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Western Feminism or Return to Authentic Islam? Jordanian Women in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt and My Name is Salma*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the violence against Jordanian women through Fadia Faqir's novels, *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name is Salma*. These novels question cultural conventions that tolerate men's oppression and killing of women in the name of the family's honour in most Arab countries. The analysis of the two novels illustrates how Faqir's opposition to women's subordination and victimisation in the name of Islam stems from her interest in going back to authentic teachings of Islam with regard to women, rather than Western feminist theories. In addition, the similarity between Orientalist misrepresentation of women's status in Islam and patriarchal misinterpretation of the Holy Qura'n and Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah to subordinate women is explored and examined from the postcolonial feminist critical perspective. This paper highlights feminist contribution to raising awareness about violence against women in some Arab countries through literature.

Keywords: counter narrative, feminism and Islam, honour crimes, orientalism, postcolonial feminism

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Introduction

This research examines violent practices against Jordanian women in *Pillars of Salt* (1996) and *My Name Is Salma* (2007), two novels by the British-Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir. Over the past decade, the narrative of Islam's inherent and inalterable oppression of women has been high on the list of topics within Western discourse on Islam and women. As a result, a number of Western feminists reiterate the rhetoric of saving our fellow women in the Arab world from repressive Islam. However, oppression faced by Arab women in general and Jordanian women in particular is due to gender discrimination and patriarchal dominance, rather than Islam's teachings. This paper examines the oppression of Jordanian women from a feminist postcolonial perspective that questions and subverts the essentialist gender politics yielded by cultural and social traditions, and resists orientalist stereotyping and homogeneity in representing Jordanian women's stories through the dialogic narrative created by Faqir. Her feminist stance revisits the oppression of Jordanian women from a standpoint that empowers them to fight back for the rights given to them by Islam centuries ago, and encourages them to never surrender to false Western representations or the hegemony of indigenous patriarchal cultural and social traditions.

Since its advent in the early twentieth century, the scope of postcolonial studies has stretched to reflect the contributions of many different perspectives, including that of feminism. The intersection of these two fields lies in their interest in disfranchised classes, subduing powers of domination and oppression, and forging new spaces for change. (See Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2001). Postcolonial theories that emphasise and question "dominance and resistance", "race and class", "gender and sexuality", and the "representation and translation of cultures (Loomba, Kaul, Bunzl, Burton, & Esty, 2005, p. 13) are useful to feminism. Postcolonial feminism is utilised in this study to highlight Faqir's undermining of cultural and social discrimination and violence against women in Jordan through literature. Moreover, postcolonialism is relevant in addressing the issue of Western representations of Arab women's lives and highlight the gap between how Arab women are depicted and who they really are. The two novels of Faqir's considered here present a postcolonial feminist counter-narrative to hegemonic, oppressive paradigms of Muslim and Arab women's experience. Specifically, it examines Western misrepresentations of Islam and Muslim women, largely rooted in Orientalist discourse, and what Faqir calls "neo-patriarchy"—a system in which power relationships are influenced by gender, class, clan, and proximity to the regime, based on the "subordination of the disadvantaged and disfranchised" (Faqir 2001, p. 67)—in Arab societies in general and Jordanian society in particular. Faqir's feminist consciousness grows out of first-hand experience, dialogue with oppressed women, statistics, and a sense of responsibility towards her nation and people.

The two novels considered here present an unmistakable analogy between patriarchal exploitation of Islam to control women and Western misrepresentations of oppressed Muslim women: both discourses reflect a mistaken understanding of Islam, which results in the oppression of Muslim women in different ways. Whereas patriarchal dominance exploits religion, as a divine power to which people adhere, to subordinate women, Western discourse diffuses Islam's oppressive rule over women as a road map to colonialist enterprise. Further, both discourses refer to surface information and laws in the Holy Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's Sunna and generalize them to other incidents regardless of historical, cultural, social and political changes without exerting efforts to substantiate their findings. What is

important to these discourses is establishing their control. Faqir's critique illustrates how far the two discourses are from the reality of Islam with regard to the status of women.

Through her novels, Faqir raises questions about violence against Jordanian women and the persisting silence and distortion of facts surrounding it. Cultural conventions around the status of women, followed blindly by the Jordanian family, tribe, society, and state, have caused women's continuing oppression and suffering. Faqir is critical of cultural parameters generating, justifying, and maintaining inequities based on gender that oppress women. In both novels, her presentation of honour crimes provokes a series of very important questions: why has the oppression of Jordanian women in the name of family honour not reduced? Why has the government not made rules that would save women from being killed in order to redeem the reputation of the tribe in the event of a transgression? More importantly, does Islamic teaching condone such acts of violence against women for honour? It is important to look at the Bedouin code of honour and cultural conception of women as well as women's status in Islam and Islamic teachings in the context of honour in order to consider the role that authorities should play.

