

A Together Apart Corporeality: The Representation of the Female Body in Hanane El-Sheikh's the Occasional Virgin and Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the conceptualization of the female body in samples from Arab and American literatures, by virtue of the analysis of Hanane El Sheikh's *The Occasional Virgin*(2015), and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*(1963) respectively. The present investigation relies on feminist criticism traced by Simone De Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, in addition to Michel Foucault's theory of docility. As such, this paper examines the cultural boundaries, which surround the portrayal of the female body; and explores accordingly, the remote similarities and differences in the delineation of the female corporeal identity in the two novels. It furthermore, exhibits the dichotomy of female-male corporeality in socio-biological and historical contexts. Moreover, the paper signals out the various socially gendered layers that lurk behind the biological sex, wherein the overwhelming majority of cases, the existence of the female body marks the utmost presence of absence.

Keywords: Female Body; Feminism; Society; Docility; Object

INTRODUCTION

Since the early existence of humankind on Earth, men and women have been distinguished as different sexes on the basis of their distinct bodily attributes. The biological discrepancy that determines human beings as males and females entails indeed the construction of social norms that identify the two sexes in the name of 'gender'; Attributing, thus an agenda of specific social conduct to which males and females are expected to respond. Judging by this, both of men and women grow to adhere to the predetermined roles dictated by their particular society. In other words, the roles, which a person is to fulfill in his/her society, are already imposed as early as the doctor says "It is a boy" or "it is a girl". Given this fact, one's own social pursuit tends to be similar to a corporeal lottery, as it depends, largely, on the physiological characteristics one happens to be born with by chance.

Such conceptualization of gender roles is far rooted in the human history, taking different shapes in distinct societies, albeit what brings most of them to agreement is the representation of the female body as the 'lower sex' or the 'weaker sex'. In fact, females had to succumb to different forms of sexist social practices on the basis of the customary ideology of their environment. The female infanticide in the Arab zone during the pre-Islamic era, in addition to the female circumcision in different parts of Africa are striking examples of the sexually-biased traditions that stigmatize the female body, and renders it synonymous to "sexual shame".

In conformity with this, women's role is gendered in the language itself; in that some professions bear a female label, which makes them female professions exclusively. The word 'midwife', for instance, roots from the belief that this job is womanly, that now males who exercise this job are referred to as "male midwives". By contrast, literary writing was restricted to men only that women, like Mary Ann Evans, had to write under male pen-names to be taken seriously. Denying women's potential to produce literary artworks was but an objectification of their bodies, regarding them as brainless and spiritless vessels meant only to reproduce children and to take care of them. This belief was reinforced with the spread of some slogans like "**keep them pregnant and barefoot**" in the U.S.A and "**the angel in the house**" in England, these indeed emphasized the conceptualization of women's roles in the American and British societies as muted and submissive reproductive bodies.

Alongside with biological and sociological considerations, literature has in turn, lent itself to the discourse of the female body; However, the literary portrayal of the female body changes its voice according to a set of variables including the cultural environment of the text, and the writer's gender

per se. It is against this background that this paper compares between the representation of the female body in the two novels *The Occasional Virgin* (2015) and *The Bell Jar* (1963). The former is written by the Lebanese writer Hanane El sheikh; narrating the exceptional journey of Yvonne and Huda, the Christian and Muslim successful Lebanese women who endeavor to pursue their self-identification via their bodies, and to retrieve their sexual recognition, meanwhile flashbacks of their old repressed bodies haunt them. The latter, is the only novel written by the American author Sylvia Plath. It similarly details Esther's struggle with the social norms, owing to which she fails to determine her female identity and her sexual existence altogether. With consideration to this, the paper sets forth to uncover the extent to which Yvonne, Huda and Esther are similar or different, with regard to their corporeal representation in their distinct cultures.

