

## Arab Women's Trauma and Oppression in Arab Anglophone Literature: Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*

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**Received:** 27/03/2025

**Accepted:** 01/11/2025

**Published:** 01/01/2026

### Abstract

The present study examines how are women oppressed and traumatized by both their patriarchal society and the British Mandate (colonialism), in Jordan, in Arab Anglophone literature: Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*. It explores how oppression and trauma affect their lives and led them to madness. In this vein, the paper shows how Colonialism or the British Mandate has a hand in creating domestic conflicts among members of the Bedouin community and even of one family. It also undertakes the social constraints and cultural barriers that oppressed women and ranked them in a very inferior position to men. Thus, this paper highlights how the two ladies, protagonists, ended up in a mental hospital, oppressed even in the process of their medical therapy, after a long journey and struggle against patriarchy. Analyzing the protagonists' unbalanced psychologies will be done through Critical Disability studies theory. This helps engaging deeply, when studying the protagonists' attitudes, within the social structure in the Arab bedouin society. The mentioned theory examines how literary narratives have shifted from describing madness passively to representing and reflecting disabled psychologies as a result of a distorted social composition. It studies how the two women were sharing their experiences despite the fact they were from different backgrounds and even different social classes, one Bedouin and the other Urban. Sharing experiences is seen as a source of power to push resistance and rebellion against patriarchy and social exclusion. Finally, it sheds light on the way Fadia Faqir utilizes Arabic Narrative Techniques and arabizes the language of the novel in dramatizing the traumatic consequences of oppression on Maha and Um Saad.

**Key Words:** Arab women; Bedouin community Colonialism; Oppression; Patriarchal society.

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*Journal of Languages & Translation* © 2026. Published by University of Chlef, Algeria.

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## Introduction

In Arab Anglophone literature, women's trauma is referred to as a "double colonization", a term coined by different scholars, which represents the different entities which caused female's double oppression. The term was firstly used by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford in 1980s. The term was also known in postcolonial feminist literature as "dual oppression" which concerns mainly women. This double colonization is depicted in various Arab Anglophone literary works, and mainly by female authors who have lived in diaspora and witnessed how was harmful for Arab women to be excluded and marginalized. These novelists used their narratives to elucidate the hardship of Arab women's state when they are between western colonialism and the complexities of social patriarchal societies. Authors such as Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Diana Abu-Jaber, Leila Lalami, Susan Abulhawa, fadia Faqir, and many others were known for their profound impact in portraying the wretched conditions of women and criticizing all parties that inflicted physical and psychological harm and pain.

Fadia Faqir (born 1996) is a good sample of how Arab female authors have fought to voice marginalized Arab women. She is a pioneering Jordanian-British author, academic, and a human rights advocate whose narratives primarily explores the experiences of marginalized women in the Arab world and exile. She also struggles against tribal dictates and honor crimes and revenge. Her human rights advocacy empowered her to critique, in her *Pillars of Salt*, the complex structure of the Arab society and its destructive impact on Arab women.

This study examines Fadia Faqir's novel *Pillars of Salt* (1996) as it approaches women's attitudes,

actions, and reaction in the Jordanian society. This feminist narrative deals with two women, one Bedouin and the other urban, who are ill treated and unjustly institutionalized during the colonial era. Faqir targets to reveal the structure of the patriarchal Arab society in relation to the legacies of the British mandate in Jordan and the impact of this complex relation on women. The narrative centers on the dramatic and abusive confinement of two ladies in a mental institution during the mandate. The novelist approaches to what extent were both western and local entities a destructive weapon that targets women's mental well being.

This paper will initiate with how Fadia Faqir depicts the two characters suffering patriarchy and colonial oppression, it will then seek to explore how the two ladies were traumatized during their journey of resistance and refusal of male-domination and oppression, and main significantly, it shows how the "sisterly" relation between the two women make them narrate their experiences. Also, it reveals how this literary work is special in voicing the two women to tell their own stories through a traditional storytelling of anti-traditional feminist themes. It is almost obvious that struggle for independence against foreign oppressive hands and tyrannical colonizers have been the backdrop of life in the Arab World in fiction; however, in *Pillars of Salt*, new thematic aspects are added. The author depicts that struggle focusing on female characters, in addition to the effects and worries of societal and cultural constrains on them while performing the act of colonial resistance, the literary work is written by a female author.