The thematic and narrative levels in the two novels make up a feminist critique that emphasises the effectiveness of literature in raising awareness about forms of violence against women, and the novelist's role in challenging structures of oppression in society. Both novels can be classified as "resistance" texts, which expose, defy, and counter dominant forces of oppression (Harlow, 2009). The common theme in the novels include the fact that both are set in Jordan and deal with violent acts against women, which are taken for granted and go unpunished. In each novel, Faqir gives voice to repressed and violated women, empowering them to question and speak against injustices. In this way, Faqir also affirms the power of literary works to challenge dominant forms of oppression and the significant role they can play in resistance.

Both novels include multiple forms of resistance to attest to the intersection of gender and nation, and culture and power. Set in 1920, during the British Mandate over Jordan, *Pillars of Salt* counters oppressive powers in past and contemporary contexts, underscoring the close connection between the Orientalist project and British colonisation, and dismantles their rhetoric about Islamic oppression of women. The fight against oppression extends to the issue of violent treatment of women by the patriarchal local culture in the name of Islam. The protagonist, Maha, resists both British rule over her home country and local male chauvinism against women in the village. In both battles, Faqir links gender oppression and Orientalist stereotyping through the concept of "honour". In the novel, overlapping internal and external forms of oppression in Jordanian women's lives show the role they play in resistance. Men control women's bodies and choices, because they conceive women to be their property in the same manner as British colonization perceives Jordan to be its territory.

In *My Name is Salma*, the narrative is not situated in a specific historical period, which indicates two important points: the endurance of honour crimes in the Jordanian society, and the state institutions' ineffectiveness in taking action. In Salma's story, resistance is meant to reveal the social conventions, rather than Islamic law, used by people to justify honour crimes against women. Honour killings are "an example of a local custom [rather than religious] that violates Islamic law and hurts women" (Kahf, 181). In some Arab societies and Jordan is a case in point, there is a blind adherence to social traditions and norms which render women as second-class citizen in the name of religion (Afzal-Khan,17). Therefore, Islam is not to be blamed for the

“vile and inhuman customs practiced in different parts of the Islamic world by tribal-minded men”, who are more “interested in maintaining their patriarchal power than in creating the type of just society envisioned by 7th century Islam—a religion that gave property and other rights to women” (Afzal-Khan, 12). Faqir is determined to liberate and transform the status quo of Jordanian women in a way that reflects and reaffirms Islam’s rejection of their oppression.

In both novels, Faqir associates physical assault on women to damage to the nation using code-switching, a technique postcolonial writers employ where words or sentence structures from his/her native tongue are incorporated into the coloniser’s language to achieve a certain effect and purpose (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989, p. 60-61). Postcolonial feminism offers new readings for the female body. Ashcroft et al. (1989) equate “writing the body” in feminism with “writing place” in postcolonial theory (p. 23); in this analogy, the female body becomes the land, and the male rapist, the coloniser. This analogy accords great importance to the female body, making an attack on it a grave offense on the nation. In both novels, Faqir uses the Arabic word *Il’ard* to undermine the power men exercise over women. In Arabic, the word *Il’ard* can be spelled in two different ways; this difference is effaced by the English pronunciation. When written with the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, it means “the land”, while if the eighteenth letter is used, it means “family honour”, which rests on the honour of the women of the family. The pun involved in *Il’ard* emphasises the connection between a man’s land and a woman’s honour, implying that men should not violate women just as they would defend their land from aggression. This association shames men who fail to keep their *ard*(honour)—woman/land—safe. Thus, Faqir’s writing on the violation of the female body in both novels can be read as advocating for a decolonisation of both the oppressed female body and the land.

Family Honour versus Woman’s Life in *My Name Is Salma*

In *My Name Is Salma*, Faqir addresses a pressing issue of honour killings in Jordan, which is indicative of the lack of civil laws against the practice. Faqir’s narration of this heart-breaking story helps her condemn this situation. The story is told from the perspective of Salma, a young Bedouin shepherd, who tells us about her tormented life. Seeing the story through the eyes of the victim creates an intimate relationship between Salma, as protagonist, and the reader. However, Faqir’s purpose is not just invoking pity; by putting her protagonist through many hardships, she depicts a strong Arab woman who deserves respect and admiration. Indeed, Salma is a survivor.

