

Women Victimization in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*

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Abstract

The patriarchal power has been recently given to dominate in the Arab world at all levels. This patriarchal domination has allowed society to suppress women and deprive them of their basic rights as humans. It is argued that the power of tradition implanted in most Arab countries has enabled those patriarchal societies to marginalize the role of women and silence them so that they can never be heard all over again. Faqir's 1996 novel, *Pillars of Salt* strives to show this complicated issue and find a space in which marginalized and oppressed women can narrate their own stories. With the appropriation of a feminist approach, the current paper aims to shine a light on the situation and stand of women as represented in *Pillars of Salt* by Fadia Faqir.

Keywords: Domination, marginalized, oppressed, patriarch, victimized

1. Introduction

In recent years, Arab women novelists have been striving to be heard and seen globally. For a long time, Arab women have been invisible as their societies never give them the opportunity to narrate their own stories. Fadia Faqir is one such Eastern and Middle Eastern novelist who has greatly focused on this issue, shedding light on the influence of tribal life and the power of traditions on women in Jordan. In *Pillars of Salt*, Fadia introduces the readers to the life of the Jordanian women. Therefore, Fadia is concerned about her protagonists Maha and Um Saad as well as other women and the kind of life they have accepted.

According to Al-Ghammaz et al. (2022), women should seek freedom from slavery and salvation from the prison they have acceded to, and this can never occur without struggle. In the same context, as explained by Spivak (1988), the subaltern refers to someone within the realm of the hegemonic umbrella, who has no means of access to upward mobility or the hegemonic discourse. It is added that the subaltern figure could be historically understood as those under the control of colonial powers or a victim of slavery; they can be understood as the completely powerless.

Hence, Spivak (1988) has defined women as subalterns and silenced creatures; they are not allowed to practice any of their rights or to use their own voices. These women are enslaved by their societies; therefore, they are imprisoned inside their societies and deprived of their basic rights. In different ages, both before and after Islam, women have struggled to restore what they have lost, and what they do not possess (Cooke, 2001). However, subaltern people or marginalized people will never be able to regain themselves unless they struggle for it (Al-Ghammaz, 2023). Given the introduction about the illegal social and personal situation of women in the Arab world and the dire need to address this problem, the literature review related to the problem previously raised is provided next.

2. Literature Review

Research has documented the issue of women's victimization in the world in general and the Arab World in particular. Al-Ghammaz et al. (2022) are concerned with shedding light on the issue of emotional abuse against women in the American context by analyzing "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin. The results reveal gender inequality and irrational social beliefs in the American context.

From a literary point, Hammouche (2020) states that the concept of "unhomeliness" as defined by Homi Bhabha will be used in this work to analyze *Pillars of Salt* written by Fadia Faqir in 1996. It is intended to demonstrate how this concept, describing the psychological pressure experienced by the female characters of this novel and the feeling of displacement engendered by the different "unhomely" situations from which the female characters suffer, reflects the author's Arab Islamic womanism in this literary production. It explores different Arab traditions, colonial encroachments, and a hegemonic orientalist vision as present in the novel, representing patriarchal, colonial, and imperial "unhomeliness" for the female characters".

In the same vein, Zouhry (2020) confirms that the analysis raised in the paper is important since the custom in the history of Morocco has fronted some judicial dilemmas with women in general, and their diverse rights in particular, which are still unsolved. There are also other problems related to guiding the Moroccan legislators and researchers on women's and family issues to the importance of historical and heritage studies in jurisprudence and enacting.

In the same vein, El-Bwietel (2015) examines the social relationships in both the Arab culture and the Western culture by focusing on gender roles within the society. Although the novels are set in two different cultures, some common similarities have been found. The social status of women is investigated in both different cultural spheres. The patriarchal Western society portrayed in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* shares a great deal of similarities with the Arab male-dominated society in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*.

Against the previous literature review, it is shown that the issue of women's victimization is addressed in the world in general and the Arab World in particular. What makes this research significant and novel is the idea that it tackles the issue of women's victimization at the Jordanian level which is a new venue for research. Importantly, the research problem is reflected in shedding light on the situation and stand of women as represented in *Pillars of Salt* by Fadia Faqir. The next section shows the method adopted to analyze the issue of women's victimization in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*.

3. Method

Given the previous literature review and the research problem discussed in this paper, a feminist approach is adopted to make the required textual analysis. The feminist approach is used to analyze gender inequality and shed light on the marginalized and dominated women in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*. Major concepts and elements of feminism related to the issues of oppression and domination suffered by women in their patriarchal societies are also incorporated into the paper. The textual analysis of this paper is restricted to the borders of the selected novel. Particular concepts such as the feminist conception of and emphasis on freedom as opposed to oppression are utilized to find a way to give all the marginalized people their voices and rights. With that being said, the textual analysis is furnished in detail in the following part.