### 1. Contemporary Arab Anglophone Literature

As a literary phenomenon, a group of Arab writers have decided to incorporate Arab themes and subjects into the English Language whether they write directly in English or translate from their Arabic language to the English one. Many Contemporary Anglophone writers chose English rather than Arabic as language for their fiction for variety of reasons as enlarging their audience all over the world as well as avoiding cultural restrictions and censorship. Thus, the main significant reason is to correct what English canonical, or non canonical, texts misrepresent about Arabs, or what has Edward Said termed "Anglo-Arab Encounter". Interestingly, Arab writers use English language to voice their issues and raise

their cultural, social, and even sexual struggles attempting to find clues or at least participating in a partial positive change.

In this sense, in Contemporary Arab Literature, Women's voices are increasingly heard and given weight, Nawal al-Sa'dawi and Hanan el-Shaykh, for instance, are amongst the well known writers in Arabic in the west, and even most translated despite the fact they were criticized for not respecting the Muslim Arab conservative background and heritage. Similarly, the Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir has written in English several novels raising the feminist issues and struggles in the Arab world, her *Pillars of Salt* which was written in 1994, and which will be discussed in this paper, is a good example of calling for feminist rights through Anglo-Arab fiction. Geoffrey Nash, in his book, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and autobiography by Arab Writers in English*, refers to Fadia Faqir's writing as closer than any other writings to a recognizable Middle Eastern Feminist encoding in the sense that she engages with feminisms of the region that, as Denis Kandiyoti puts it, "have been both intensely local, grappling with their own histories and specificities, and international, in that they have been in dialogue, both collaborative and adversarial, with broader currents of feminism and activism" (1996, p07)

She discusses the strident protest by female characters against patriarchal standards and values as well as against the colonial mission, she shows how her two characters Maha and Um Saad resisted and rebelled against their male-dominated society and colonialism during the English Mandate in Jordan. Thus, she has taken the Anglo-Arab encounter into a new area, she depicts both sides of women resistance, in one hand, against Arab patriarchy and nativism, on the other hand, against the western colonialism; and in both cases she uses the "Third World feminist discourse", as Geoffrey puts it. As Tayab Salih, Fadia uses traditional oral Arabic narrative forms to subvert patriarchy and traditionalism and to picture how female characters suffocate along their journey of resistance and opposition. Thus, Yaser Suleiman and Ibrahim Muhawi referred to nationalism in the literature of the Middle East as the notion which makes literature belongs to a special community and depicts its culture. They declared,

The link between nation and literature in the Arab Middle East assumes great importance because of the tug of war between the nation-state and pan-Arab nationalism. Each form of nationalism strives for authenticity and seeks to inscribe this in a literature that it calls its own. (07)

## 2. Patriarchal practices in the Arab Society

It is worth knowing that there are three voices in that sad Jordanian story set in the time of the British Mandate, a traditional male-storyteller and two women, Maha and Um Saad, who exchange their stories of the difficulties they faced in their male-dominated societies, while confined to a mental hospital. Maha is labeled "tigress", or as her father, Sheikh Namer says to her, "the daughter of a tiger of the desert should be a tigress", and in many occasions the storyteller calls her a "ferocious demon", or as he described her in the very beginning of his narration "a sharp sword stuck to the Arabs 'enemies.'" (p2) And even she was referred as violent "birds of prey", she tells also her husband that she would drink the blood of the one who wounded him (p83), all these harsh descriptions which show how Maha was violent and strong push to question the reason behind that strange personality which is best known for men rather than women. Consequently, one can fantasize the difficulties and calamities this woman went through so she shifts to a worrier character, for a woman is supposed to be so kind and feminine far away from any violent expressions or even acts. For this reason, this study investigates further what events pushed Maha to be more violent, and it comes up with the fact that the first reason is the violent society she lives in. One asks what makes women suffer and be a dead-alive person more than rape and ravishment?

The first act of violence which shows how Maha and women in general suffer in their oppressive community is performed by her brother, Daffach, who raped the poor Nasra, and how she sided with her

against her brother claiming again, "Daffach, son of Maliha, I will drink your blood." (p11) Hence, she was ready to kill her brother, and she knows very well how to shoot, which is an unexpected act from a soft lady,

I dug the metal barrel between his ribs and shouted, "wake up, you dog, and see with your own eyes how I am going to kill you." He opened his eyes slowly and saw Nasra. When he realized that I am serious, he shielded his head with his hands. "Don't shoot; I am your brother, the son of your mother and brother.