Salma’s life is at risk because she is pregnant out of wedlock. For the men of Hima, her village, this is an unforgiveable sin, which disgraces the whole tribe. The only way Salma’s male family members can redeem the tribe’s reputation is by taking Salma’s life. To save her daughter’s life, Salma’s mother first tries to abort her pregnancy. When this fails, Salma’s female teacher comes to the rescue; she says, “The best thing to do is to hand you over to the police and pray they will keep you in protective custody for ever” (Faqir, 2007, p. 41). In prison, young women are mistreated by male guards, who call them “prostitutes” (p. 44). Salma is imprisoned for six years, until Miss Asher, a Lebanese Catholic nun, smuggles her out of prison to England. However, she is safer in prison; if she had been released, she would likely have faced a fate similar to the “girl, who had been released by the prison authorities, [to be] shot dead on the spot by her younger brother” (p. 126). The limited options available to Salma to save her life illustrate the helplessness of women within a strict patriarchal society. Tired of her life in exile, she returns

to Hima after twenty years to see her daughter, only to be given the devastating news of the daughter's death at the hands of her uncle (Salma's brother).

In the story, Hamdan takes advantage of Salma's love for him to satisfy his own desires. When he realises she is pregnant, he abandons her. Salma's pain amplifies when Hamdan reacts to the news of her pregnancy with, "you are responsible. You have seduced me [...]. I've never laid a finger on you. Do you understand?" (Faqir, 2007, p. 171). Hamdan's lack of responsibility leads us to believe that this is a usual occurrence in the village; men are in the clear, as women are to be blamed. As the events unfold, Salma's brother and father neither look for nor chase Hamdan; they only condemn Salma. Indeed, Hamdan entices Salma to love him with romantic words. Faqir reasons that blame should not fall on young women, whom men may have seduced when they tend to their sheep in the hills, or fill jars of water by springs.

Throughout the novel, what happens to Salma makes the reader wonder if the notion of purity and chastity is worth wasting a woman's life, and why women are treated like criminals when they are the victims. This confusion is meant to force a re-examination of honour crimes in Jordan and help effect social change. Salma is herself very confused about why her family and village have treated her as if her life means nothing, for a mistake she never anticipated. Addressing Noura, her friend back home, Salma writes, "I stand in this new country alone wandering about the final destination of migration birds. Why are we here and what is it all about? A mother who allowed you to swim in the spring? Why am I still alive and what brought me here?" (Faqir, 2007, p. 13). The plural pronoun in Salma's letter is indicative of the number of girls who suffer the same fate.

Traumatic memories are in control of the narration of her life in England, reinforcing past experiences of shame, guilt, fear, and brutality Salma has faced. Faqir demonstrates the emotional damage endured by Salma in the way the narrative oscillates between past and present. Evidently, the pain from her past is still weighing on Salma's psyche, as is reflected in her frequent nightmares. Similarly, Salma's mercilessly interrupted motherhood is depicted through her body's sensitivity to the wind, "A sudden chill ran through me so I hugged my erect nipples. Before I had the chance to look at her face she was taken away to a home for illegitimate children. I lay on the floor bleeding like a lamb slaughtered for the grand Eid festival" (Faqir, 2007, 126). Her culture has led her to self-essentialise the guilt in her psyche, such that she cannot feel real freedom even thousands of miles away, "I felt as dirty as a whore, with no name or family, a sinner who would never see paradise" (Faqir, 2007, 108). Salma's hopelessness shows how even religion in her village could not save her from repressive culture, "cream tea I did not deserve. If you had crossed lands and seas looking for answers, looking for a daughter, looking for God, you end up drinking bitter coffee" (Faqir, 2007, p. 14).

Imagination plays a significant role in Salma's life; it keeps her sane, and helps her endure the pain of reality. She imagines the life of her daughter in great detail, a fantasy indicating a disturbed state of mind that rejects the real world and finds temporary solace in creating a world of its own in an attempt to escape obtrusive facts. She names her daughter Layla, and tries to imagine her face and draw a picture of her, "Layla was faceless, but three years ago I decided to give her a face. I dressed her up, combed her hair" (Faqir, 2007, 105). Layla does not remain a baby in Salma's imagination; rather, she is alive and growing with the passage of the years, "Layla would be crying afraid to go to school for the first time [...]. Then,

Layla, a teenage girl, would be telling me about a boy, like Hamdan: I would rub her back then kiss her” (Faqir, 2007, 103).

In addition to this, Salma must also suffer marginalisation, racial slurs, and sexual exploitation in England. Salma could not understand why people in England “look at [her] all [the] time as if [she had a] disease” (Faqir, 2007, 102). Her alienation is aggravated by her life in this culture that “enforces the supremacy of everything that is Christian, Western, [and] white” (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p.53). Salma is forced to take her headscarf off because of the harassment she faces for it in the streets of London. Here, Faqir demonstrates that men’s sexual exploitation of women is not restricted to specific cultures and happens everywhere. Salma is oppressed at home based on gender, whereas in England it is due to her race and culture.

