

“Unhomeliness” and the Arab Woman in Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* (1996)**Malika HAMMOUCHE**Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Languages
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Oran. Algeria**Abstract:**

The concept of “Unhomeliness” as defined by Homi Bhabha will be used in this work to analyse *Pillars of Salt*, written by Fadia Faqir in 1996. This paper intends 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, reflect the author’s Arabo-islamic womanism in this literary production. It consists in exploring 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.

Keywords: Arabo-islamic womanism, Colonialism, Faqir, Orientalism, Patriarchy, *Pillars of Salt*, Unhomeliness, unhomely

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Introduction:

Despite earlier attempts, the Arab woman writer did not contribute significantly to the genre of novel until the second half of the twentieth century. From the 1960s to the 1990s, this form developed, bringing to the fore a postcolonial writing representing the encounter between the East and the West. As argued by Rasheed el-Enany, progressively, this form reaches a staggering degree of artistic maturity and originality of vision (Suyoufie, 2008, P. 224).

The concept of “unhomeliness” will be used in this paper to describe the psychological pressure experienced by the female characters of Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* (henceforth *Pillars*). It will also serve to describe the feeling of displacement engendered by the different oppressions the female characters experience and resist. As defined by Bhabha (2009): “‘unhomeliness’ is perceived as having a direct bearing on identity awareness and its reconstruction amidst the overwhelming external forces of dislocation and depersonalization” (as cited in Suyoufie & Hammad, 2009, p. 271). In this paper, The researcher intends to demonstrate how “unhomeliness” is represented in Faqir’s novel, as patriarchal, colonial and imperial “unhomeliness”.

In Fadia Faqir’s novels, such as *Nisanit* (1988), *Pillars of Salt* (1996), *My Name is Salma* (2007), *At the Midnight Kitchen* (2009) and *Willow Trees Don’t Weep* (2014) we encounter an author whose literature always contains a double criticism, deconstructing “the Occident’s logocentrism and ethnocentrism” (as cited Mehrez in Abdo, 2009, p. 242). Faqir represents her characters as victims of tradition, religion, history, geography or politics in her literary writings. She depicts the power structure existing at different levels and domains (Moore, 2011, p. 4).

The story of *Pillars* is set in Jordan during and after the British mandate. It tells the story of two Jordanian women confined in a madhouse. The narration is shared by two voices: Maha, a Bedouin woman sent to the madhouse after being harshly beaten by her brother Daffash because of her refusal to marry a second time after the death of her husband. She tells her story and that of her roommate, Um Saad (or Haniyyeh) who is a city woman (daughter of a Syrian émigré) whose husband brings a second wife to their house after many years of marriage. The narration is shared with a second voice, that of The Storyteller. He is a foreigner who provides us with his vision of Maha’s story.

This novel has been criticized in an orientalist tradition and considered, on the one hand, as “‘Arabian Nights’ fabulism and social concern regarding the representation of Arab women,” a book whose basic concern is “anti-traditional feminist themes” (Steinberg in Abdou, 2009, p. 266). On the other hand, Bibizadeh considers Faqir as an “Islamic womanist” borrowing Miriam Cooke’s idiom (Bibizadeh, 2012, p. 10). Yet a post colonial reading of this novel entails taking into consideration racial and sexual aspects together. For this reason, one has to qualify her ideology differently and that I will coin “Arabo-Islamic womanism” in this work. In this paper the concept of “Unhomeliness” encompasses three different indictments revealed behind significant scenes in the novel *Pillars* where plausible interpretations will be considered as an illustration of patriarchal, colonial and imperial “unhomeliness” and through which the author’s Arab-islamic womanism is unveiled.

In Arabo-islamic womanist writing, Faqir represents a multi-layered criticism where two important aspects of oppression tackled and resisted by female characters. On the one hand, we find the indictment against the androcentric and the colonial systems represented by the traditional patriarchy in the Arab and Muslim context and by colonialism as demonstrated in the following two points: patriarchal and colonial “unhomeliness”. On the other hand, the western hegemony represented under the orientalist vision of the Arab Muslim woman is condemned. The third title will demonstrate the imperial aspect condemned by Faqir’s ideology.

Patriarchal “Unhomeliness”:

Faqir voices through the character of Haniyyeh the transmission of “unhomely” values from a mother to her daughter, strengthened by religious patriarchy. In the asylum Haniyyeh tells her roommate Maha how she was treated by her mother when she was very young: “...they sent me to school. My mother made me wear a long black skirt, a black cape, covered my head and my face with a black veil. Hot, masked and unable to breathe, I walked to the Kutab, the religious school run by the mosque...” (Faqir, 1996, p. 38).