Historical overview of the female body

In fact, tracing the exact historical background of the portrayal of the female body in the western culture, may not lead to exact chronologic scenes as most of the old texts had not survived. Nevertheless, one of earliest testimonies, which reflect the assumption that the female body has been a debatable subject since ever, can likely be traced back to the classical period in late archaic Greek civilization, notably during the Hippocratic era. This span of time had witnessed the issuing of several treatises whose core topic was the female body. Indeed these treatises tackle the female body and the human body in general from physical and medical point of views; however, such texts had largely participated in the construction of the social image of genders in the Western world. To put it differently, the physiological assumptions adopted during that time, had ostensibly developed social connotations with relation to the female body versus its male counterpart since they were seeds. With this regard, the French historian (Bonnard, 2013, p. 4) reports that the Greek treatise entitled *On the Nature of the Childen* tails that the male fetus forms within 30 days whereas the female one takes up to 48 days to form. In fact, such inductions about the early fetus' formation have implemented a social categorization of genders, which entail that the male is naturally the most powerful and the most active fetus, and thus, the most powerful and leading gender. The female sex, on the other hand, forms out of a less quick and less active seed, making her the weaker sex in the mother's womb, and subsequently the weaker gender in her social life.

The stereotyping of the female body, does not concern the newborn female only, it actually reflects gender clichés onto mothers also. To pursue this idea, some treatises indirectly yield a sexist nuance through their physiological inference. In other words, these medical theories resulted in gendered implications that presumably contributed to the reinforcement of the degradation of the female body. In this sense, (Bonnard, 2013, p. 5) quotes an ancient Greek treatise entitled *Diseases of Women* as follows: "The women who while pregnant have spots on their faces are carrying a girl, while those who have a good complexion are most often carrying a boy; when the nipples are turned upward, it is a boy; when turned downward, a girl." Such a statement, justifies that women's physical degraded status does not stem from ex nihilo; the female body can be read physically in terms of gender classifications, which denote that even a pregnant woman's body takes a shiny look if expecting a male baby while it gets deteriorated if the fetus is female. Besides, the direction of the nipples itself yields a symbolic allusion to the upper position of males, on the one hand, and to the submissive position of females, on the other hand. Such statements are summarized in Plato's declaration: "As regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (Nicholas, 1983, p. 467). By this token, a woman's body turns out to be at odds with itself due to the scientific connotations, which more or less inflict socio-cultural prejudiced forces against women. This, in turn, justifies why Aristotle would consider the female body as a mutilated form of the male body. (Nicholas, 1983, p. 468).

Apart from ordinary females, some Greek goddesses were believed to hold restricted potentials compared to their Roman counterparts, Aphrodite, for instance, was the goddess of love, beauty and sexuality only whereas her Roman equivalent Venus, other than being the goddess of the above, she was moreover the goddess of fertility and vegetation. With this regard, the Greek lack of reference to the female fertility might have been affected by Aristotle's viewpoint that women's wombs serve only as nutshells that receive the embryo. In other words, the female body is only the material cause that feeds the seed which originates in the first place from the male; accordingly, the male body is regarded as the efficient cause that intrigues the embryo to move to the female (Bonnard, 2013, p. 5). The denial of women's true reproductive potential is but an instance among many other presumed physiological

treatises that shaped the socio-cultural and philosophical depictions of genders in ancient Greece. The latter has fashioned the conceptualization of the female body, and the female gender in different cultures, namely the western one.

With regard to female beauty, the Greek equivalent to the word “beautiful” is “kalos”. This term not only refers to physically appreciated norms, but it also hints at moral qualities. Thence, a beautiful woman is by nature noble and upright while a woman who does not fit into the defined beauty norms is prejudicially degraded in terms of morals and social status. Accordingly, the female body is considered as a material discourse of the discursive female identification; the psychological, spiritual and social attributes of a woman were defined particularly with reference to her corporeal entity as though they were standing statutes. By this token, art with its different branches has had its impact on molding the female body into specific shapes. (Lovano, 2019, p. 76) observes, in this sense, that the sculpture of Aphrodite of Cnidus “had become the ideal of the female beauty and physical perfection in Greek culture”. Hence, painters and sculptors were granted handy means to formulate their own versions of the beautiful female body; as a result, they participated in re-creating and dictating their own codes of beauty and feminine traits.