The way Minister Mahoney argues Salma’s case to the immigration authorities, who question the authenticity of Miss Asher adopting Salma, evokes the colonial rhetoric of “saving” oppressed Muslim women from their misogynist culture, “even if you question the adoption, she should be given the right of political, social or religious asylum [...] thousands of women are killed every year. You must give her shelter; if you send her back she will be shot on sight” (Faqir, 2007, 136). Faqir shows how devastating it is for these women when their own country fails to protect their lives, and appeals to authorities in Jordan, rather than foreigners with neocolonialist agendas, to prohibit honour killings, which can be accomplished by simply applying Sharia rules.

The end of the novel is intended to demonstrate the futility and cruelty of killing a woman who gets pregnant out of wedlock. Salma spends all her life waiting to meet her daughter. This moment finally occurs at the end of the novel, when she discovers that her brother killed her daughter many years ago. Unfortunately, this is also the moment when Mahmoud, Salma’s brother, decides to finally “atone” for his sister’s mistake by shooting her, after almost 20 years. The common belief among Arab tribes and families that *Il‘aar ma yimhiyehilail dam*—“dishonour can only be wiped off with blood”—sounds meaningless as Mahmoud insists on murdering Salma in spite of his mother’s pleas to take “the farm, everything” in exchange for his sister’s life (Faqir, 2007, 279). To him, Salma’s forced estrangement and exile from her parents, daughter, and homeland are not enough to clear the stained family name; only her life wipes away her crime. Faqir shows how unjust it is to waste a girl’s youth, motherhood, and even life for a single mistake, and appeals to reform such social traditions.

Faqir’s defence of Jordanian women’s rights makes her liable to accusations of social and cultural treachery. Patriarchal systems in Arab countries defend this charge in order to isolate feminists in their societies, who threaten the stability of their dominance and control over women. One of the most persistent challenges for postcolonial feminists is the aspersions that fall upon their national loyalties because of their activism. As a result, they often attempt to counter gender oppression “within their own cultural models rather than those imposed by the Western colonizers” (Bulbeck, 1998, p. 282). In other words, they define their theories from the particularity of their societies rather than adopting Western feminist models and theories. In doing so, they decolonise feminism as a political movement to help them express their own needs and rights, which vary from sociocultural context to context. Although Faqir studied in England for many years, she is aware of the inappropriateness of Western feminist theories to the Jordanian society.

Thus, Faqir's fight against women's oppression in Jordan repudiates patriarchal claims of cultural and national treachery, as she calls for a return to authentic Islamic teachings and rules with respect to gender discrimination and women's status. Instead of Western feminist theories, she utilises Sharia rules as a counter discourse in her critique of violence against women in Jordan. In her article titled "IntrafamilyFemicide" (2001), Faqir compares Jordanian civil laws and tribal norms on honour crimes with the rules of Sharia and finds that the Jordanian Penal Code for honour killings is in discordance with Islamic law, which prevents male family members from killing any female member even if her adultery is proved. She writes, "both the Qur'an and the Hadith made clear the penalty for adultery, if proved by 'confession, testimony of four rational adult eye-witnesses, or pregnancy' is '100 medium lashes in public for unmarried women and men, and stoning for married men and women'" (Faqir, 2001, p. 74). Whereas, Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code states that "he who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery with another, and he kills, or injures one or both of them is exempt from any penalty" (as cited in Faqir, 2001, p. 72). The sexism is obvious in the Article's legalisation of physical violence and murder against women without any conditions or deliberation. The disparity between the Jordanian legal penalty and the Islamic one is because the former is not based on Islamic teachings, but derived from other legal codes such as the French code (p.73). Islam is not a violent religion that propagates gender oppression or gives a male family member the right to end the life of either adulterous men or women. In Islam, the penalty for adultery should never be executed by individuals, only by the Islamic state, after careful consideration of the aforementioned conditions.

In fact, it is patriarchal authorities and Islamists who support honour killings in the name of Islam. Faqir observes that Islamists in Parliament have rejected cancellation or amendments to Article 340 repeatedly, saying that the Article should remain in order to "stop promiscuity [and] moral disintegration in society" (as cited in Faqir, 2001, p. 74–75). A prominent Islamist senator in the Jordanian Parliament speaks against applying equal penalties for adulterous husbands, as in the Islamic legislative system, arguing that "whether we like it or not women are not equal to men in several aspects in Islam. Female adulterers are worse than male adulterers; they determine family ancestry and if they bear children out of wedlock then the right to inheritance would be lost" (as cited in Faqir, 2001, p. 75). Faqir exposes the hypocrisy and discrimination in the Jordanian legislative system for failing to apply the same penalty to husbands as the wives committing adultery. Further, opposition to the cancellation of or amendments to these articles of law are justified by connecting honour to national identity—Islamists and nationalists argue that protecting women's honour is an act of defiance and resistance against Western influence (Faqir, 2001, p. 76). This kind of nationalist discourse strengthens their position and increases public support, while weakening the stance of Jordanian feminists like Faqir by making it seem Western. Such inappropriate interpretations of the Islamic law, and opposition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Jordanian feminists' demands can be explained in terms of protecting and sustaining male hegemony and subordination of women. Thus, efforts to end honour killings in Jordan have been a huge challenge for Jordanian feminists.

