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Violence, Storytelling, and Medicine: the Overt and the Covert Patriarchy in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*

A garden of paradise, a homestead missing a matriarch, a love cut short, a loyal wife betrayed. Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* may well be characterized as a romantic tragedy, if not for its feminist tinge and the realness with which fate befalls the characters. This unrelenting emotional roller coaster is set in Jordan during the British occupation, centering on two women who cross paths, however unwillingly, in a mental hospital and share their stories to each other about the events that led to their institutionalization. Peppered throughout the story are narrative interjections from a character who calls himself the "Storyteller"; he interjects a performative, friendly tone with an audience to whom he directly speaks, as a performer and entertainer. Maha and um Saad, the hospitalized women, share their stories through reflective and dialogue-heavy interaction.

Pillars of Salt demonstrates not only the overt perpetuation of patriarchy through the violence of masculinity that the main characters are subject to, but also the more covert contributors of storytelling and medical practices. In sum, Faqir makes it clear that patriarchy, while challengeable, has an iron grip in the cultures of her characters, one that cannot be combatted by isolated individual efforts towards equality.

The Violence of Masculinity

Perhaps the most notably overly-masculine and violent character in the novel is Daffash, Maha's older brother. Maha and Daffash live in a household with their father in a small village; their mother passed away some years prior to the novel's beginning. Barely a dozen pages into the novel, and only a few pages into Maha's first narrative chapter, Maha, in the middle of determining whether she should meet her sweetheart after dark, recounts the time that her dear friend Nasra was raped; Daffash was the culprit. Daffash attempted to shift the blame to Nasra, saying "'She asked for it. Whenever she set her greedy eyes on me…she tempted me" (Faqir 12). Maha, in the middle of this confrontation, asks Nasra, "'Did he force you?' 'Under my breast, his dagger, I swear" (Faqir 12). Daffash does not deny threatening Nasra in order to rape her. A short time later, Maha and Daffash's father enters the scene and says to Nasra, "…you should not have tempted him" (Faqir 13). Here, Faqir has essentially opened the story with an essentially patriarchal act of violence: rape. By writing the rape act to be committed by Maha's brother, Faqir is able to keep in focus the perpetrator-victim dynamic. So striking in this passage was the quickness with which both Daffash and Daffash's father accuse Nasra of being at fault by "tempting" Daffash; the willingness of a patriarchal society to shift the blame of rape to the victim of the rape is exemplified clearly here.

However horrible his actions toward Nasra, Daffash's true pattern of violence towards women is best displayed in his antagonistic and threatening manner with his younger sister. After Maha loses her husband to a British air attack, Daffash (who is partial towards the British) tricks her into cooking at his friend's house for a group of British officers. Maha, who realizes the scheme in the middle of dinner time, confronts the guests, calls them "Foreign killers"

(Faqir 162), and leaves the gathering to go home. Daffash, embarrassed, beats Maha relentlessly. Maha had done something as simple (and brave) as confronting the killers of her beloved husband. The layer of Maha's task that introduces her to the British—the cooking—cannot be ignored either. Maha is never really exposed as a fantastic cook, just a knowledgeable housewoman, yet Daffash selected her to accompany him in order to have her complete a traditionally feminine task at his behest. Daffash's assault of Maha can then be read not only as his reaction to her outburst in front of the British, but his frustration and consternation at her refusal to complete a domestic duty.

Daffash is not the only perpetrator of violence in the novel, however prolific he may be. Um Saad, who shares a room at the mental hospital with Maha, recounts the violence that she herself experienced at the hands of her husband. As um Saad aged, after she had eight sons, her husband brings home a new, young wife. Um Saad, after being asked what she is cooking for breakfast by the man who had just kicked her out of her own bedroom, simply snaps, "slapping [her] face, wailing, and kicking his fat legs" (Faqir 179). Abu Saad then "smashed one of the chairs, picked up the legs, then broke them one after the other on [her] sides" (Faqir 179). Instead of understanding or even explaining in order to calm the understandably-frustrated and insulted um Saad, Abu Saad response to her apparent breakdown by beating her into submission, claiming that he "got married to a second wife because of [her] gray hair (Faqir 179).