Historical archives of ancient Rome also, hold records of the female beauty standards that continue to pertain to the modern day beauty criteria; this illustrates those women’s efforts to preserve their femininity are as old as the ancient Roman civilization. This is presumably due to the medical interpretations, which in part, fashioned the female social representation, and designed a typical silhouette to which the female corporeal appearance should correspond. With this regard, Jacob Hammer describes the predictable ancient Roman beauty criteria as follows: “The Romans expected a beautiful woman to have a tiny nose, beautiful legs, a well-developed tapering hand, with long tapering fingers, and golden or auburn hair” (Bowen, 1940, pp. 20-22). As a matter of fact, the keyword in the above quote is the verb ‘expected’, which entails that degrees of femininity and female beauty standards were already pre-determined by the surrounding socio-cultural context. This premise calls to mind Benhabib and Cornell’s statement: “It is the way that anatomy is socially invested that defines gender identity and not the body itself”. (Martin Alcoff, 2005)

Driven by the social desire to fit into the norms of the idealized body (Bowen, 1940, p. 20), states that Roman women created shiny skin recipes to exhibit their beauty and to preserve it altogether. Examples include the use of threads and needles to insure beautiful hairdos, in addition to the invention of artificial brows and curls, besides the fabrication of mascara and anti-aging facial masks like “tectorium” and “lumentum” (Bowen, 1940, p. 20).

Nevertheless, beauty is in part, insured at the expense of women’s comfort and health. In this sense, the female body was condemned to the application of unpleasantly toxic or dangerous substances that enabled them to correspond to the socially imposed standards. This includes the use of chalk, white lead, lead oxide and lampblack to guarantee white skin, rosy cheeks and blackened eyes in ancient Greece (Lovano, 2019, p. 332). Similarly, the use of powdery ash on lids and lashes caused women to experience eyelid infections in ancient Rome (Bowen, 1940, p. 20). In addition to the deforming foot binding in China, painful teeth blackening in Japan, neck elongating in some regions of Asia and Africa, and deadly belladonna eye drops during the Elizabethan era to name a few.

Many of these painful and dangerous practices had been deemed illegal; however, societies and cultures continued to expect women to fit into the already designed qualities. Therefore, other misogynist habits have, instead, seized the female beauty scene and continued to maneuver the female body until the present day. One of the harmful praxes, which began approximately by the Victorian age and continue to be exercised by women, as a response to their subsequent cultures, is the use of corset. In terms of science, the latter engages women to experience breathing difficulty, in addition to organ displacement and deformation risks. Since then, the Obsession with the ideal body has continued to reach all extremes and odds; Examples include strict dieting styles that lead to anorexia, liposuction, fat lifting, plastic surgeries, lip removal, Botox injections and toxic artificial beauty articles. All of these, in addition to many other ideal body practices, have indeed turned women’s body into a constructed scaffold.

By virtue of this, women have inherently participated in instilling the social objectification of their body; this explains why second wave feminism lent itself to women’s self-determination in terms

of bodily and sexual identifications. With reference to this, the 1968 protests against the Miss America pageant were an opportunity for second wavers to throw away bras, eyelashes, wigs, and other artificial beauty elements in a freedom trash bin. This came as a rebellion to overthrow patriarchal beauty standards, and to set women free from the norms that imprisoned their bodies in a culturally shaped frame. Ever since, the call for freedom of the western female body has continued to demonstrate itself at different layers including literature. With regard to the latter, the American author Sylvia Plath stands as one of the major literary figures who contributed in the formation of the female corporeal identity, and in the recreation of femininity altogether.

In the Middle Eastern sphere, Hanane El Sheikh stands as one of Plath's Arab counterparts who have also put the female body under scrutiny within the Arab context. Although El-sheikh's literary testimony is modern, myriad cultural practices, which fashioned the female body in the Arab world have existed centuries ago. Examples include the Nile virgin bride sacrifice in ancient Egypt, the female infanticide in the pre-Islamic Arab peninsula, the female circumcision in Egypt and Sudan, and sealed hymens or the "Tasfih" rite in Algeria, to name a few. Such rituals, among other patriarchal practices, have long served to empower the perpetual harnessing of Arab women's body into socially mirrored standards. Writers like El-Sheikh and Plath accordingly, sought to act against the physical misogynist ideals that hinder women from the true performance of their corporeal identification.

The historically-rooted norms related to the female body, beauty and sexuality, be them in the Western or the Arab cultures, reflect the accumulations of the different socially-consented clichés inflicted on the female gender in the name of biology. With reference to gender and biology, it is worth taking into account the female/male and female/woman binary juxtapositions.