This persistence of tribal codes of honour in the face of global norms, historic changes, and even religion, where, as Faqir states sadly, "the protection of honour now takes priority over Islamic teachings" (2001, p. 74) leads to the imprisonment of Salma to protect her from her

father and brother, who want to kill her for staining the family's honour. No authority could deter angry male family members from avenging their honour, and she must run for her life instead. Faqir observes that "despite the attempted changes, the pre-Islamic code of honour survived, creating a powerful value system parallel to Islam and the newer political ideologies" (2001, p. 79), and proposes two ways to end gender-based violence and honour crimes in Jordan. First is "true democratization"—where feminists can take part in decision-making on women's issues (p. 78). Second is for Jordan to compare Islamic pronouncements on women's honour and behaviour with those in its secular code to see how far apart they are, and address this difference (p. 77–78). In other words, she demands reinstating Islamic rules on women's violation of their families' honour, instead of sexist laws (p. 78). Her proposal indicates the extent to which gender is socially and culturally constructed.

Crossing cultural and social boundaries is hazardous for Arab women writers. Faqir notes that "to expose the inner self publically" and "challenge cultural conceptions of women's role" is to "risk losing the respect of the family and society at large" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p. 14). Both *My Name is Salma* and *Pillars of Salt*, reveal instances of demonization of women and violence against them that are tolerated in Jordan. Until she leaves Jordan, Faqir cannot criticise oppressive social, cultural, and political systems; women must remain silent "in the house of obedience" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p. 52). Faqir is dissatisfied with the monologic discourse on women's lives in Jordan, "when faith is presented as all or nothing, when two plus two no longer equals four, when the writer must decide to follow the men of religion, to be a clown of the court, or to write the truth of her heart" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p. 52–53). Therefore, she refuses to let her voice be "silenced" or her stories "distorted" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p. 53) and chooses to move her protagonist to another location to protect her stories from distortion and effacement in a hypocritical and violent society.

Living in diaspora also gave Faqir the opportunity to observe Western hypocrisy and racial violence, in particular, the disparity between Western Orientalist discourse on Arab women and their real lives. She states that one "cannot fight the authoritarian sultans and mullahs in [one's] country of origin without fighting reductionism, colonialism and misrepresentation in the Western media" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p.53–54). Faqir's sentiments towards Western misrepresentations of Arabs are best expressed in her own words:

When you fail to recognize the truth of your experience in the Western perception and representation of it, when you realize that you are—after all years of living in exile—still dark, incomprehensible, and completely surrounded by high white walls [...] you become so anguished over seeing yourself mutilated every day on [TV] screen" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, p.59).

Diasporic Arab women writers play a significant role in ensuring that the image of their Arab sisters back home are not distorted through a commitment to authentic representation of these women's lives and issues and appropriating the language of the coloniser to speak in a way that will be understood. Susan Darraj, an Arab-American feminist writer, expounds on the need for "the voice of an Arab woman to speak the truth without the influence of others sliding in to corrupt her story" (Darraj, 2004, p. 2). Faqir has always struggled with English translations of Arabic works, which more often than not, she argues, fail to transmit the essence of Arab culture, traditions, and history (Faqir, 2004, p. 166). She believes that most Western misconceptions

about Arabs and Islam spring from literal translations (Faqir, 2004, p. 166); therefore, she asserts, it is the duty of Arab writers living in the West to “cut out the middle-man and create an ‘Arab book’ in the language of the other” (2004, p. 168).

Through postcolonial counter discourse, Faqir disavows the Orientalist discourse, which produces racist, generic statements about Arab men and women bolstered by claims of thorough and objective knowledge. Sadly, the common thread connecting orientalist works and projects over the past years is the notion of the repressive core and teachings of Islam with regard to women; “far from having overcome those ahistorical generalizations so characteristic of earlier orientalist scholarship, many recent works exploring the nature of Muslim societies, [...] evoke images of unchanging and ever-present characteristics of Islam” (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 131). Counter discourse, a term coined by Richard Terdiman (1985), signals complex non-military resistance by oppressed minorities to hegemonic powers and oppressive discourses (p. 13). Literature is regarded as one of the most powerful forms of symbolic resistance. The next section will explore her counter-hegemonic riposte in *Pillars of Salt*.