"You ruined her life" I placed my cold finger on the trigger.

"By Allah listen to me before you kill me."

"I would not listen to a shameless rapist." (p12)

She knows how to shoot, it is her father who pushed her to a such situation, he used to take her with him to hunt and taught her how to shoot; however, the one who is supposed to go to forests hunting, her brother Daffach, was left at home sleeping.

The above scene shows how Maha is faithful to her friend Nasra and takes things fairly to side with her gender against male's unjust deeds after she saw her heartbroken, weak, and unnerved. Nasra is a stereotype of how a Bedouin Arab Woman is oppressed by male, this trauma undoubtedly affects her psyche and pushes her to adopt new attitudes towards life in general, "She shook and swayed as if pain were griping her stomach." (p11) The most important decision taken by male concerning this issue was cleverly set by Fadia, when Daffach's father enters the room and discovers what his son did, he never punishes him, instead he blames the poor Nasra, "and you should not have tempted him." (p13) Afterwards, Maha has realized how women's status is inferior and poor in her Bedouin society, "I realized how high were the mud walls imprisoning us." (p13) Eventually, this physical and societal violence affected Nasra's life which was ruined by a man and she is no longer herself, in addition, a second act is done again by Daffach who continued his devilish habit raping again Salih's wife who was an idiot, and when he was blamed by his sister, he continued laughing as usual deprived of any feeling of guilt or mercy towards the women he rapped. He was a useless male naked of dignity and manhood, instead of helping his dying father, he kept raping women.

Accordingly, Fadia Faqir, as many other authors, raised up the question of primitive undeveloped medical treatments in the Bedouin society, as an example of this depiction, Maha went to the old woman to provide her with a solution for she could not conceive despite the fact that she got married only few months and her husband is most of the time outdoors fighting. As a solution, the old lady Hulala advises for Cauterization, which is a medical practice or technique of burning a part of a body to remove or close off a part of it, which is so severe and harsh for a woman to bear, and Maha accepted it. She is ready to bear the unbearable only to satisfy her husband, "I had promised that wounded man to do whatever I could to give him a child", the scene is described very cruelly,

Ooooooh Fire, Fire, Fire, the women joined in,  
"No, No" I cried, my friend Nasra dashed out of the stuffy den, a blazing iron bar passed over my head and landed on my belly Digging its way down my skin. I kicked Tammam and sent her pipe flying in a cloud of smoke. Generous drops of water. Hamda was crying over my head. I departed the world of light to the world of darkness where you cannot see and be sorry. (p92)

The other cruel act of violence against her is when her brother bed her violently to death, he used all means of violence as if she is his enemy, "with his master's boots he kicked me in the face", and he kept

beating her and her son Mubarak screaming, so she empowered herself and stood up to resist him yet he beat her again and two teeth of her are on the floor. Then, she collapsed falling down and cursing him “slave to the English”, and he kept beating her with his ammunition belt, and she kept protecting her breasts so she can feed her son .Mubarak. Thus, this is a physical violence practiced by her own brother, her flesh and blood, would eventually affect her psychological balance ending up behaving strangely, violently and even cruelly against herself as well as those surrounding her. Besides, Daffash went free after his cruel act without any punishment, beating women was a tool used by men in Bedouin life to keep them under control and even some old women accepted being obedient to that harsh male treatment, Hulala claims, when Tammam asked her not to speak, “I will open my mouth and spit on Maha’s face. She is a disobedient girl and deserves to be beaten up.”(p165) This is the stigma of patriarchal society on women’s psychology, they obey without questioning their status or daring to refuse any aspect, male’s oppression makes them participating in their own oppression through being slaves to them obeying blindly. For instance, when Daffash raped Salih’s wife, Nasra though she was his first victim, asks her to get dressed or her husband would slaughter her as a chicken, why would she think how her husband would beat her in such harsh painful situation, why not thinking of her own comfort before all? Again, that is how patriarchy has affected their minds making them neglecting their own feelings, comfort, and role in society, and thinking only of how they please men. More importantly, this is one of the consequences of women’s trauma in a male-dominated society, and it is a fact in Arab Muslim culture, women should obey their husbands and fathers; however, this obedience is not asked to be pushed at the extreme, instead, our religion calls for mercy and love when dealing with women in particular.