The body from sex to gender

The expression gender roles had not been known until 1955, when the psychologist and sexologist John Money coined it, neither had the expression gender identity been known until the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Robert J Stoller issued it in 1968. It is on the basis of the evidence that the two figures who initiated the labels of gender discourse were specialized in psychology and psychiatry, that scholars like Jennifer Germon concluded the premise that the appearance of the term gender was in the first place merely medical. Hence, it primarily had neither social nor feminist nuances (Cortez, Gaudenzi, & Maksud, 2019, p. 3).

The postulation entailing the association of gender to medicine exclusively, cannot deny the truth that the placement of gender in a social context sounds more pertinent. To express this differently, Money held the view that it is by virtue of environmental surroundings and biological traits that a person's identity is defined as male or female. Moreover, Stoller has it that sex is a biological state while gender is a cultural one, and they together identify the person's being. By this token, the notion that gender is a socially constructed signified based on biological attributes, has long existed before the term gender itself was invented. Hence both of Money and Stoller had only named a concept that had already manifested itself via various aspects of life.

In conformity with this, gender is to culture as sex is to nature; gender is regarded as a social attribute, and a culturally determined identification projected onto individuals on account of sex. In this sense, Julia Kristeva introduced her dichotomy of the semiotic/symbolic instead of the traditional sex/gender discrepancy. Much like the De Saussurian dichotomy of signified/ signifier, Kristeva reiterates the representation of nature as the semiotic and culture as the symbolic (Reineke, 1997, p. 39), hence being feminine is the semiotic expression while being a woman is the symbolic order of it. In other words, Kristeva argues that being feminine entails primarily the notion of maternity, which is essentially a role pre-designed for women by nature, before any cultural positioning would be concluded. She therefore, denies the hypothesis that gender is social construct and that women's identity stems out of the social framing of sex.

Such a premise may be exhibited via Yvonne's excessive innate determination to experience maternity by virtue of the natural order of her female body and her feminine desire, apart from any culturally dictated rules of maternity as a female social role. In this sense, EL-Shaykh states: "she shouted, laughed, cried and cursed, because she wasn't in a relationship, and because she was scared she would never have a child" (Cortez, Gaudenzi, & Maksud, 2019, p. 91). Therefore, Yvonne's intense urge for motherhood is by no means socially or culturally oriented, it is rather bound to her innate biological desire with consideration to her bodily potential of maternity. On the other hand, Esther is afraid of the very notion of maternity, yet she, at the same time, is terrified from her unmaternal state (1966:234). The fact that Esther is worried about her denial and rejection to

maternity, leads her to deem herself to be odd while looking at mothers taking care of their children.

This indeed is but a proof that maternity is by nature deeply rooted within the female regardless of cultural jurisdictions. To pursue with culture, Esther's neighbor Dodo, a mother of seven children, goes against Kristeva's hypothesis that maternity stems out of the biological entity of the female, and that the female identity is to be by no means, socially defined. To put it differently, Dodo's excessive number of children, contrarily to other mothers in the neighborhood, is according to Esther a response to the Catholic order to which Dodo should adhere (Plath 123). Thereby, maternity for characters like Dodo is a combination of the semiotic discourse and the symbolic identification.

Nevertheless, unlike sex and gender, the semiotic and symbolic do not come in binary distinctions due to the fact that signification stems from both layers as argues Kristeva. It is only by virtue of developing speech and turning into the "I" subject that the individual shifts from the semiotic to the symbolic (Anderson, 2006, p. 95). Her argument entails also the assumption that when regarding maternal function of the body it is essential to set the fulfillment of the child's needs apart from love and desire. So the binary distinction of male/female is not pertinent to this account. Accordingly, maternity as argues Kristeva, can be fulfilled by both of men and women on the basis of "the speaking body" apart from the sexual and cultural standards (D'Alleva, 2005, p. 100).