Resistance to Orientalist Misrepresentation and Patriarchal Hegemony in *Pillars of Salt*

Pillars of Salt, set during the British Mandate, tells the story of Maha, who is a strong and kind woman, the daughter of Sheikh Nimer. She quarrels with her brother, Daffash, who beats her brutally. She defies his authority, and opposes his sexual exploitation of village women. The novel tells also of her love for Harb, which leads to a short-lived happy marriage, as Harb is killed by the British army during one of his rebellious raids against their rule. Maha’s conflict with her brother is intensified by his support of the British officers. Unable to control Maha’s life the way he wants to, Daffash admits her into an asylum to get rid of her. In the asylum, Maha meets Um Saad, another battered woman thrown out by her husband after 20 years of marriage.

The novel is narrated in three different voices: the Storyteller, Maha, and Um Saad. Two of these voices—the Storyteller and Maha—narrate the same story. The Storyteller is known as *alhakawati* in Arab countries: a person, usually a native, who travels from place to place to tell stories. Faqir adds a new dimension to this stock character by making him a foreigner, an Orientalist traveller from the West. The Storyteller introduces himself as “Sami al-Adjnabi, the best storyteller in Arabia and the oldest traveller in the Levant” (Faqir, 2007, p. 1). In Arabic, *al-Adjnabi* means the foreigner. In opposition to his story, Faqir chooses a woman to provide the insider’s view, creating a feminist narrative that represents indigenous women and culture in opposition to a misogynist, Orientalist narrative from outside. According to Anastasia Valassopoulos, Faqir “paves the way for [an] engaged reading when she invites [Western readers] to open the book of Arab women’s stories and listen to their clear voices” (2007, p. 110). Moreover, readers have the opportunity to decide what is real and what is not in the Storyteller’s story because of the presence of another version of the story, in Maha’s voice. There is a paradox between the way the Storyteller starts his narration and the tales he narrates—the first Qur’anic verse he recites is “confound not truth with falsehood, nor knowingly conceal the truth” (cited in Faqir, 1996, p. 1), but he does not practice what he preaches; he mixes up what actually happened and what he fabricates. He distorts events and interprets them the way he likes. The obvious exaggerations and distortions in the Storyteller’s narrative make it unreliable.

As suggested above, the Storyteller’s tale recalls Orientalist discourse in many respects. Faqir shows how the Storyteller’s narrative is largely based on miscomprehension and

misinterpretation of Qur’anic verses about women. The Storyteller depends on “a reservoir of oral tales mainly inspired by the *Arabian Nights*, folktales and quotations from the Qur’an” (Elsherif & Smith, 2013, p. 72). A clear example of this is his citation of the verse in which women’s cunning is mentioned in a particular context. Verse 34 in Surat Yusuf tells the story of the seduction of the prophet Yusuf by the wife of the king of Egypt and her attempts to trap him when the prophet rejects her. The Storyteller takes this verse out of context, and makes a generic statement about the “women of Arabia” (Faqir, 2007, p. 8). He uses this verse to support his allegation that Maha attempted poisoning her father to take over his land. The Storyteller further misinterprets the same Qur’anic verse to justify violence against women because women are naturally “foul and evil” (p. 139). Contrary to the Storyteller’s tale, however, readers can see that Maha is a virtuous woman. The way the Storyteller tries to force all Arab women in the village into the same mould, casting them as vicious witches, is a reminder of the egregiousness of Orientalist stereotyping of Arab women and effacing of their differences.

To speak against the sovereignty of male domestic power, however, is not accepted in the novel’s milieu. Maha relentlessly challenges her brother and refuses to give up her share in her father’s land and marry Sheikh Talib to win his support. Likewise, when Um Saad finally dares to leave her house-prison on her own, she seeks refuge in the mosque. However, her husband brings her back home only to take her to the mental asylum next. Due to their resistance and rebellion, these women are considered either insane or corrupt, and are banished from their houses, village, and even country—an extreme reaction taken by the dominant patriarchal order as a protective measure to sustain male dominance and control. Men are granted this unquestionable authority by the cultural, social, economic, and political paradigms in the country.

Faqir provides space and power to these silenced women to voice their sufferings and struggles through the two female narrators, Maha and Um Saad. Ironically, the “space” in question is a room in an asylum. Nevertheless, it is within this place that they share their past and present heartaches and begin to feel free, by becoming aware of their identities as women for the first time. Both characters try to reclaim these identities by reflecting on their experiences during their youth and their struggles and unresolved traumas. Old Um Saad comes to the bitter realisation that her life has been wasted in the service of her ungrateful husband, who is 25 years older than her. As a woman, she was a mere “container in which [Abu Saad] could get rid of his frustration” (Faqir, 2007, p. 151). Maha, too, realises that as a woman she has no control over her life.

