may seem to us now conservative in their humanistic approach to gender issues, in their criticism of foregrounding the difference between the two sexes, and seeking a more holistic view of men and women as human, it is worth pointing out that their arguments were remarkably progressive in their own socio-historical contexts, where women were by definition relegated to an inferior position based merely on their womanhood. Taymur and Gilman seem, thus, to have adopted the strategy of re-inserting women into humanity, through questioning gender-based assumptions and reversing gender roles in their fictional and non-fictional writings. By doing so, they were propagating a vision of equality and advocating social change.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Feminist Pedagogy**

Taymur lived in a historical and cultural moment marked by women’s confinement within shielded femininity – a condition that she rejected, criticised, rebelled against and countered through her writings, thus becoming a pioneer of Arab women’s modern literature. Similarly, Gilman’s world came short of her ambitions for women’s advancement. It was a reality that she resisted through her essays and literary writings, as well as through the additional opportunity she had of coming in direct contact with young generations of women through her public talks, and the lectures she was invited to give at women’s colleges. In her study of the pedagogical significance of feminist utopian writing, Libby Falk Jones states that utopian writing embodies feminist education as it achieves three feminist goals: “validating the self, encouraging innovative thinking, and fostering critical awareness” (Jones, 1990, ) – a definition that easily applies to Gilman as well as Taymur. As shown in the analysis of their fictional and non-fictional writings, their texts challenge prevalent ways of thinking and modes of expression; hence their innovative contributions to the predominant literary genres, as well as their critique of gender power relations in their respective societies. As advocates of women’s education and equality between the sexes, they assert the female self, encourage innovation and promote critical thinking.

Taymur and Gilman are recognised as pioneers of women’s literature, not only by their contemporaries, but also by feminist literary criticism. They also hold a significant position as early promoters of what has later been defined as “feminism consciousness” by Gerda Lerner, stated in the following lines:

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).

Both Taymur and Gilman have addressed the subordination of women, exposed gender power relations as socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and sought to provide alternative visions of biased social organisation. By writing, they asserted themselves in the public sphere, resisted women's marginalisation, set a model for their contemporaries and carved a literary space for following generations of women writers. Taymur and Gilman emerge as educators and activists; laying foundations for feminist pedagogy, and establishing a form of feminist activism through the written word.

Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> In a section entitled “Her Love for Her Name” of May Ziyada’s literary biography of Aisha Taymur, Ziyada states that Taymur used three versions of her name in signing her writings: her first name Aisha for her poetry in Arabic, her middle name Essmat for her poetry in Turkish and Persian, and the genitive form of Taymur (Al-Taymuriyya) for her prose (Ziyada, 1983, 92-94). Aisha Taymur, however, introduces herself in *Nata’ij* by her full name: Aisha Essmat daughter of Ismail Pasha Taymur (Taymur, 2003, 24).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations of texts and quotations from Arabic into English are done by the author of the paper.

<sup>3</sup> Buthaina Shaaban mentions Taymur twice (Shaaban, 2009, 15, 46), among a list of other Arab women writers resisting “marginalisation” and seeking “parity” at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Other pioneer fictional prose women writers of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century include Zainab Fawwaz (1846-1914), who in addition to poetry and poetic drama, published two historical novels; and Labiba Hashem (1882-1952) whose writings included short stories and novels. (For more on the early exponents of Arab women’s fiction, see: Joseph Zeidan, 1995; Ashour et al, 2008.)

<sup>5</sup> In her literary biography of the Lebanese pioneer poet Warda Al-Yazaji (born in Lebanon in 1838, then moved to Alexandria in 1899), May Ziyada points out the literary exchanges between the two contemporary Arab women: Warda Al-Yazaji (1838-1924) and Aisha Taymur (1840-1902). These exchanges take the form of poetic correspondence, as well as Al-Yazaji’s particular praise of Taymur’s *Natai’j* after having received a copy of the book as a gift from Taymur (Ziyada, 1980, 31-34). It is worth noting in this context that Warda Al-Yazaji is the daughter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal thinker and *maqama* writer Nasseef Al-Yazaji.

<sup>6</sup> In her study of utopian fiction, Daphne Patai states that she has not come across any utopias written by men, which portray a society that is composed exclusively of men, while some women writers have envisioned societies without men. She then offers an explanation of this literary phenomenon, suggesting that by creating a world without women, men would be denying men domination over a subordinate group, whereas by imaging an exclusively female world, women assert their independent identity (Daphne Patai, 1983, 164).

<sup>7</sup> Van is frequently seen reflecting on various aspects of life in Herland through a scientific lens, as he compares normative female values in Herland to the superior roles played by females compared to males in different animal species. It is in those often lengthy commentaries that Van seems to speak for Gilman who was known for her adoption of Darwinism particularly in relation to his theory of evolution by natural selection, which she embraced and used to explain women’s oppression and argue for women’s superiority. (For more on echoes of the discourses of evolution and eugenics in Gilman’s writing, see: Jennifer Hudak, 2003.)

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