With this regard, Kristeva's notion of the maternal body seemingly meets with Judith Butler's argument: "Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies." (Doring, 1999, p. 345). It is in this spirit that Simone De Beauvoir's statement: "One is not born, but becomes a woman" is recalled. De Beauvoir's argument is used to opposite ends; in other words, gender according to her is a combination of determinism and free will. To be more explicit, her assertion entails that individuals hold some agency in positioning themselves as women throughout time, albeit this does not annihilate the cultural construction of gender in the process of shift into womanhood. This implicitly implies that the female body is not exactly synonymous to womanhood; therefore, such a premise leaves room for females to act as another gender other than being women. Her account; however, does not refer to the basis of gender on sexual grounds; the statement which goes like "one is not born, but becomes a woman" instead of "the female is not born, but becomes a woman", entails that this "one" could indeed be female or male.

With respect to the transformation towards womanhood, Esther has to go through a transitional phase characterized by physical, spiritual and mental turmoil before she could reach into her real identity and perceive the woman she is, stating repeatedly: "I am, I am, I am" (Plath, 1963, p. 256). On the other hand, Huda's path towards womanhood is particularly contradictory with itself; in the quest to be her own self and to accept her female body, Huda declares: "I want to be a man" (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 109). According to Huda, the only way to become fully woman is to be a man. In this sense, the narrator states "Huda's short hair, her eyes free of Kohl or eyeshadow, her unplucked eyebrows and bare skin, made some of the young women become infatuated with her, while the local youths thought she was competing with them for the women and remarked when they saw her: Do you dress to the right or the left, for we can't see it at all?" (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 109)

Huda experiences a physical intermingled identity on her way to womanhood, conforming thus to De Beauvoir's assertion that womanhood is more of a decision and a transitional experience than a static biological sex. It is in this spirit that De Beauvoir's notion of the body is recalled; she has it that the body is not a thing, but a situation lived in a social context (Worsfold, 2011, p. 92). Therefore, sex does not count as much as does gender, though the latter is accordingly, said to be the result of the historical conventions built over the body and the cultural constructions related to its predetermined acts. With respect to the perception of the body as a situation lived in a particular social condition, which results in the identification of gender, Huda's boyfriend states after a sexual intercourse where Huda takes total control of the scene: "you're a witch! I have to admit you made me feel as if I was the female" (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 70). Such an assertion reveals the socially attributed roles to male and female bodies; the male being the active body, and the female being the disabled and subordinate agent in whatsoever bodily manifestation. Furthermore, the fact that the man felt as though he were the woman because his body was passive and subordinate, this validates De Beauvoir's assumption that the body attributes particular genders according to the specific contexts where it is placed. Judging by this, gender is not a static condition, nor is the body, be it male or female. Hence, Kristeva's statement in her famous interview "Women can never be defined" may in fact, be said to apply to men too.

Huda, Yvonne and Esther as Docile bodies

(Foucault, 1975, p. 136) Defines docile bodies as those, which “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”. According to this account, Huda’s, Yvonne’s and Esther’s bodies might be identified as docile, for they were at least manipulated, used, shaped or transformed. Indeed, the three women did not experience the same form of docility, not at least at the same exact scale; nevertheless, each of them succumbed to a particular form of bodily domination with regard to their subsequent cultures. The latter indeed affect the conceptualization of the body, furthermore they draw its societal limitations, as Foucault puts it: “In every society the body was the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations” (Foucault, 1975, p. 136). With reference to this premise, Foucault, reveals a set of authoritative powers i.e. the disciplines that procure docility over the body. These in fact, are the group of powers by virtue of which bodies are dominated, subjected and disabled, with regard to the docility-utility equation. To be more explicit, the rules that dictate the utility of the body define the degree of its docility, this is what Foucault labeled as ‘the control of activity’.

The first mechanism of the control discipline is identified as ‘the time-table’. It regards the settlement of rhythm of particular activities in terms of time and space in addition to the establishment of particular occupations via the regulation of the circles of repetition. With regard to the female body, this power mechanism applies to (Tseelon, 1995, p. 82) statement “: While both sexes dread ageing, it is the woman who is expected to prevent it”. Pertinently, age may be deemed as a restricted timetable that limits women’s capacity of re-productivity. Huda’s narration of Yvonne’s struggle against time to experience motherhood is a striking instance of the forces of the timetable mechanism. She reports “: The doctor who urged her to have a child before it was too late.” (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 91). At this stage, Yvonne can be said to reveal the pressure cast on the female body by social norms, which restrict women’s role to re-productivity. The female body, in this case, is placed under the control of timetable, which traps women in the hysteria of the dysfunctional body at a certain age.