Although suffocating under her veil, Haniyyeh is depicted as very excited to learn to write and read. As she says to Maha: “My favorite surah was the Blood Clot. ‘Read: In the name of thy Lord who created. Created man from a blood clot... Who taught by the pen. Taught man that which he knew not’”(Faqir,1996, p. 38). A year later, her happiness disappeared along with her youth. Her father ordered her to stay at home with her mother because she was growing up. (Faqir, 1996, p. 39) The female character appreciated the Islamic education and so did her classmates: “I lifted the veil and saw the faces of my classmates. The faces of Transjordanian girls beamed with happiness.” (Faqir, 1996, p. 38) Yet, this happiness is interrupted and invaded by patriarchal domination. Haniyyeh enjoyed going to the Qur’anic school because it provided her with an excuse to leave their house and escape her father’s wrath. (Faqir, 1996, p. 39) The house where she grew up in is described as an “unhomely” environment because of a patriarchal system in which men were granted rights women simply were not. “Unhomeliness” is lived as a displacement. “In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.” (Bhabha as cited in Suyoufie &Hammad, 2009, p. 286)

Patriarchal “unhomeliness” is also reflected in the importance given to women’s marriage and virginity. Haniyyeh’s growth represented a threat to her father’s purity. She must stay at home to preserve her virginity. She was forced to marry a man she did not love and Haniyyeh becomes Um Saad after marriage. (Faqir, 1996: 39) About the importance of women’s virginity for the Arab man, Mernissi writes:

Like honor, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self confidence. The concept of honor and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman (Mernissi, 1992, p.183).

In the Arab Muslim culture, the purity of the men in the family is determined by the sex organs of their daughters and sisters. This is well represented by Maha. As Harb asked Maha to see her in the night before marriage, her answer was: “Are you mad? For a girl to be out at night is a crime of honor. They will shoot me between the eyes.” (Faqir, 1996: 10)

In Maha’s culture a woman must preserve her sexual reputation because the spreading of rumors plays an important role and may instigate honor crimes. Faqir emphasizes the importance of a bride’s virginity in the utterances of Maha more than in those of Um Saad although they belong to the same Arab Muslim culture. This difference highlights the degree of importance that exists between the urban areas and rural areas. Faqir argues in her essay on honor killing in Jordan:

Within centres the honour of the individual is related to that of the family, but in rural areas the honour of the individual has wider connotations and is related to that of the family, clan, community and tribe. Tribal law, or ‘urf, considers honour as something that does not belong to one individual, but to the whole community. (Faqir, 2001, p. 75)

The importance of young girls’ virginity is an aspect typical to patriarchal communities and which is controlled by marriage. Faqir criticizes the patriarchal system, giving much importance to this aspect through the voice of Maha. During their wedding night, to help her husband prove her chastity Maha asked Harb to give the whole tribe, who are waiting outside their room for the cloth with Maha’s virgin blood, a cloth with the blood from the tip of her finger as she nicked it. Maha says to Harb: ““We can fool them”... “It is my blood they are after”... “Prick my little finger with the end of your dagger” ... “Give them the proof of my chastity. Quickly”” (Faqir, 1996, pp. 45-6)

Yet, through the marriage of the Bedouin Maha with Harb (the Arab warrior who died while fighting against the British colonizer and whose name means war in Arabic) Faqir is reflecting another dimension of the importance of the Arab girl’s virginity. The importance and the protection of the purity of the colonized Arab woman represent a way to resist the Western influence and preserve the national identity during the British mandate. Faqir writes: “The protection of ‘ird or women’s honour was perceived as the last resort against Western influence and modernization during the British Mandate in Palestine and Jordan.”(Faqir, 2001, p: 76) This shows that traditional patriarchy operates as a harsh protector within a colonial context. Yet, while highlighting this aspect in *Pillars*, Faqir portrays the Arab woman as a container filled with consumable objects. (Abdo, 2009, p. 260). For instance, when Maha was confirmed to be a virgin on her wedding night, she says: “the honey in its jar was safe; I was pure.” (Faqir, 1996, p. 46) or in songs like: ““Dark haired beauty. / Oh dark-haired beauty. / You are the glass. / And your lips are wine.”” (Faqir, 1996, p. 79)

This portrayal strengthens the “unhomeliness” that marriage represents in such a culture. “Unhomeliness” within the traditional or private sphere is well described through the marriage of Maha with Harb. The first time Maha enters the house of her husband she describes her feeling:

