

# Confessions of the Mad Wife:

## A Study of the Role of the Madwoman in Assad Fouladkar's film *Lamma Hikyit Maryam*

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She is desperate and bitter, she believes in superstition, she is an outcast gone mad, and above all she is dead: Maryam, the narrator of Assad Fouladkar's 2001 feature film *Lamma Hikyit Maryam*, is yet the only source of information available to the viewers. From her small empty room in the clinic where she has been kept and where she is receiving her psychiatric treatment, Maryam breaks her silence to tell the story of her failing marriage and her gradual breakdown, which eventually lead to her death. Using the Lebanese local dialect as its main language, *Lamma Hikyit Maryam* or *When Maryam Spoke Out* tells the story of the struggle and suffering of Maryam, a young woman who is rejected by her beloved husband and condemned by the rest of her society only because she is infertile. Fouladkar's *Lamma Hikyit Maryam* renders justice to the incriminated and silenced Maryam by presenting the woman's perspective and by exposing the dilemmas she lived through as she was trying to adapt to the harsh laws set by contemporary Arab societies.

In brief, *Lamma Hikyit Maryam* tells the story of Ziad and Maryam, a blissfully happy couple who, after three years of marriage, discover that Maryam is infertile. At first, Ziad is compassionate; he assures Maryam that he loves her regardless of her infertility. Although Maryam consults several doctors who unanimously confirm her infertility, she doesn't give up easily. Then, her simple-minded mother convinces her to visit Abu al-Faraj, a person who is commonly believed to have hidden powers and who might find the cure using some kind of spell. Meanwhile, Ziad starts to consider adoption as an option, but his mother quickly interferes, explaining to her son that adoption is against Islamic law, and that he has the right to have a child of his own, especially since he is not the one with an infertility problem. Ziad's mother also explains to Maryam that the only reason Ziad is still with her is because he pities her; Ziad has the right to have a child of his own even if this means marrying another woman. In a culture where infertile women are considered inferior and incomplete, the idea of divorce gradually takes hold of Ziad who starts insinuating it to Maryam. Unable to escape the increasing familial and social pressures and afraid of losing the love of Ziad, Maryam accepts that he marry another woman who can bear his child. Convinced that Ziad's marriage to another woman is for the mere goal of conceiving a child and that he will be back with her when the mission is accomplished, Maryam accompanies Ziad to choose a bride, and she even attends his wedding party. However, she soon realizes that Ziad's marriage is as real and painful as her divorce, mainly when his new wife Souraya turns out to be pregnant. In a world where she is doomed to loneliness, Maryam finds in her unconditional love for Ziad a reason to

live. But the disappointments caused by Ziad's abandonment, her mother's death, and the fact that Abu al-Faraj is a charlatan, gradually lead to her insanity. Maryam is then sent into confinement in a local asylum where she reacts by deciding not to talk, believing that talk is useless. Shortly afterwards, Maryam dies, leaving Ziad a video tape and a note in which she asks that he wash and bury her dead body according to the Muslim ritual.

Although the story in *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* corresponds to the classical storyline of the mad woman that goes back at least to Euripides's *Medea*, the rather modern representation of the film's plot is somehow unusual, creating a challenging yet powerful effect. In other words, the work gives voice to the usually-silenced madwoman whose story is, in most fictions where she was featured such as the silent monster-like Bertha in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, mediated through the point of view of other characters. In *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* however, Maryam is no longer presented as a voiceless, victimized, and alienated human being; rather, she is given the chance to speak for herself and tell her own story from her "mad" point of view.

In what follows I wish to examine the particular role of the madwoman in *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* and illustrate how the film problematizes the notion of madness to convey by the same token the incongruities at the heart of patriarchal societies. *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* does not simply offer Maryam a voice to speak for herself; in fact, the film gives its protagonist the chance to literally face and address the audience. Throughout many scenes in the film, Maryam defies the common notion of madness by coming across as a complex human being who's not only in control of her actions but most importantly can control how her audience sees her.