In addition to the above, the mechanism of timetable encompasses power tactics that regulate body activities across space also. In this sense, Huda’s body experiences a certain degree of docility when her family restricts her from going to the sea, as well as to the covered swimming pool dedicated to women, nor do they allow her to visit the European-like side of Beyrouth (El-SHaykh, 2015, pp. 12-13). Regardless of Huda’s rebellious character, space power tactics prove to be indestructible whenever she attempts to defy them. To put it differently, Huda wishes to break free from the chains that society put over her body in terms of places, yet she somehow succumbs, to this power-mechanism by restricting herself from being out of the allowed space. In an instance where Huda is invited to swim, she feels paralyzed and replies: “I’ve got a book...you go and swim” (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 5). Huda is not truly interested in reading; she simply evades admitting that she cannot step out of the physical allowed zone where she has long been confined. This example is evidence that space mechanisms strongly seize individuals even if they no longer belong to the society which imposes them.

In another instance, a man interrupts Huda’s debate in a Park and aggressively declares “: And remember, your place is in the kitchen, not here.” (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 104). This declaration not only reflects the society’s restriction to women, in terms of particular positions and places. Furthermore it highlights the postulation that the control of activity, with regard to space, results in docile bodies, for it reinforces the physical constraints set around individuals; namely women.

In this sense, Yvonne also appears to have her share of the space power tactics; this is especially revealed when her mother bans her from diving deeper than her brother. To illustrate this stance, at a moment when Yvonne swims deeper than him, her mother shouts “: You’ve humiliated your eldest brother. Destroyed him. Castrated him.” (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 25). Accordingly, diving deeper than a man is a humiliation to his manhood, and to the social expectations of his male body. Hence, Yvonne’s allowed space is measured by her brother’s capacity, for she is allowed a space a little behind him. Such an argument exhibits the body-disabling prohibitions repeatedly imposed by society, as a medium to regulate and distribute power among individuals. Nonetheless, the aforementioned quote not only exhibits the space limitations used against the female body, it furthermore reflects the pressure put on males. By way of explanation, male bodies are also forced in terms of place, for they are compelled to surpass the physical space that females can attain.

The second category of the Foucauldian theory is the temporal elaboration of the act. It concerns the adjustment of the body to temporal activities. This brings to mind Esther's assertion "the Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made a cover girl out of her." (Plath, 1963, p. 7). The fact that Betsy is set as cover girl with short hair, is a manner of adjusting other women to imitate Betsy as a prevalent beauty standard; exactly as Foucault refers to soldiers in marching troops imitating the soldier in the front line by repeating the same gestures, manners and movements. Pertinently, Esther herself experiences this control mechanism when she is invited to dance and replies that she cannot, but Marco insists saying "You don't have to dance. I'll do the dancing." (Plath, 1963, p. 112). Marco's statement applies directly to the control of activity, where he is the leading agent and Esther only imitates his moves and gestures. Esther continues the narration of the manipulation of her body, as she states "Marco's leg slid forward against mine and my leg slid back and I seemed to be reverted to him, limb for limb, moving as he moved, without any will or knowledge of my own, and after a while I thought, 'It doesn't take two to dance, it only takes one'." (Plath, 1963, p. 112). Esther in this precise case reincarnates an extreme docility; she gives in her own gestures and instead lends her body to echo other moving bodies around it, with the same exact rhythm, length and duration of movements.

Another pertinent mechanism of body manipulation is the exhaustive use. This tactic states that men are traditionally banned from time wasting. In other words, time equals force and activity; hence, a time wasted equals energy and economy wasted. This belief affirms the necessity to take out as many moments of activity as possible from the least time (Foucault, 1975, p. 154). Such a mechanism measures time according to a tempo of achievements, not according to the regular hourly system. Accordingly, bodies are accustomed to a restricted schedule of a set of activities, which exhaust time to the maximum. Given this, Roberto tells Yvonne the story of the woman who exhausted her time in making the tablecloth "A young woman from this town embroidered it and she kept postponing her marriage until she reached the final stitch, and it was too late for her to marry. Can you imagine? She was only twenty." (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 67). Apart from the sarcasm about the constraints cast on women with regard to their age, this statement exemplifies the exploitation of the female body within a continuous circle of time.