Harb’s well lit house looked unfamiliar in the darkness – our own roof was dome-shaped and low, Harb’s was flat and high. When my father built our house he patted the doors into arch-shapes. Harb’s house had straight lines which met to form sharp angles. The lines in our house were circular and stooping. My body would not fit through the rectangular door. It was my new home. I must loosen up. I repeated that several times, until the minaret of the shrine caught the echo and repeated, “loosen up, Turn into rectangular, Allah-u Akbar”. (Faqir, 1996, p. 43)

“Unhomeliness” within marriage is experienced more harshly by Haniyyeh, as she is forced by her father to marry a man she does not love and is prevented from marrying the man she does. This situation makes reference to the prohibition of love and desire in the predominant discourse of the patriarchal system that regulates and controls the bodies and desires of women and men. Haniyyeh was beaten by her father when he discovered her secret meeting with a man she loved: “I ate about a hundred lashes” (Faqir, 1996, p. 100)

In *Pillars*, patriarchal “unhomeliness” is also experienced through women’s infertility. The phenomenon of mothers denigrating barren women is described through Maha’s difficulty in having a child with Harb. Aunt Tamam, Harb’s mother, almost forced her to endure violent practices, such as cauterization, in order to give a child to her son. Faqir demonstrates through her female characters how, though women suffer from the restricting values of their culture, women also perpetuate these values and eternalize negative stereotypes about themselves. Maha formulates what her mother used to say when Daffash brutalized her: “...my mother...Her gentle touch on my plaits used to wipe out the pain of Daffash’s slaps. “What do you expect? He is a boy. Allah placed him a step higher. We must accept Allah’s verdict””, (Faqir, 1996, p. 33)

Polygyny also causes and results from patriarchal “unhomeliness”. When Maha suffered from cauterization for procreation she says to Tamam accepting and justifying polygyny: “I did not want children. I was barren. Barren. Do you hear me? “Tamam, get your son another wife”” (Faqir, 1996, p. 75)

Before giving birth to her first son Mubarak, Maha’s infertility represented an important phase in which her “unhomeliness” in a patriarchal society could be easily gauged. Her body, privacy and domestic space are invaded by the intrusion of Hajjeh Hulala’s investigation and cauterization. She described her mutilation for procreation to Um Saad as a descent into hell. (Faqir, 1996, p.73) Through the physical pain, Faqir binds together violence and the female body to shed light on and criticize the “unhomeliness” of the patriarchal system. In *Pillars*, the phenomenon of beaten daughters, sisters or wives is described as an act of violence on women’s bodies. She condemns the patriarchal system of the Bedouin communities.

In the asylum Um Saad shares her story with her roommate Maha. She tells her how she was beaten by her father without reason: “...They just beat me without a reason...” (Faqir, 1996, p. 79), or when she states: “...my father shouted at me, and started beating me with his leather belt. The buckle was cold and sharp ... That night, I dreamt of the Vanishing Cap. I wanted to be

invisible like ether. I wanted to slip into another identity. Can you cast off your identity like dirty underwear? Can you?” (Faqir, 1996, p.80)

The scene describing Um Saad’s wedding night is another example reflecting the violence her body receives as she is raped by her husband: “He looked at me assessingly, patted my hairless stomach with his cold fingers, forced my legs open, then penetrated my discarded body. I hugged myself tightly and kept repeating the name of al-Shater Hasan.” (Faqir, 1996, pp. 109-10) Then Um Saad tells Maha how during the early days of their marriage her husband, Abu Saad the butcher, beat her before sleeping with her. (Faqir, 1996. P. 179). In return, Maha narrates how she was kicked in the face with her brother’s boots because she refused to cook for his English friends. (Faqir, 1996, p. 164) Another time, she was beaten by Daffash when she refused to marry Sheikh Talib (A man who, prior to this, has tried to rape her one night as she was walking alone in the bush). Daffash’s brutal behaviour was supported by the utterances of Imam Rajab who reminded him as he was beating Maha: “Allah said in his Wise Book, ‘Beat them up.’” (Faqir, 1996, p. 217) Through this passage we observe how Faqir emphasizes male misinterpretation of the Qur’an through the male character’s voice Imam Rajab. voice (without taking into consideration the context of the verses).

Maha’s narrative describing the way the physical pain is firstly lived through violent practices when she wanted to have a child, then when she was beaten by her brother Daffash as she refused to obey, and then the experience of a beaten wife and daughter as told to her by Um Saad, reflects how the female body can betray its owner. They are tortured and their bodies mutilated because they are women. It is through such an experience of violence that Maha finally understands what was meant by Um Saad when she says she wants to change her identity as her father refused to marry her to the man she loved:

I collapsed and started calling al-Shater Hasan at the top of my voice. Roll into oblivion. Roll into another identity. Depart this body. I could not stop the flooding tears; I could not move my arms or legs, I could not stop shouting [...]. I rubbed my eyes, I began understanding what Um-Saad meant when she spoke of ‘identity’ (Faqir, 1996, p. 101).