4. Textual Analysis

Pillars of Salt discusses the situation of women in a patriarchal society. In *Pillars of Salt*, the writer introduces us to two different women "characters" in her novel, one Bedouin woman and another from the city, the Bedouin Maha, Um Saad, and Nasra the beautiful shepherdess. The whole story revolves around these women who live in two different environments, yet they have the same sufferings. The female characters Maha and Um Saad have met each other in a mental hospital where they have been enforced to, while Nasra was a friend of Maha and fell in love with Maha's brother Daffash and he raped her and finally rejected her as a sinner.

Pillars of Salt tries to shed light on the societal restrictions that forced women to a certain role either in Bedouin or metropolitan societies and to discuss in detail the suffering of women in a patriarchal society. According to the traditions, women are not allowed to express their own opinions or to discuss any situation that they don't like. If they do it, they will be accused of being rebellious women who must be punished and silenced by their men. *Pillars of Salt* shows how women are victimized by the power of tradition that gives the father, the husband, and the brother full authority to control the life of his daughter, wife, or sister.

Maha, the protagonist in *Pillars of Salt*, is a victim of her tribal society, and she has paid a high price for her challenge of the tribal traditions. When she attempts to use her voice, she is silenced by her society which sends her to a psychiatric hospital. They accuse her of insanity and force her into a straightjacket. In the hospital, Maha the Bedouin girl found herself a neighbor to a lady from the city of Um Saad who rejects Maha from the very beginning, considering her an illiterate and backward woman.

In tribal societies, the power of tradition is connected with the power of religion and therefore forces women into specific roles throughout their lives. In such societies, men and women are by no means equal; society determines what women can and cannot do. Men are deemed superior so they are "we" while women are the "other", and men can act without restrictions. Society even accepts men's redemption when they are ready for it. Therefore, we can observe that men in these societies consistently depend on their interpretation of certain verses of the Holy Qur'an to strengthen their position within the societies in which they live.

The tribal life before Islam, however, is unfair to women, with female offspring buried immediately after birth to hide their shame about what they had done; females were considered a sin that must be rid of at the moment of birth. With the introduction of Islam, such practices were outlawed and considered terrible crimes, such as that by Cain against his brother Able.

To some extent, most complex societal problems have been dependent on the interpretation of certain verses of the Holy Qur'an in a way that serves patriarchal purposes, as Allah Almighty says "Men are in charge of women because Allah hath made one of them excel the other" (The Qur'an, 1965, 5:3-4). Thus, this verse is continuously cited to prove the superiority of men. However, the real meaning of this verse is that men are in charge if they can finance their women and protect them; otherwise, they will never excel over women. This interpretation has allowed men to dominate women's rights, and to force them to play certain roles even if they are dissatisfied. Tribal society depends on the verses of the Holy Qur'an to empower their beliefs, nobody can discuss or oppose what they say, or the dissenter will be accused of being anti-Islam and anti-Allah "God".

The radical feminist analysis insists that male power is not confined to the public worlds of politics and paid employment, but that it will extend into private life; this means that traditional concepts of power and politics are challenged and extended to such "personal" areas of life as the family and sexuality, both of which are seen as an instrument of patriarchal domination (Pryson, 1992, p. 181). Therefore, sexual equality can never be found in a tribal society, a fact that can be observed clearly when Maha learns that her brother has seduced her close friend Nasra and forced her to lose her virginity. Maha loses her mind and wants to shoot her brother, but when her father learns of the problem he accuses Nasra of tempting his son. This leads us to the conclusion that it is the woman who must be blamed for this fault. This is because, in a tribal society, there is no shame for a man in having an affair, while the same is not true for a woman. A

woman who loses her virginity will be killed if her family comes to know, or she will live the whole of her life without marriage due to her fault.

However, in the Holy Qur'an, God does not give the right to have an affair to men and not to women. The Holy Qur'an considers both sexes guilty and punishable and states that their punishment will be the same, as Allah Almighty says "The adulterer and the adulteress scourge each one of them with a hundred stripes" (Al-Noor, 2). The hegemony of men in a tribal society is empowered by the misinterpretation of different verses of the Holy Qur'an. This leads us to one specific point this patriarchal spirit, which has endured for a long time, has served men greatly, enabling them to dominate women and to deprive them of their basic rights, such as to inherit, to have her money, to work, to vote, and to learn.