To continue with the Foucauldian mechanisms of disabled bodies, Foucault has metaphorically theorized the concept of the Panopticon with regard to the social regulation of discipline. The Panopticon is an architectural pattern, which enables guards to see the inmates from a vantage in a high tower, while the latter cannot see them back; hence, prisoners cannot know when they are being watched, and when they are not. This architectural design aims at serving as an omnipresent violence-free control tactic, which restricts all the aspects of the individuals' life. In other words, this form of building instills a delusion of constant observation that obliges prisoners to fit into the social consensus of discipline. With this regard, a man called Tahir at London Park reports stories of the restrictions related to many disciplines and behavior patterns. He reports for instance that an Arab shaykh forbade girls to wear the brand NIKE shoes, for it translates to a pejorative word in Arabic, he also banned them from driving, for it damages their ovaries (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 94). He furthermore, refers to the woman who banned girls from sitting on chairs or sofas, for it may intrigue anyone to have sex to them (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 94). In another instance, a woman addresses Huda saying "I don't like the way you're standing there with your chest uncovered. A woman should be modest, even in front of her husband." (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 137). These instances indeed reflect the public and private positioning of the female body in a Panopticon-like society where everyone watches them and controls their bodies. The last instance reveals the ubiquitous spread of the Panopticon from Lebanon to London; although Huda leaves Lebanon, yet the restrictions of her native culture still peruse her body, not only to a foreign country, but also to her house, and to her room along with her husband in precise terms.

It is worth of mention that throughout the two novels, the tactics of body constraints happen to be exclusively restricted to the female body, which reflects the social tendency in applying mechanisms of prohibitions to trap the female body in docility. Moreover, despite the fact that Esther belongs to the culture of the West on the one hand, and Yvonne and Huda belong to the Middle Eastern culture, on the other hand, they, along with other minor characters, have succumbed to different degrees of disability and docility with regard to their bodies.

Abject femalebodies:

In 1982, Julia Kristeva published a book entitled *Power of Horror* where she introduced the concept of the abject. The latter is a theory that has to do with the complex analysis of identity, transformation and escape. In this sense, Kristeva states “: Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be”. (Beardsworth & Kristeva, 2012, p. 83). Given this, the mere being of a body depends on its separation from other bodies; this explains, in turn, why all of Esther, Yvonne and Huda struggle for separation, in their quest to reinforce their corporeal identity. In fact, the three characters experience different forms of separation from a particular body, be it a person, a place, or a situation; however, what brings them all together is the pursuit of separation per se.

The abject is said to begin with the struggle to separate oneself from the maternal body (Oliver, 1993, p. 56). In this case, the body goes through a transitional phase where it is neither, the object i.e. the other, nor the subject i.e. oneself, in which case, the body is said to be the “abject”. At this exact stage, the body struggles to develop a secure space where it ensures its being and differentiates itself from other bodies on the one hand, and more importantly, fights whatever may menace the settlement of that space, on the other hand. With this regard, the abject, from a feminist perspective, may be interpreted as the body that seeks emancipation from other bodies and escapes restrictions, which threaten that emancipation to take place. Accordingly, Esther, Yvonne and Huda embody a degree of abjection as regards the struggle to set a space that separates them from the threat of being reincarnated and mirrored by other bodies. The body in this case, may refer to bodies as a physical presence, or to norms and restrictions, which individuals strive to cast off.

It is by this token that Huda separates herself from the maternal body by refusing to be a replica of her submissive mother. She instead opts for a total corporeal transition from adopting the bodily restrictions set on her mother and other women in her society, to an emancipated body according to her personal norms. This shift is apparent through the following statement “: That day she began covering her hair from genuine conviction. All that showed were her hands. Her dress reached well below her knees. She no longer felt weighed down like before and tried to be passive, like her mother and most of the girls in the family.”(El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 74). In contrast, she reaches the abject phase through sexual experiences, that a man comments “: you’re as liberated as any Western woman, if not more so”(El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 70). This transformational phase; however, is as difficult as is the detachment from the maternal body. To illustrate this, in a scene in Italy, in between the two above scenes, Huda is presumably detached from the burdens of her culture, yet she discovers that she does not feel comfortable about getting undressed at the beach (El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 5). Although no social restraints are imposed on her, Huda is uneasy about undressing, which suggests that her body is still trapped between the other and the self, in other words she is captivated in abjection.