Though oppressive, patriarchy is an important pillar in the construction of female identity. As argued by Joseph: “...patriarchy in some Arab societies is linked to a ‘connective’ (or relational) notion of self that is embedded in relationships.” This is partly what contributes into the persistence of such a system, (Joseph, 1996, p. 18) as highlighted by the author through the character of Um Saad and this is nothing but one characteristic of the author’s womanism where tradition is a means of resistance.

In *Pillars*, women are addressed as slaves and servants. The following songs used by different female characters in this novel demonstrate this vocabulary of slavery and servitude: “‘Hey Saideh, listen to your master. / I am having a bath. / Obey you master. / Go to your master’” (Faqir, 1996p. 95) “‘Girl, do you have a protector with a sword and shield? / No, I don’t have one, but to you I will yield’” (Faqir, 1996, p. 56)

It is also reflected in Haniyyeh’s words as she refuses to marry the man chosen by her father, and says to this latter: “I will be your slave girl for the rest of my life” (Faqir, 1996, p. 108). Um Saad is ready to serve her father for the rest of her life rather than marry that man with whom she later becomes of victim of polygyny.

As argued earlier, the issue of polygyny is raised by Faqir in *Pillars* to expose women’s “unhomeliness” within the Arab patriarchal social system. Polygyny is the main cause of Um Saad’s internment in Fuhais Mental hospital. With the coming of a new wife to Um Saad’s house, the latter is thrown out from her bedroom to the kitchen, then completely outside her house. As she tells Maha: “That night, I slept with my kids on the floor. Did I say slept? I could not shut my eyes. The minaret of the Big Mosque was crying ‘Allahu-Akbar’ when I found my belongings flung on the floor of the sitting room.” (Faqir, 1996, pp. 178-9)

Um Saad’s kitchen is a significant place where she negotiates space in her husband house. It is an “unhomely” place where she exists and has a “full role”. The kitchen becomes an interesting site of articulation of gender relation. As she states:

I put on my brown Kaftan and went to the kitchen. You see, the kitchen was my domain, my space. I would shut the door and nobody would disturb me there. I wanted to talk. We never ever talked, Abu Saad and I. He gave me orders and I listened ... roll into another beautiful body and another identity. (Faqir, 1996, p. 151)

In this passage, Um Saad expresses her desire to negotiate her space differently than in the kitchen. She wants to speak. She could not, however, exist differently: As she says to Maha that she was forbidden to enter rooms in the house other than the kitchen. (Faqir, 1996, p. 185)

A reference to a patriarchal figure in the oral Arab tradition is constantly voiced by Um Saad as she mentions al Shater Hasan. Every time she is confronted to “unhomely” situations, when she is beaten by her father or raped by her husband on their wedding night, as quoted earlier, she calls this name. It is a way to call for somebody to liberate her by telling her story. It could also be regarded as a reference to a regretted traditional past during a colonial present.

The author’s Arabo-islamic womanist ideology is expressed in her use of tradition as a means to negotiate her space, and this idea of recycling tradition itself represents a mode of resistance against “colonial unhomeliness”.

Colonial “Unhomeliness”:

Instances in *Pillars* reflect the “unhomeliness” experienced by the colonized populations in urban cities; these are found in scenes describing the female protagonists walking in the contemporary city. Theorists such as De Certeau suggest that, in postcolonial texts, such an act of walking in the city implies “lacking a place” and that it is related to questions of citizenship, home, and belonging. (as cited in Herbert, 2014, p.210) In *Pillars*, a scene describes Maha angrily leaving the Pasha’s villa when she discovers she is cooking for the English people: “Foreign killers, all of you” I cried, then I marched past the parked cars, past the flashing lights of lamps, past the mud

hut of the guard, and out of the wide gate”(Faqir, 1996,p. 162). Here resides the feeling of displacement and “non-belonging” that characterizes colonial “unhomeliness” described through Maha’s reaction in this scene.