Each of the above incidents—Nasra's rape, Maha's beating, um Saad's breakdown and her husband's response—even from an isolated viewpoint, are powerful illustrations of patriarchal violence used to perpetuate the hierarchy of men over women, to literally beat

them into submission. However, what's made clear throughout the rest of the novel is the life-long impact that these seemingly one-off incidents have. Nasra, having been robbed of her virginity by Daffash, will never marry; after receiving news that Nasra is being harassed for it, Maha observes, "It was not enough for Nasra to be flayed to the bone; [the young men of the village] wanted to chew the rest" (Faqir 57). Later in the novel, a few years down the road, the situation remains the same. "Nasra was thinner than usual and her face was caked with dirt and soil. My friend was growing old. No marriage for Nasra" (Faqir 145). Something that Daffash was able to blow off his perpetration of had a life-long effect on Nasra. Likewise, Maha's beating at the hands of Daffash leaves her missing her two front teeth; after this, she never shows her mouth while smiling (Faqir 6, 171). She has been robbed of something human—the ability to comfortably show joy to others. Even though she is making an effort in her interactions with um Saad to comfort her, Maha has to cover her mouth with her hands or her veil for conceivably the rest of her life, thanks to a violent outburst by her brother. Finally, Abu Saad's reaction to um Saad's breakdown sent um Saad spiraling. His beating of her, coupled with his complete lack of empathy and respect for her feelings, leads to her running away and falling asleep in the mosque's yard. When she is woken up, she is being put into a straight jacket by her husband and two other men, and is immediately shipped off to the mental hospital, upending her life.

Although the women respond to their victimizations differently, Faqir has made clear the life-long effects that patriarchal violence has on women. Rape or assault in the patriarchal context serve to further the patriarchy by not only physically subverting them, but instilling a conditioning to being less-than and victimized. When she sees how her father also blames

Nasra for her own rape, Maha so aptly thinks to herself, “I realized how high were the mud walls imprisoning us” (Faqir 13). In concurrence, a reading of Pillars of Salt by Suyoufie and Hammad found that “Behind the suffering of both women stands a deeply entrenched tradition that alienates women” (286). The women in the novel are alienated from their own lives, their own destinies, by the cultural practices and responses to their individual actions.

Subtly Subverting Women

So overt are the obvious patterns of violence and discrimination that Maha and the other women characters face, that other facets of the novel seem at face value to be ornamentation. It is precisely due to their lack of necessity to the plights of Maha and um Saad that the presence of the storyteller and the ethnomedical/medical aspects of the novel should be examined.

Storytelling is a device often employed by feminists/womanists as a tool to combat patriarchy (Hua 30). In general, it is a way to gain empathy and make clear how real lives are impacted by patriarchal practices. However, Faqir turns this convention on its head with her use of the Storyteller narrator in the novel. The Storyteller introduces the story by narrating the first chapter, performing genially in front of an audience for Ramadan. He interjects in the same manner every few chapters, accounting Maha’s story but turning it into something mythical, outlandish, *entertaining*. She becomes, in these chapters, an antagonist in her own story. The Storyteller often glosses over Daffash’s terrible actions and instead portrays him as a sympathetic character. Take the following example from a classmate, with perspective on Daffash’s assault on Maha after she confronts his British acquaintances:

> The storyteller narrates the fight as if Maha is Daffash's aggressor: "She ran towards her brother to stick the needles in his flesh . . . She jumped on Daffash's back and began wrenching his shoulder muscles" (Faqir 181). The truth according to Maha is that: "He threw me on the rug and starting slapping my face . . . Daffash raised the stick and started beating me all over my body" (Faqir 174). As if that isn't enough Daffash knocks out her teeth and continues to beat her with his ammunition belt, nearly killing her (Faqir 175). (Brittany Locklear, Class Discussion Post)

Another striking account of contrast between Maha's and the Storyteller's narrative is the accounting of Maha's cauterization, wherein she is burned with iron on her stomach to treat infertility:

> The storyteller's interpretation of the same torturous situation was described as if the women were doing something sexual stating that Hulala, "stuck her head between the lean thighs of the barren bride. The sound the bride uttered was like the purrs of a cat lying in the warm sunshine being rubbed upon its belly" (Faqir, 88). (Conswalia Green, Class Discussion Post)

Obviously, both of these incidents could have only taken place as the Storyteller portrays if Maha was, in fact, the "she-demon" that he ascribes to her. The Storyteller's perspective is nothing more than a patriarchal view and twist on the events that befall Maha throughout her life. The Storyteller is honest about his job from the beginning of the novel. He recites,

> I am the storyteller.

My box is full of tales.