Beauvoir (1949) explains that the most important obstacle to a woman's freedom was not her biology, the political and legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it was the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in society. According to Beauvoir, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (1949, p. 297). It is a society that forces women to adopt certain roles and beliefs that are not drawn from any religion. Society constructs these chains and rules in a way that pleases man and enables him to enjoy every aspect of his life under the domination of this patriarchal world. Also, Beauvoir claims that "like men, women could therefore lead independent, rationally ordered and autonomous lives once they were freed from artificially restricting myths and cultural assumptions" (1949, p. 154)

At the early beginning of Islam, we hear different tales of famous women who participated in battles and served as nurses, preachers, and teachers. We also learn that Islam gave women the right to inherit and to equality with men. Tribal society divided the roles of men and women when it classified men as superior and women as inferior. This superiority/ inferiority dichotomy appears clearly in Fadia's Pillars of Salt "Daffash twisted his thin moustache with his thumb and forefinger, stretched out his arms, spreading out his wide cloak" (p.34) while Maha hurried back to prepare the house for the guests. I carried the mattresses and placed them next to each other on the thick rugs" (p. 34). This demonstrates that society confirms both the roles of men and women; the man should show his power to his guests, while the woman should show that she is the one who serves the man and his guests.

From the Holy Qur'an, it is clear that there are no differences between men and women, when it comes to rituals both should partake in the same prayers, fasting, donations to the poor, pilgrimage, and other forms of worship. For example, Islam gives women the right to work, which is demonstrated at the very beginning of Islam when women engaged in different roles, such as soldiers in the army, nurses, preachers, and teachers.

Yet, some tribal societies prohibit women from working and consider women who go against tribal tradition as sinful women and deserving of punishment. This happened to Maha when she tried to live her life and refuse the cuffs of her society they accused her of being mad and they sent her to a psychiatric hospital. However, Islam assured the importance of learning, and we can see that these tribal societies considered it shameful for a woman to attend school. According to them, only men can attend school and learn, while the normal place for any woman is to stay at home and do the housework. The first verse of the Holy Qur'an was "Iqraa" which is to read in English, as Allah says "Read in the name of thy lord who created, created man from a blood clot...who taught by the pen" (1-3). This verse shows the importance of learning and teaching, regardless of gender. All prophets came to this world only for one purpose and it is to teach.

On the other hand, Um Saad, the neighbor of Maha in the hospital, relates her experience in Alkutab "a place where children are taught to write and read". She tells Maha that, after attending Alkutab for one year, her father ordered her to stop going there and to stay with her mother: he said "You are growing up" but I hated growing up, I wanted to push my body back to its former younger shape" (p. 39).

It is known that Nazira Zain Aldeen and Al-Ghazali are believers and are confident that all traditions that function to keep women ignorant and prevent them from functioning in public are the remnants of Jahiliya and that following them is contrary to the spirit of Islam (Afkhami, 1995). Islam encourages women to learn and to teach others what they know. Aisha who is the wife of Prophet Mohammad continuously taught women the basics of Islam. The first word in the Holy Qur'an was "Iqra'a" "read" and God didn't address only men and ignore women. The universal discourse of the Holy Qur'an addresses all human beings, regardless of whether they are men or women. Yet, the sporadic voices that claim that sending girls and women to schools and Universities will spoil them and expose them to many dangers are simply a means to continue to dominate women and to imprison them within a specific role.

In tribal societies, there is a complex and uneasy understanding of "virginity". It is considered an important issue and should be proven by the groom on the night of his wedding. If he discovers that his bride is not a virgin, then the shame will kill her father and her family." Maha said "I was thinking of my honor. I was a virgin: I had the blood in me, but Harab was the one to spill it. She added "Harab was the one who was supposed to prove that I was a virgin" (p. 45). According to society, the only proof that the bride is a virgin depends on handing them a piece of white cloth dripping with blood.

Harb considers this practice humiliating to his wife, whom he loves, yet he cannot ignore it. The power of tradition in a tribal society even forces men to do things that they do not accept. As a way to resolve this embarrassing situation, Maha says to Harb, "We can fool them....Prick my little finger with the end of your dagger...it is my blood they are after" (p: 45). However, the virginity of men is not considered, the virginity of woman is insisted upon. This sends us back to Daffash and his affair with Nasra, it was Nasra who was blamed for losing her virginity, while Daffash was a man allowed to have as many affairs as he wished with impunity. This situation reminds us of the dichotomy between "superiority" and "inferiority"; "master" and "slave"; "man" and "woman".

According to deconstruction theory, we will never be able to overcome this classification until we deconstruct what we have previously constructed. Silenced voices can never gain their liberty without raising their voices. When Nassra was seduced by Daffash, she was scared, and she was unable to tell anybody what had happened to her, Maha was the only one who learned of her story as she was her close friend and the sister of Daffash who raped her.

