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**What do the swimming pool and the sea represent for the young narrator?**

In “The Women’s Swimming Pool” by Hanan Al-Shaykh, the narrator, who is never named, is in search of the swimming pool that only allows women in. This is important because it is inferred that she comes from a religious family and culture that instructs women to be fully always covered. The narrator is suffocated and confined to a religious tradition, family expectations, the heat in her hometown, and to loneliness. The overarching representation of the “sea,” (which is how the narrator refers to the swimming pool) is freedom, liberation, and independence. She may not know that freedom is what she is after but through her words, emotions, and actions we can see she is seeking physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom. We see it in her excitement and desperation to get to the sea, her frustration and detachment with her grandmother, and even the way she clings to her bag that holds a change of clothes.

**CLOTHES**

The narrator expresses her struggle with her clothes. She lives in a dry, hot, and lonely tent near a tobacco field that offers little to no shade. “In this heat I still had to wear that dress with long sleeves, that head covering over my braids... Thank God, I had resisted her and refused to wear my stockings.” (Al-Shaykh 1385-1386) Despite the hard work she puts into tending the field and the beaming sun on her all day long, she is still required to wear the clothes that women in her religion are accustomed to wearing. Her grandmother follows this practice

and is “clothed in thick black stockings.” (1385) The women’s swimming pool will allow the narrator to take off her long sleeve clothes, change into something lighter, and be freely refreshed by the cool water since there will be no men present and therefore will not be violating their religious traditions. That is why throughout the story she clings to her bag; when the bus arrives, “I tightened my grip on my bag in which lay Sumayya’s bathing costume, a sleeveless dress, and my money,” (1386) when she saw the sea but couldn't find the entrance, “Had my dreams come to an end in the middle of the street? I clasp my bag and my grandmother's hand, with the sea in front of me, separating her from me,” (1388) and finally when she finds the entrance, “still clasping my bag to my chest, I saw my grandmother standing and looking at the sky... had prostrated herself in prayer. She was destroying what lay in my bag, blocking the road between me and the sea.” (1389) The clothes in her bag were an extended representation of freedom and relief and now her grandmother and her customs stood in the way of what she was after.

### **EMOTIONS**

The narrator is overcome by so many emotions that she cannot freely express and perhaps does not even understand. From the beginning, she appears irritable, perhaps because of the heat but also because she feels suffocated. On top of living in dry land and having to wear long sleeve attire, she is isolated and only has her overbearing grandmother. When she goes to drink water and splashes herself, she says,

“Before being able to savor its relative coldness, I hear my name and see my grandmother standing in her black dress at the doorway of the tent. Aloud I express the wish that someone else had called me. We have become like an orange and its navel: my

grandmother has welded me so close to her that the village girls no longer dare to make friends” (1384)

The narrator does not have friends and does not have the ability or desire to open up to her grandmother. When her grandmother suggests that the bus might not come, the narrator shows that she is not comfortable opening up to her grandmother because she “didn’t answer for fear I’d cry if I talked” (1385) and her grandmother doesn’t show or offer support because she continues to question and disapprove of her wanting to see the sea, which overwhelms the narrator, “My distress increased and I was no longer able to stop it from turning into tears that flowed freely down my face.” (1385) Her grandmother is her only close relationship in the world and despite that she does not feel safe to share her frustrations with her, this leads the narrator to harbor emotions of resentment, bitterness, and loneliness. The sea represents an escape from her suffocating and lonely reality. She is left to deal with her emotions and frustrations alone and when she starts to believe she won’t see that escape to the swimming pool, she shuts down, “I remain seated, crying inwardly because I was born in the South, because there’s no escape from the South.” (1388) and towards her grandmother, she reveals, “I shan’t eat, I shan’t drink, I shan’t reply to Maryam at-Taweela. It was as though I was taking vengeance on my grandmother for some wrong, she did not know about.” (1388)

### **GRANDMOTHER**

The grandmother embodies everything that makes the narrator feel restricted and confined. Her hesitance to leave their hometown for a day trip to the swimming pool causes the narrator much anxiety and sadness and her insistence that Sumayya, “that devil,” (1385, 1386, 1387) gave her this idea shows that she does not approve of what they are doing. On the bus ride

the grandmother places heavy burdens and expectations on her granddaughter, about the risks of the swimming pool she says, “If any man were to see you, you’d be done for, and so would your mother and father and your grandfather, the religious scholar— and I’d be done for more than anyone because it’s I who agreed to this and helped you.” (pg. 1386) The sea represents independence from these expectations. Though encountering the swimming pool is such a big risk, the narrator is determined to experience it. Just like the bag represents relief, change, or freedom, the grandmother’s hand represents their religious customs, expectations, and burden. Throughout the story, she holds on to either both or one or the other. She attempts to hold both but throughout her journey, she realizes she can’t. At the arrival of the bus, she double-checks that she has both, “turning round to make sure that my bag was still in my hand and my grandmother’s hand in the other.” (1386) The narrator becomes desperate to find the sea and when she sees it from afar, she lets go of her grandmother’s hand to ask strangers in the street how to get closer to it.

“I tried to choke back my tears; I let go of my grandmother’s hand as though wishing to reproach her, to punish her for having insisted on accompanying me instead of Sumayya.” (1388)

When the narrator was finally directed to the right entrance for the swimming pool, she left her grandmother behind to inquire about it since she was tired and slowing down. She was determined to enter the swimming pool without her but decided not to. She returned to her grandmother but found her praying. The granddaughter was heartbroken and conflicted.

“I would have liked to persuade myself that she had nothing to do with me, that I didn’t know her. How, though? She was my grandmother whom I’ve dragged with my

entreaties from the tobacco-threading tent, from the jagged slab of stone, from the winds of the South... I felt sorry for her, for her knees that knelt on the cruelly hard pavement, for her tattooed hands that lay on dirt... For the first time, her black dress looked shabby to me.” (1389)

The young narrator goes through a range of emotions as she realizes that what her grandmother personifies will always stand in the way of entering the “sea,” or her freedom. When she feels bad for her grandmother, she also feels sorry for herself. Despite the complex emotions she encounters at that moment, she returns to her grandmother, and in the end, “she again puts her weight on my hand.” This weight symbolizes the expectations and lifestyle that the narrator is burdened by.

### **CONCLUSION**

The narrator is feeling suffocated and isolated because of where she lives which is very dry and hot, the clothes she must wear despite the heat, and her grandmother smothering her to the point that she cannot make friends and is required to uphold traditions that place a heavy burden on her. The sea and the women’s swimming pool represented a moment of thirst-quenching relief and freedom from the pressures and the loneliness she experienced in her life.

Works Cited

Al-Shaykh, Hanan. "The Women's Swimming Pool." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (Shorter 4th Ed.), edited by Martin Puchner et al., translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2019, pp. 1384–1389.