Yes, the yarn-spinner.

I spin and spin for days. (Faqir 4)

He is not merely spinning a new tale; no, he is putting a spin on a story he is familiar with in order to perpetuate patriarchal norms. The abundance of integration of mythological and witchcraft elements into his telling of Maha's story serve to further his point that "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 3).

It is possible, of course, to assume *why* the Storyteller is being so drastic and hyperbolic in his tale. Of note is that he is addressing an audience; he is obviously there to entertain, and a story containing jinn and witchcraft is going to be much more entertaining than one without. Second, it is presumable that he is addressing an audience primarily of men; he addresses "Oh most illustrious masters" on page 1. Finally, his chapters read like conversation, like a performance; he often brings in his donkey and monkey into his monologuing, and interjects poems and songs occasionally. It is possible to read his performance like a script and imagine a captivating man delivering it to much intrigue and satisfaction of his audience. He uses these skills and motivations to conjure and perform a more interesting story, at the expense of Maha's reputation.

Outside of the immediate story in the novel, the Storyteller serves as an important lesson that yes, storytelling is a powerful tool; it is the oldest trick in the book to enforce patriarchy and ensure women stay subject to men. Readings and interpretations of religious texts of all kind have been used to enforce the domestic role of women, and the

provider/protector role of men. Perpetuating these attitudes is as simple as finding a listener and turning that listener into a follower. Faqir's use of an overexaggerated unreliable narrator trope makes a fantastic point towards the uphill battle faced by the women in the cultures in the novel.

Already mentioned in this paper is Maha and um Saad's meeting place: a mental hospital patient room. Before analyzing the women's experiences in this hospital, in the context of medical practices in Pillars of Salt, it's important to discuss Maha's difficult fertility journey. Maha is very much looking forward to getting pregnant, and is also feeling the societal pressure to do so. She notes that "Harb's companions laughed and said to him, 'If you bought an English rifle and found out that it did not shoot, what would you do? You would throw it away and buy another'" (Faqir 70). After around six months of awaiting a child, she is taken by her mother-in-law to a woman they call Hajjeh Hulala to attempt a remedy for infertility. Maha is suffered humiliation in this encounter and afterwards; she is made to take her clothes off, be prodded by Hulala, and an herb-filled sachet is placed in her vagina to be kept there for three days (Faqir 73). She fights and is filled with pain from the sachet, but reminded of Harb, she lasts the three days before pulling the sachet out (Faqir 76). When she continues to remain un-pregnant, she agrees to the next step of cauterization, at the hands of Hulala. Cauterization is a fairly common ethnomedical treatment, used for a range of complaints (Inhorn 3836). In Maha's case, she is subject to some unimaginable pain of the placing of hot-irons directly on the skin of her stomach (Faqir 91). Maha's embarrassment and physical pain that she endures in her mission to get pregnant is illustrative of the general pains that women take to fulfill a biological function. Of particular note is that, as is often the case, the first assumption of infertility was placed on

the female. Although the male takes part in the baby-making, culturally, women bear the brunt of the pressure for reproduction. Even through the lens provided by Fatima Seedat, a non-feminism that takes Islam for granted, it is possible to recognize that Maha is experience undue and unjust pain. The happenstance that she does become pregnant around the time that she undergoes the cauterization is a tragic irony that only serves to perpetuate the patriarchal practice of placing the burden of conception on women.

Finally, it is appropriate to circle back to the framing of the novel from the beds of a mental hospital. By now, it should be clear that what landed both Maha and um Saad in the mental hospital is a case of uncontrollable patriarchy. Rather than acting in the ultimate interests of the patients they are serving, the English-run hospital sedates and medicates the women. From the perspective of Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes*, they are being dangerously and ignorantly prescriptive, as feminism is wont to do: "the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women" (56). Women who combatted social norms in the mid-20th century were initially treated as hysterical; Maha and um Saad were no exception to the rule. In fact, it is the sedation that they experience at the hands of the doctors (Faqir 103, 110) that serves to encourage their own self-censorship and restriction.

At the end of the novel, um Saad is laughing hysterically, as the doctor cuts Maha's hair. Maha is "too tired to lift [her] hand up, to open [her] mouth, to screw [her] lips and shout 'Nooo'" (222). Maha, who has fought through the whole novel against injustices she experienced, is too tired at the hands of the colonizers to fight any further. The efforts of patriarchy, physical and mental, have gained another unwilling victim.

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