First, the character of Maryam challenges the canonized notions and the social biases through which the woman is generally represented by exposing the processes of meaning-construction that the other characters in the film are engaged in. In fact, one of the effects of ideology is to make the cultural (and therefore changing) signifiers look natural and therefore indisputable (Barthes, 1992). For instance, infertile women in a society such as Maryam's are looked upon as inferior and labeled as incomplete as though such views or judgments are natural and unquestionable. Also, films very often embody some ideological practices whereby the woman is constructed as "eternal, unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed images and meanings" (Kuhn, 1993, p. 77), ideas that Maryam relentlessly tries to challenge and escape. In Fouladkar's film, Maryam's infertility transforms her into an outcast that her family and other members of the society label as "incomplete". In a dense conversation she has with her son, Ziad's mother uses a synecdoche to refer to Maryam: in the eyes of her mother-in-law, Maryam is "an incomplete body" (i.e. *Jesma na'is*). The use of this metonymical expression, whereby an important aspect of a fictional character is emphasized, illustrates how Maryam, as a result of her infertility, is no longer seen as a complete human being. Maryam is consistently described by a single body part; her whole being is sadly reduced to a bodily condition, which eventually becomes a substitution for her as a whole. Ziad's mother, like many in her society, believes that infertility means imperfection. This definition of infertility is the result of the fixed ideology that governs the individual's thinking activities and makes such ideas appear natural and legitimate. As a result, the general perception of Maryam, whether from

the society or her family, becomes conditioned by the value placed on her lacking biological condition.

Despite her social condemnation, Maryam challenges the fixed image of the incomplete woman set by her society and presents herself as a thinking being with complex and logical thoughts. More particularly, Maryam strives to show that her infertility does not reduce her to an alienated, mad person (a connection that is usually made in her patriarchal society). On the contrary, she projects the complex, psychological side of herself. She even strikes viewers with her awareness of her unstable mental state, especially when she admits at one point that she has suffered from a nervous breakdown and had to be treated in a medical institution. By talking about her breakdown, Maryam draws attention to her self-consciousness and awareness of her condition and shows the viewers that she is not just a mad woman placed in an asylum, but that she is fully aware of her condition.

Maryam's complex character is also conveyed in a very touching scene towards the very end of the film, where she addresses Ziad and bitterly calls him, "You madman!" (i.e. *Ya majnun!*). In her ironic statement, the insane Maryam, who is in a mental asylum, calls another person, who is not in an asylum, insane. For the first time, Maryam does not call Ziad by his name; her words are profound and intriguing, for it is unusual for a mad person to call other people mad. If Ziad is mad, then what would you call Maryam who is a patient in the mental asylum?

In fact, by calling Ziad insane, Maryam defies the common definition of insanity and calls for a reconsideration of the term. Maryam problematizes the notion of madness and shows that it is an equivocal term: if madness means insanity, then what act would be more insane than condemning a person for being infertile? Maryam's unconditional love for Ziad and her inability to accept that he take another wife are quite logical and expected reactions on behalf of a heartbroken woman. Arguably, the only insane act, which happens to be a naturalized truth in Maryam's society, is to divorce a woman or judge her in terms of her biological condition the way Maryam is judged. With her ironic statement, Maryam draws a line between her and the rest of the society, enabling herself to question from her outcast point of view the social norms and laws that are usually perceived as natural.

Consequently, many questions are raised concerning Maryam's mental condition. Although she is in a mental asylum, Maryam's point of view in most of the scenes is valid and convincing, and it seems that there is a kind of truth in her madness, especially in her implicit criticism of the dominant social ideology. By addressing Ziad and calling him mad, Maryam is indirectly addressing the patriarchal society that the character of Ziad represents. Also, Maryam's words come from the heart of an angered, frustrated, and infuriated woman who has suffered from the unjust laws of patriarchy. As a result, Maryam becomes, just like Charlotte Brontë's famous madwoman Bertha, the "repressed dark double" (Gilbert, 1979, p. 360) embodying the voice of every repressed woman living under the pressures of patriarchy. Therefore, the insane character of Maryam in the film is an intentional rhetorical device employed to challenge the coerciveness of dominant thinking and to show that notions such as sanity and insanity are equivocal terms that are used to label and classify people in an attempt to preserve social order.