To draw a picture of such violently repressed Jordanian women makes us question Faqir’s motives behind the novel. Faqir’s former professor at the University of East Anglia, Angela Carter, describes *Pillars of Salt* as “a feminist vision of Orientalism” (Faqir, 2013, p. 72). Orientalism, which begins with Edward Said’s classic book *Orientalism* (1978), can be defined as the study and representation of the orient in service of western imperialist agendas. Orientalism becomes associated with the West’s “patronizing” representation of the East for the purpose of controlling and ruling over eastern societies politically, economically and culturally (Bullock, 1993, p.617). The narrative of the Storyteller—the Orientalist traveller—is full of misrepresented events and images of Arab women and the way they are treated in Islam. However, Maha’s counter-narrative clearly shows that despite the Storyteller being the oldest traveller in Arabia, his stories about Arab women produce essentialist and monolithic images that

do not change with the passage of years. Hence, the novel is the result of a female voice asking readers to carefully examine the discrepancies in the Storyteller's narrative.

In addition, the Orientalist discourse mostly extracts the image of the "Oriental" man or woman out of the historical, cultural, and social context and generalises it to include different contexts—all in service of Western political agendas pertaining to Arab countries. In her novels, Faqir designs an oppositional narrative in which Arab women "weave a language of their own" for the purpose of challenging, disrupting, and subverting the "master narrative" (Faqir&Eber, 1998, 22–23). In *Pillars of Salt*, Faqir shows how the Orientalist discourse on Arab women goes as far back in history as *Aljahiliah* (the pre-Islamic era) to derive a monolithic image of Arab women, their culture, and religion. The Storyteller's generic statement about Maha being the symbol of Arab women since *Aljahiliah* is anomalous—as the novel is set during the English mandate over Jordan in 1921—and signals the Orientalist discursive homogenisation of Arab women's experiences throughout history:

Maha was born when the first female child was buried alive by the tribe of Bani-Quraish. When the tribe was told that they had a daughter instead of a son, their faces turned black. [...] burying alive under the ground, the two wings of Maha's soul fidgeted, and glided over the gloomy horizon of the Arabia. Her cry echoes in female hearts calling for revenge. That's why no man can trust his wife, no Lord can trust his mistress. (Faqir, 2007, p. 3)

Suyoufie and Hammad argue that Faqir's presentation of Arab and Muslim culture is unsuccessful and aligns it with that of the Storyteller, arguing that she perpetuates the stereotypical image of oppressed Arab women that is upheld in Western feminist and Orientalist discourses (2009, p. 306). Umm Saad's submissiveness and the sexually violated village women, the assaults borne by Maha and Salma all seem to be the basis of their conclusion about Faqir's novel. One of the main challenges that feminists in postcolonial contexts continue to confront is the assumption that critiquing oppressive patriarchal paradigms in their societies means that they are somehow Westernised or co-opted. In defence of Third World feminists' activism, AiméCésaire explains, "to challenge gender oppression within their own culture does not make them Western" (1955, p. 11). Clearly, Suyoufie and Hammad (2009) have overlooked how Faqir has cleverly balanced this Orientalist-misogynist image with a display of unflinching determination and resistance of Maha. Readers quickly discern Maha's strong character despite the social and political constraints on her. For example, when she realises she is cooking for the English, she attacks them with knives and forks at the party; and she does not give up her right to the land despite Daffash's repeated beatings. Um Saad's acceptance of her unfortunate life and the brutality of her father and husband is complemented by Maha's obstinacy and courage, thus, representing two sides of the coin and while also subverting claims about Faqir's betrayal of her Arab kinswomen. Valassopoulos rightly points out how "stifling [it is] to assume that Arab women's writings are an affirmation of oppression" (2007, p. 4). Faqir does not deny the subordination and repression of women in her country or misrepresent their reality; she lays out the issues facing Jordanian women in order to address them, highlighting that even though there is violence against women in Jordan, there is also resistance against it. Nor does Faqir give one-dimensional picture of men in her culture. The men in the novel are not all, as Suyoufie and Hammad state, "ruthless when it comes to women, but sheepishly obsequious before the

colonizers” (2009, p. 307). Harb and other men in the tribe are brave warriors who defend their village and rail against the British invaders. Harb is also kind to his wife and mother.