Yvonne, who is also Lebanese, does not experience the same level of abjection as Huda; she undresses easily because she has not been through such bodily restrictions in her Christian culture. Nevertheless, she escapes different forms of threat that hinder her transitional process. As soon as Yvonne’s body develops into a real female silhouette, she begins her transitional journey from the object to the subject. As a reaction to cast off her mother’s manipulative rules, which mirror her ideals into Yvonne’s body, she dives from the forbidden rock to identify her potential according to her physical capacity, and not according to her mother’s standards. Yvonne manages to surpass her brother’s corporeal achievement in swimming, nonetheless, she continues to be haunted by the ideas that her mother instills about the superiority of the male body. As a reaction to identify her body apart from her mother’s norms, Yvonne declares “: Perhaps now I ought to buy sperm and have a child”(El-SHaykh, 2015, p. 193). At this stage, Yvonne’s will to be impregnated without a man’s bodily performance with hersetsherin an abject position where she no longer distinguishes her body from that of men.

In fact, Esther is a particular case, for her inability to identify herself, apart from others stems from her mental state more than from external forces. Esther imagines herself captivated in a bell jar, as a metaphor for her urge for freedom. In other words, Esther stands between the impulse for detachment from her mental delusion, and social constraints on the one hand and her wish to be physically emancipated, on the other hand. As a result of failing to manage any of the two

situations, she attempts to commit suicide, as to escape from her obscured position. Accordingly, Esther urges to disable her body, so she would finally be able to identify it, and distinguish others from herself. With this regard, Esther's boundaries between herself and others appear to be so blurry that she cannot differentiate between the object and subject, consequently, she ends up sees herself through others in a highly abject situation. To illustrate this idea, Esther sees the image of her successful self in other ideal women, like her teachers, in addition to the famous writer Philomena Guinea, Ee Gee the magazine editor, and her Friends Betsy and Doreen. Her body accordingly turns into a hub of identities, and the only way to dissolve herself from them is to put an end to it. At this very level of escape, Esther is captivated in an abject situation; Esther's state of denial of her bodily boundaries blocks her from crossing the line separating the object from the subject. Eventually, it is only when she isolates her body from her mental delusions and escapes from mirroring herself into others that she eventually reiterates "I am, I am, I am"(Plath, 1963, p. 256), as to ensure the establishment of her transition from abject to subject at last.

Conclusion:

The disabling of the female body is as old as is human history; this is especially true owing to historical proofs from different cultures and civilizations, which reflect women's endeavor to seek social satisfaction by responding to gender roles and beauty standards at the expense of bodily comfort and health. Not only that, but the degradation of females is justified in scientific terms; in that, the underestimation of their body begins as soon as the female embryo is detected. This suggests that gender stereotypes, and social classifications begin with one's formation in the womb; hence, individuals, be them males or females, are faced with predetermined roles dictated by social forces since birth. Nonetheless, despite the facts that male bodies are also put under social pressure, female bodies are still deemed less important, less powerful and more devalued. This biased consideration has indeed established social roles and body potential criteria, which have prevailed from ancient times until the present day.

Moreover, regardless of the cultural aspects that produce a myriad of various tactics, which limit the female body in terms of social performance, the classification of women at the second layer of the social categorization compared to men is what happens to be common among many individuals in different societies. This explains why Esther, Yvonne and Huda, who are all brilliant, educated and well-read, are still agonized by their body, for the latter forms a social burden that annihilates their success and their being at all. In other words, the social debasing of the female status is founded on mere biological grounds; hence, the female body succumbs to a process of disability, or as Foucault calls it "docility", wherein the female body is commanded like a marionette by authoritative mechanisms and social limiting tactics.

Above all, women happen to experience an agnostic phase where they fail to identify their bodies and set them apart from other surrounding bodies because of the omnipresence of authoritative forces around them. This, not only engenders an identity crisis because of which women cannot differentiate themselves from others; it furthermore establishes a sense of bodily dependency, where women are validated only if they reincarnate someone else's corporeal identity. Consequently, the female body continues to be in an everlasting subordination, which stems from a long history that began with the link between the biological status and social controlling mechanisms.

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