Nevertheless, *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* does not lead us to dislike or even blame Ziad for Maryam's death; in fact, the film presents Ziad as a pivotal character who surrenders to the pressures of his society and who chooses to live his life the way it is "supposed to be lived". For him, marrying another woman seems to be the only natural option a man can choose when his wife is infertile. It is not a coincidence that he works at a copy center; indeed, Ziad's job is a concrete reflection of his life. In other words, Ziad's life is a copy of the life his mother and the society in general has conceived for him. Just like his job where there is no chance for individuality nor creativity, Ziad's life is a fixed image that copies other people's lives and expectations. He does not see another option than to accept the life that is envisioned for him.

If Ziad is to be blamed, it is only for being too passive and for indisputably yielding to the naturalized laws of his society without questioning them. For instance, he chooses to marry another woman without thinking whether this decision is suitable for both of them, or whether it would hurt Maryam's feelings and affect her life. However, Ziad only realizes this fact when Maryam dies, and it is then that he also acknowledges her as his wife after he has shunned her for a long time. The tears that he sheds at the end of the film finally awaken him to reconsider his beliefs, his society, and his life. Indeed, Ziad realizes the important role that Maryam plays in his life. Maryam's death triggers Ziad's awakening to face and accept the consequences of his acts; before her death, Ziad never took responsibility for his actions: he never apologized for breaking her heart, for not sticking to their former plan where he would not leave her, and for abandoning her. Ironically, it is only after her death that he wakes up and feels regret.

Finally and most importantly, Maryam challenges the traditional concepts of male gaze and power. In a patriarchal society where women are generally perceived as objects and are constantly subjected to scrutiny, Maryam defies the laws of such society and attempts to retaliate in the scenes of storytelling. She refuses to remain the object of gaze – the exposed – and decides to take control. Although the lingering close-ups usually constitute the woman as an object in film, the lingering shots of the scenes of storytelling in *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* are controlled and directed by Maryam herself. In the fifth and last scene of storytelling, the plaintive Maryam grabs a remote control device and turns off the camera in front of which she has been telling and recording her story. In her videotape, Maryam returns the society's gaze as she looks straight into the camera and speaks. She thus becomes in control of the viewers' gaze, for not only does she willingly face the camera and subject herself to their gaze, she also decides how and for how long the viewers' gaze should last. In addition, Maryam defies the conventional notion of gender through the character of Ziad. Although she turns out to be addressing Ziad all throughout the film, Ziad remains absent from all her scenes of storytelling and is therefore silenced. Interestingly, Maryam seems to be both addressing and indirectly silencing the person who has condemned her and whose rules she had to previously abide by. Moreover, the fact that the scenes of storytelling do not include a reverse-shot of Maryam's addressee – Ziad – conveys the reversed hierarchy that Maryam covertly establishes between herself and Ziad. Maryam refuses to be a victim; if she cannot control her life, she can at least control the parameters of her life story.

In *Lamma Hikyit Maryam*, Maryam breaks the barriers and projects herself as the victim of unjust patriarchal practices. Rejecting her miserable fate, she chooses to break her silence, speak, and die. Even her death takes the form of a strong liberating act that she willingly assumes in order to elude the barriers of an irrational world she cannot belong to. If Maryam was unable to choose her miserable life, she was at least free to choose her fate.

*Lamma Hikyit Maryam* is a film that skillfully explores the dark spaces that exist between madness and sanity, male and female, and life and death. The film strongly questions the social patriarchal beliefs that are considered natural and unchanging through the choice of an unreliable character/narrator: Maryam. However, the significance of such a work lies not in its adherence to the classical story-line of the madwoman in the attic, but in the particular way the plot is structured, such that the madwoman herself becomes the center of interest as opposed to the silenced, alienated person. The powerful character of Maryam raises important questions concerning the condition of marginalized women in patriarchal societies and shows that the world is not made up of one reality or one version of the truth, for there is always the other side, always.

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