Misunderstanding real Islam is not only limited to Orientalist discourse, but also evident in Muslim societies. The patriarchal rhetoric prevalent in a society like Jordan—which reserves full power, control, and privilege over women for men—claims its roots in the Holy Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad’s teachings. There is more than one reference to this rhetoric in both novels where we see, for instance, the absolute authority that imams exercise using their status as religious leaders. Salma tells us how her father and other farmers “cannot sell [their] olives before getting a fatwa from the Imam” (Faqir, 2007, p. 34), while Daffash listens to the imam’s advice to admit his sister Maha into an asylum based on her relentless resistance and defiance of their authorities. Further, the imam urges Daffash to use violence against Maha when she demands for her rightful share in her father’s land, saying, “Imam Rajab reminded [Daffash] ‘Allah said in his wise book: beat them up’” (p. 217). The Imam takes the verse about beating women up out of its context and uses it in a completely different context in order to silence Maha, who defends her rights. In Surat Al-Nisaa, verse 34 lists a number of steps that can be followed gradually by husbands in order to save their marriage and restore their wives’ loyalty, “those whom you fear their desertion, admonish them, then leave them alone in the sleeping-places, then beat them; if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great” (Qur’an 4: 34). These steps should be applied in a marital relationship in specific conditions, as mentioned clearly in the verse. It does not involve a sister who is asking for her right to inheritance given to her by Islam. Even so, the verse does not suggest violence against wives. Kahf, Muslim feminist and researcher in misrepresented Islam, argues that this verse “seems to suggest Islam allowing husbands to beat their wives, but to misread it that way perverts the entire fabric of Islamic law and the spirit of marriage set forth elsewhere in the Qur’an” (1999, p.180). She adds, “no Islamic commentator, male or female, ancient or modern, considers the verse as permitting abuse” (1999, p. 180).

Faqir exposes gender bias in the village as a microcosmic example of what happens in the society at large. From their birth, girls are received with resentment, because they are associated with family shame: “‘The burden of girls is from cradle to coffin,’ said my father” (Faqir, 2007, p. 117). Cultural conventions entitle men to exercise unlimited power over the women in their families—Daffash even dictates Maha’s words and actions: “‘Imam Rajab will ask you some questions. You answer yes.’” (Faqir, 2007, p. 210).

Furthermore, there is silence and blindness when it comes to men’s misbehaviour. The authority that imams (representing religious authority) have over people is not questioned in some Muslim communities. Lack of a deterrent rule for men’s violation of women and the understanding that women are at men’s disposal are clearly shown by the passive attitude of Daffash’s father and the imams, the highest authorities in the village, when they find out that Daffash has raped Maha’s friend Nasra more than once. Salma’s brother kills her daughter and finally kills her. The option of repentance is not even given to Salma; it is either life-long imprisonment or death. Nor do they consider her young age. Faqir questions the inequality between men and women before the law and the problematic role of the family’s honour. More importantly, Faqir shows how women’s rights could get more complicated when religious authority becomes synonymous with patriarchal dominance and control, and any clash with

patriarchal order is regarded as a disagreement with, or worse, as deviating from religion itself: Daffash says, “I don’t talk to women. No brain and no faith”, and the imam nods approvingly (Faqir, 2007, p. 216). However, she deftly exposes the hypocrisy involved in neo-patriarchy, as exemplified by Imam Rajab, who is focused on pleasing both Sheikh Nimer and his son, Daffash. Imam Rajab witnesses Sheikh Nimer’s will, which gives a piece of land to Maha; however, after Sheikh Nimer’s death, he denies the will to gratify the person who will now be in charge of the village, Daffash, thus establishing that religious authority works in the service of patriarchal control in *Pillars of Salt*.

Conclusion

The narratives and stances of Maha, Um Saad, and Salma together represent a highly-charged feminist counter-discourse to multiple hegemonic oppressive paradigms in their lives. Maha’s fight against her brother, who raped her friend Nasra, shows female solidarity and rejection of male violence. If not for her father’s intervention, Maha would have shot and killed her brother. Although Um Saad is not as outspoken and fearless as Maha, her outbursts in the hospital also help unravel male chauvinism. Salma’s reluctance to give up, her stamina, perseverance, and the courage with which she faces death in the end illustrate that Salma is not weak, as readers might have initially thought due to the repeated assaults and crises she experiences in her life. More specifically, she is a resourceful person doing everything she can to fight oppression and survive. She pursues high school and university education in London and her letters can be considered as feminist missives demanding women’s rights and overturning absolute male control. Thus, these women’s stories are replete with different instances and types of resistance, whether in the madhouse, the village, or abroad, against continuous and various types of patriarchal violence and oppression.

The struggles of Maha, Nasra, and Um Saad convey Faqir’s message that women’s activism is urgently needed in Jordan to fight for those women who cannot voice or grapple with their trauma. Both novels direct attention to the reality beneath some of the Jordanian society’s elements that are unquestioned, such as Imams, honour killings, prisons, and mental asylums with respect to women. Faqir’s feminist strategy embodies the activism of feminists in some Muslim countries who upset and dismantle hegemonic patriarchy by returning to Sharia rules, from their authentic sources, i.e. the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad’s teachings. Here, feminists could protect women’s rights against patriarchal misreading and misinterpretation of scriptures, on one hand, and rectify western stereotypical image of women’s status in Islam, on the other hand. This research aims at directing further attention and scholarship on how western discourse on Muslim women frequently depends, in addition to Orientalist narrative, on Islamist movements in some Arab countries as explaining the Islamic law.

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