In Amman, colonial violence, like the patriarchal form in the village of Hamia, intervenes at the macro and micro levels. We notice that it operates within the female characters’ way of life. It is experienced as insecurity in the public as well as in the private spheres of Maha (through her relationship with her brother Daffash) and of Um Saad (via her relationship with her husband Abu Saad). Every time Um Saad speaks about Amman she describes its “unhomeliness”: “Amman was like a spacious Ottoman prison.”(Faqir, 1996, p. 71), “Amman has a black heart” (Faqir, 1996, p. 151) or when she describes it as an absent minded city. (Faqir, 1996, p. 178)

Daffash, meaning literally ‘the bully’, is described by Maha as a man without dignity. We find instances where the colonizer’s condescending view towards the colonized is depicted, as when the British audience laughs at Daffash dancing: “...Daffash [...] held the end of his cloak and started dancing the Dhiyya. They all pointed at him and shrieked with laughter” (Faqir, 1996, p. 90) Daffash epitomizes the ignorant Arab man who has sold his past and his history. He helped his friend, Samir Pasha, to loot archaeological sites: “They excavated the land and handed the old bowls, pots, and jars to the Pasha, grinning” (Faqir, 1996, p. 167). His behaviour reflects what theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon call mimicry (Fludernick, 2007, p. 268). Through this scene Faqir reflects how inferior the colonized feels and is perceived and how he needs to imitate the colonizer to resemble him.

Other instances in which Arab men living in the city are described negatively are recounted by Um Saad, the daughter of a Syrian emigrant, as she speaks about her father: “I did not like my father, but I really hated the French who made him restless and dirty.” (Faqir, 1996, p. 37) She describes him as having: “big hairy hand”, “fiery eyes”, “he stood like an eagle above my head” (Faqir, 1996 p. 100)

In *Pillars*, Faqir represents different forms of violence that a woman may experience within the home, through the female characters’ bodies. Micro and Macro violence is concretely represented in this novel through the rapeⁱ of Nasra by Daffash. (Faqir, 1996, p. 11) This scene represents the micro violence within an intimate relationship where it takes the shape of this rape. Further, this rape is experienced by Nasra as macro violence. On the one hand, at the level of her community, Nasra was accused by the people of her village of having provoked such an act. Daffash says to Maha: “She asked for it.” (Faqir, 1996, p. 12) On the other hand, the macro level representing the act of colonization: the scene of rape is a metaphor of the British intrusion in the land of Jordan, if we consider Daffash as an epitomy of the British colonizer and Nasra’s body as the land of Jordan. The metaphorical relationship between land and women has its roots in ancient western, African and modern Arabic literatureⁱⁱ. To possess the colonized woman means to possess the colonized land. The colonized woman embodies the colonized cultural identity. In the Arab context, as Fanon’s analysisⁱⁱⁱ of the Algerian case, comparing Algeria to a veiled woman, the unveiling of the Arab woman (through rape) indicates this relationship to her cultural identity and

to the land. The scene describing Um Saad putting her veil on her head and wishing to change her identity, as demonstrated earlier, is also a reference to this relationship. To unveil the colonized Arab woman (and rape her like Nasra) destroys her identity and dispossesses the colonized (women and men) from their land. Unveiling in such situations is tantamount to rape.

It is through the character of Um Saad that the veil is used to highlight a specific identity. The veil of Um Saad symbolizes the Muslim community membership on the one hand. On the other hand, it is used as a means to maintain her identity^{iv} as she was in the “unhomely” asylum and to resist the “silencing” treatment given by the British doctor. In Faqir’s novel, the veil becomes a symbol in the anti-colonial struggle as the colonized woman’s body becomes the battlefield. Though considered by some feminists as the emblem of the Muslim woman’s oppression, in an “unhomely” colonial context, the veil functions as a traditional material used to negotiate colonized women’s space. And this is nothing but Arabo-islamic womanism in action.

Unveiling, for Um Saad, represents a source of anxiety. She told Maha how she felt when the man she loved, when she was younger, tried to unveil her: “He looked at me. I started crying like a fool [...] He lifted the black veil and kissed the powdered chin. ‘No, you must not. Do not touch me.’” (Faqir, 1996, p. 80) Though occupying a peripheral place in *Pillars*, the veil could be seen as a place of security for Faqir’s female characters. This is well reflected through Um Saad, who feels naked when the British doctor “snatched the pink scarf off Um Saad’s head and Um Saad objected, there are men in the room. I shouldn’t show my hair to strange men” (Faqir, 1996, p. 207) Um Saad’s identity has been constructed between the disavowal from her people (father, mother and husband) and the British doctor as a free and sane individual on the one hand, and on the other, the designation by her patriarchal community of a girl who must obey her father, a wife who must have children and accept polygyny. Furthermore, she is designated by the British doctor as an insane person who must be silenced.