Despite attempts to force women into specific roles, we can find some voices that insist on narrating their own stories, and not allowing the “other” to narrate for them. Silenced voices can be heard here and there and are observable on some pages of the novel. Alkhatib (2023) sheds light on the oppressed and marginalized women in Sudan. Women have been deprived of their basic rights, and they are left with no free will to make any decision. This emphasizes that women in different parts of the world are sharing the same domination and subjugation in their patriarchal societies.

Historically, women have been victimized by their societies, and are condemned to domination of the patriarchal world. In a patriarchal world, women are never allowed to lead-free lives or to enjoy all of their human rights. Polygamy is considered a complex issue in most tribal societies, with men believing that God gave them the right to marry more than one woman, a permission of which they want to make use. In some societies, a husband may decide to marry another wife without an excuse. The moment his wife becomes old, he starts to think of a new young bride, regardless of the harm that he will cause to his old wife.

Um Saad, the wife of a butcher, was never able to protest or complain when her husband beat her every night before sleeping with her. She underwent a terrible experience when she witnessed her husband’s marriage to another young and beautiful woman and accused her of being the reason why he married again. Um Saad shouted, “Beating me. Have you no respect for my gray hair? He said that he got married to a second wife because of my gray hair. My gray hair was responsible. What can I do sister? Can you check the flow of days and the spread of gray hair? They are unstoppable. Aren’t they?” she asked and fixed the pink scarf over her straight gray hair (p.179).

According to her husband, he is only using his God-given right to marry more than one wife. However, according to the Holy Qur’an, there is only one condition under which one may marry more than one woman, and this condition is to be fair, which is mentioned clearly in the Holy Qur’an. Regarding the rule of polygamy in Surat Al-Nisa “Women”, his almighty God says: “If you fear not justly with the orphans marry what women of your choice, two or three, or four if you are afraid of not being fair then one” (Al-Nisa, 3).

Um, Saad suffered due to her husband’s marriage; he ejected her from the bedroom and took his new bride there. “Um Saad said,” “I stood up smoothed my Kaftan, and asked “Who is she?” he said in his pathetic voice, Yusra, my new wife (p. 178). She continues “Abu Saad took her to my bedroom and closed the door; I could not bear to see what they were doing on my bed...When I heard their suppressed sighs, the laughter, and the husky pleading, I could not open the door (p. 178). Um Saad, Humiliated and abandoned, ran to her son, but even her son Waleed did not sympathize with her and took the side of his father. When Um Saad began crying on his shoulder, he simply said, “Just thank God that you came to know because the whole city knows that he got married” (p. 178).

Injustice is common in such a society, and this absence of justice in such a society helps to empower men and weaken women. Um Saad was an oppressed woman and no one could stop her husband when he decided to send her to the psychiatric hospital. No one took her side; even her sons abandoned her and left her to face her horrible future. The Holy Qur’an pays great attention to women and “constipation kindness or layoffs benevolently” whether you will respect your wife or divorce. It is not permitted to humiliate or degrade wives. The Holy Qur’an formulates the rules to be followed in every aspect of our lives. Unfortunately, what occurs sometimes is that we try to interpret the holy verses of the Holy Quran in a different way, or in a way that will serve our purposes and intention. The Holy Qur’an has drawn the right road to follow by all the people, regardless of any differences among them.

In Fadia’s Pillars of Salt, women are not given any rights at all. All of them are humiliated, tortured, and suffer under patriarchal domination. Maha, the protagonist, attempts to explain what she suffered in her tribal society, saying: “The day sealed the cut in my gums, but didn’t heal the gaping wound in my heart. Humiliation, anger, and sheer helplessness the women of Qasim restored the body to its former shape, stubborn and dignified, the heart refused to be mended and continued weeping silently” (p. 171). Maha is a helpless woman, lost, and deprived of her humanity. No man, even her brother, is concerned to heal her suffering. According to them, a woman is simply a victim whom they can slaughter at any time without guilt, and she is not allowed even to complain. If we apply the rules of the Holy Qur’an without misinterpretation, then women will be able to enjoy the rights given to them, free from the domination of the patriarchal world.

5. Conclusion

In a few words, it is evident that the unjust treatment of women creates a sense of inequality between genders that may lead to disorder in any society. In an unfair situation like this, women can also never feel the sense of freedom that may enable them to be an effective half of any society. It is also seen that as long as this discrimination between men and women still dominates societies, families can never lead normal lives to raise kids.

Another key point is that it is believed that the voices of women must be heard by society that reconsider the whole situation of women in different parts of the world. Despite these attempts in Pillars of Sal by Fadia Faqir to enforce women to a specific role, it is found that some voices insist on narrating their own stories, and not allowing the “other” to narrate their own. "Maha" and "Um Saad" have succeeded in narrating their own stories, and their voices can be heard even if they come from a psychiatric hospital.

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