In Faqir’s novel male characters epitomize different oppressions. Some native male characters, like Um Saad’s father and husband, underline the patriarchal “unhomeliness” experienced by the Arab woman. Other male characters, like Daffash, Samir Pasha and Dr Edwards (the British doctor) represent the colonial “unhomeliness” for Arab female characters (Maha, Nasra and Um Saad). Male characters are described negatively in the colonial city of Amman. This portrayal expresses Faqir’s indictments against patriarchy and colonialism. It has been demonstrated that Faqir’s womanism is, not only, a double criticism of race and gender but also a multiple criticism including the religious aspect. On the one hand, Islam is misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Arab man, and on the other, misrepresented and demonized by the utterances of a foreign narrator in the novel representing this time an imperial “unhomeliness”.

Imperial “unhomeliness” is a third oppressive aspect resulting from western domination suffered by Arab women and condemned in this novel. It is represented by “The Storyteller”. In *Pillars*, the female protagonist’s space is dominated by “The Storyteller’s” representation. As stated by Löw: “When boundaries are crossed by gazes, by touches, by invasion, by language, etc.,

or when different spaces do not coexist in harmony, it is social power and domination that take over.” (Löw, 2006, p. 128)

Imperial “Unhomeliness”:

Through the description of the storyteller we distinguish a colonial narrative presenting a western view of the native other and the native’s country. It is a situation of dominance where the female protagonist becomes a second narrator and tries to negotiate her space using her narrative.

Faqir makes of the first narrator, “The Storyteller”, half Arab and Muslim. Yet, she names him Sami Al Adjanibi to underline his foreign origins and create a conflation through focal character. On the one hand, he is the Arab man epitomizing patriarchal hegemony by speaking on behalf of the Arab woman. On the other hand, he represents the orientalist vision that stereotypes the Arab woman. The version of the storyteller is doubly mistaken, as a man he could not report correctly what was seen in the private life of Maha since Muslim customs excluded foreigners and males from the segregated Arab house^v. Despite his name, Sami Al Adjanibi, and his half Arab origin, his narrative reflects the travelogue representing a foreign country and its natives from a superior male/white perspective. From the exoticism with which he describes Maha one may recognize the otherness used in latent orientalism^{vi}.

In *Pillars*, Maha and the storyteller Sami Al Adjanibi never meet. Being a foreigner, he is not allowed to enter the indigenous domestic sphere. Maha is not really aware of his existence but mentioned him only once in her narrative as “that driveling liar”^{vii}. (Faqir, 1996, p.135)

Faqir names the second narrator “The Storyteller” to hint at its function as a medium of storytelling representing the other place or other person. The “Other” is thus encountered in his voice. As argued by Fludernik:

One very obvious level is that of the medium of storytelling. Most audiences and readers encounter narrative not merely as representing the other place or other person; they additionally encounter it in the voice of the storyteller [...] in which the actors iconically signify the otherness of the fictional world and their inhabitants. Not only the subject but also the medium of narrative therefore relate to a process of othering. (Fludernik, 2007, p265)

The escapism that the unfamiliar fictional narrative proposed by the storyteller is, therefore, in itself another level of alterity for the reader who tries to discover the setting and characters of the story and intends to immerse himself/herself in it.

Faqir gives privileged positions to the storyteller by beginning and ending the novel with their voice. According to Bridgeman, “Beginnings are where we first encounter the narrative world and establish its key characteristics. And endings are where we move towards our final interpretation of the narrative. Rabinowitz calls these “privileged positions.” (2007, p. 57) These

are narrative positions that capture Maha's story and image of the Arab woman in the storyteller's orientalist representation, but which Maha intends to liberate herself from.

The notion of alterity in narrative is exactly what the storyteller does through his utterances. He needs to create a thrilling story to excite and interest the audience. Maha's description by the storyteller is that of an unfamiliar, strange, superhuman and dangerous woman. Her environment is that of strangeness, forest and the Dead Sea. (Faqir, 1996, pp. 86-7) At this level Maha or the "Other" is the space of alterity. Faqir refers to Western travel writing on the Orient through the narrative of the storyteller. It is a hint at the orientalist description perpetuating the stereotype of the Arab woman as a "lascivious oriental female." (Faqir, 1996, p. 226) Negative descriptions of both male and female Arab characters are displayed in the narrative of the storyteller. The first depiction of the Arab male character is hardly complementary to the autochthonous Arab man. It is voiced through the orientalist representation of the storyteller:

They went to extremes to entertain foreigners before they even asked them their names[...] the Arabs of Hamia [...] had no dignity themselves, were born in that salty land, caught between the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. They lived there, counting winged cockroaches, then died there and were thus consigned to oblivion. (Faqir, 1996, p. 4)

The lack of mastery of Arabic by the storyteller underpins the unreliability of his version and reflects the impossibility of a total comprehension of a culture by an outsider. It also puts his "tellability" of storyteller at a disadvantageous position. This is well illustrated in the novel when he confuses the word "original," describing Daffash's Bedouin way of dancing and uttered by a woman, with Aba-al-Jimaal meaning "father of Camels" (Ibid: 90) showing that, in the storyteller's mind Bedouins are fathers of camels. (Abdo, 2009, p. 251)

The significance of Maha's name could be taken to satisfy the fantasies of a western representation. This name means young gazelle:

"a description that could foreshadow the way she will be 'slaughtered' and taken advantage of by these powerful men of the tribe who will use her musk, her sweet reputation, and twist it to their own political and economic advantage later on, in acquiring the land she inherits from her father." (Faqir, 1996, p. 248)

Yet, this name is used as an emphatic element for Maha's captured image in the exotic storyteller's representation. Through the storyteller's narrative, reviving the exotic within an orientalist representation, the author is utilizing exoticisation that could be defined as outmoded and orientalist. The exoticism used by the storyteller to describe Maha and her environment is reminiscent of European descriptions of the Orient. As argued by Edward Said: "[The] European invention [that] had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." (Said, 2003, p. 87)

Further to this, the clear reference to A Thousand and one Nights in Faqir's novel is a means of claiming "the legacy of exoticism in order to interrogate the discourse from within, whilst at the

same time immersing [herself] in it.” (Valassopoulos, 2007, p. 133) By juxtaposing the storyteller’s narrative with that of Maha, Faqir is joining Valassopoulos’ definition of exoticism or exoticisation as a “process, in authorship, undergone consciously and for a particular narrative effect.” (2007, p. 139). The fact that the storyteller’s narrative is contrasted with that of Maha shows that the author is using this concept for an anticolonial purpose and to reflect imperial “unhomeliness”. She is participating in the creation of a radical otherness through the storyteller’s narrative. She then deconstructs this misrepresentation by Maha’s intervention through a juxtaposed narrative with which Maha negotiates her space as a focal narrator.

This technique of constructing and deconstructing exoticism “can be a powerful, conscious tool for reviewing contact [of cultures] across time and space”; (Valassopoulos, 2007, p. 137) In this novel, Faqir re-exoticises the orientalist practice through the storyteller’s voice as a means of entering into a dialogue with representations of the past. The storyteller creates a space through his “unhomely” narrative where Maha is the “Other”. Yet, Faqir demonstrates that the ‘private space’ of Maha^{viii} has been violated by the colonial gaze and represented in a spurious manner by the storyteller. It is at this very moment that her image is captured by imperial “unhomeliness” and her identity is destroyed and seeks reconstruction through Maha’s narrative.

The idea of the gaze in *Pillars* creates a space, the storyteller’s space and Maha’s space. It is reflected in the storyteller’s perception and narrative and thus underlines the hierarchical structure of gender and race underlining the social power and domination of the orientalist. The storyteller is a traveler and he is telling a story about Jordan and the people of the village of Hamia. His curiosity is mirrored through his gaze. As his name indicates, he is a foreigner in the village of Hamia, his gaze is the “imperialist eye,” hinting at Western curiosity about the Orient. His narrative describing Maha and her people is an index of British superiority, that of the colonizer, on the one hand, and patriarchal power over the Arab woman on the other. He creates suspense through the secret gaze in the course of which he describes what he saw. The gaze of the storyteller may be read as a clue to the voyeurism of *A Thousand and One Nights* and, at the same time, as referring to the concept of the orientalist gaze, such as gazing lecherously at the closed door of Maha’s room on the day of her wedding, or when spying on the scene of consummation in the Dead Sea between Maha and Harb. (Faqir, 1996: 60-1) The scene of the gaze reflects the storyteller’s excitement at penetrating into the prohibited. Another instance is when Maha is examined by Hajjeh Hulala and the storyteller’s gaze went “through the opening between the large flat stones” of the dolman to see Maha’s naked body. (Faqir, 1996, p. 88) The same spying scene is reproduced in Samir Pasha’s villa where he watched the semi naked bodies of dancing women at the party (Faqir, 1996, p. 89).

Conclusion:

In *Pillars*, Um Saad’s ordeal narrated throughout Maha’s voice reveals an Arabic culture’s oppression of women in a colonial setting. Um Saad is a peripheral character that bears the writer’s feminist discourse. She moves from prison to prison, from her authoritative father’s home to her husband’s house (a butcher whose body and house stink of animal blood, dung and intestines) to finish her life confined in an asylum. Tormented by their past, Maha and Um Saad’s present is

worse. They are aware of a double oppression: one of their past (the patriarchal “unhomeliness”) and that of the present (colonial “unhomeliness”) experienced in the asylum shaped by the British doctor’s silencing treatment.

Their experiences are narrated through Maha’s voice. Maha’s narration exists in parallel to the storyteller’s narration. Maha’s image projected by the storyteller represents an imperial “unhomeliness” she resists as a focal narrator. The narrative uttered by Maha is different from the patronizing patriarchal discourse and the stereotyping western storyteller’s narrative. In addition to former oppressions, Faqir expresses her preoccupation about orientalist and exotic perceptions and ideas that still exist despite the fact that they have been challenged in the past.

Faqir’s novel presents a multi-layered criticism unveiling an Arabo-islamic womanism. Arabo-islamic womanism is to be recognized in Arab and Muslim women’s writing, in addition to the aspect of sexism, the impact of racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, orientalism, exoticism and psychological disorientation of Arab and Muslim women’s lives. Through the use of traditional means to carve one’s space for more freedom, we notice the predominance of the native culture claim over the claim of sexual politics.

Notes:

ⁱ According to Welsing, rape is, in a context of oppression, a cultural norm of the White man, a sick behaviour where genitals become a weapon. “Sexual inadequacy is, she argues, the basis for the development of weaponry as a mode of European conquest or control in the development of white supremacy.” (in Dove, 1998, p. 525) Following this line of reasoning, the oppressed male as characterized by Daffash is a debased human who, under his oppressor, employs the cultural norm of his oppressor to display his aggression.

ⁱⁱ This ancient metaphor equating women to the land and vice versa can be found, according to Fanon, in the Quranic texts: “Sura II, verse 223: “Your women are tilth for you [to cultivate] so go to your tilth as ye will.”” It is a metaphor that is shared in both the Algerian and the French psyches. Winifred Woodhull argues in *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures*: “The cultural record makes clear that women embody Algeria not only for Algerians in the day since independence, but also for the French colonizers... In the colonialist fantasy, to possess Algeria’s women is to possess Algeria.” (Fanon & Woodhull in Faulkner, 1996, p. 847)

ⁱⁱⁱ The veil is used by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* as a gesture of liberation the woman decides to undertake in order not to be “signified by the intruding, sexualising gaze of male, Western hegemony- she will now take agency of her own, personal corporal schema.” (Cariello, 2009, p. 341)

^{iv} To resist the colonial power, Islam, as a religion, serves as “a historical marker of belonging and resistance.” (Cooke, 2000, p. 158)

^v During the Augustan Enlightenment, Orientalist authority was contested. Western travelers knew very little about the private life of Arab men and women since male presence in the Middle

Eastern house was forbidden in the Muslim law and custom that is why domestic ethnography evolved as a female genre. (Melman, 2002, p. 111)

^{vi} Faqir said in an interview with a local Jordanian newspaper *Al Rai* (5 April 2002) that *Pillars of Salt* was written as a representation of the semi-Nomadic Bedouin life-style and life in Amman of her childhood and a way “to capture the beauty of Amman on paper, since it is beginning to fade.” She also states that “the thesis of the novel is based on the concept that orientalism and patriarchy run in parallel lines,. The orientalist often misrepresents the Oriental (Arab) women and, for him, they are often non-existent or not seen, just as she is for most Arab men.” As she puts it in the same interview: “I started with politics but ended in women’s issues.” (Faqir in Suyoufie & Hammad, 2009, p. 300)

^{vii} According to Faqir, the storyteller’s lies and imagined narrative are analogous to the Orientalist painting Gérôme’s ‘The Guard of the Harem’ (1859) “with a black guard and with a padlocked door behind him [...it] crystallizes how much Orientalists wanted to get in, but they were never allowed, so they imagined what lay behind that guarded door. Their narratives were a shabby representation of the complex reality of the Arab world.” (Faqir in Moore, 2011, p. 7)

^{viii} The Lebanese critic Mai Ghoussoub writes about Arab woman identity: “What better symbol of cultural identity than the privacy of women, refuge par excellence of traditional values that the old colonialism could not reach and the new capitalism must not touch? The rigidity of the status of women in the family in the Arab world has been an inner most asylum of Arabo-Muslim identity.” (Ghoussoub in Cooke, 2000, p. 162)

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