### 3. Critical Disability Studies Theory

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) is a theoretical framework which treats disability and paralysis as a social and cultural construct rather than a personal medical inability. It undertakes how society constructs laws and fixes standards to identify who is able and who is not. Therefore, disability is stereotypical and not standardized in literature; each society perceives it according to its norms and traditions. Fadia Faqir enables people, and mainly women, with disabilities to be voiced throughout her narrative. The two ladies are considered paralyzed because society identified them as such in its cultural context. In this sense, Elaine Showalter refers to the medical system as the responsible for patriarchy and always associating madness with the feminine gender. Abir Hamdar asserts, “Elaine Showalter examines cultural productions of madness from the Victorian until the modern era and contends that the medical establishment was responsible for appropriating madness into a feminine ailment and for reinforcing masculine robust superiority” (55). *Pillars of Salt* reinforces Showalter’s idea about madness and gender as it depicts how Maha and Um Saad were doubly oppressed and abused as their doctor diagnosed them as being disabled without tackling any symptoms or being interested to reflect on their experiences.

The theory emerges from 1970s activism, it connects medicines with social justice and it is thickly influenced by postcolonial and feminist theories. It advocates for protecting personal experiences and individuals’ lives as it calls for respecting differences and attitudes. This theory questions who has enough power and logic to identify who is “able” and who is “disabled”? The two Arab ladies were classified as disabled because they decided to rebel against men. Building stereotypical image about women in the Arab world was a common practice among men who have made a fixed social structure upon which women should act and react. Safad Al Safadi and Nasaybah Awajan asserted,

Simply by being an Arab and belonging to certain tribes or communities, most Arab women are expected to behave within a predetermined structure and are never permitted to seek their desires outside of certain limits including those that their society deems

acceptable and honorable and those that are forced upon them. It is the patriarchal ideology that controls the core of norms, customs, traditions, and values and, ultimately, the females in Arab society. Furthermore, this male dominance over women in the Arab world starts within the closest unit - the family.

#### **4. Physical and Psychological Violence Against Arab Women**

Similarly, the second female character, Um Saad is another example of both physical and psychological violence in the novel, a very expressive scene of Um Saad when was beaten harshly by her father would be a good illustration of how women were physically abused. Thus, she says,

Without uttering a word, without opening my mouth, I ate about hundred lashes. My father's belt reduced me to a heap of flayed meat. He stood like an eagle above my head and shouted, "Who is Muhammad". A quiver started in my heart and spread to my treacherous limbs. Later, I thank Allah, his prophets, and angles because he made me lose consciousness. (p100)

Um Saad narrates to Maha how she was treated by her father for he heard from one of the villagers that she has spoken to Muhammad, her father never asks her or confirm from his daughter, he directly beat her mercilessly. Furthermore, when Muhammad came to her father asking for his daughter's hand, the father immediately refused without any consideration of his daughter's opinion or stance, he refused only for Muhammad was a Circassian. Indeed, Fadia criticized racism against minorities and ethnic groups, Although Muhammad says, "but I am a Good Muslim", the father keeps refusing him without any clear apologizing reason. Then, what makes the situation worse, is that her mother connives with her sever father to marry her without even telling her, "Whose wedding is that" says the girl, "It is yours", replied her father. Are not those oppressing acts enough to lead a woman to madness?

Being back to Maha, when she describes the seven items necessary in her childhood home, she mentions the English rifle, why should a rifle be an important item? That is really ironic of how violence was an inseparable aspect of the Bedouin life, this also shows how the British Mandate has a hand in turmoil and conflicts among the members of this Bedouin community. For instance, Daffash has beaten his sister only for she knew he was feeding her enemy, feeding people who have eaten her husband's flesh, Harb. In that sense, the political conflicts caused domestic struggles; Maha has still a resisting and rebellious soul, when she found her brother feeding the English, she behaves violently, "collected as much salvia as I could and spat on the surprised face of the English General. Identically, Um Saad also was beaten by her husband violently, after he brought his Intended, Yusra to her house and taking her to Um Saad's bed closing the door having an affair with her, then asking the Poor Um Saad to prepare the breakfast. And when Um Saad refused to prepare what he asked for, he beat her harshly in front of Yusra who asked, "is this thing your wife", "yes", replies Abu Saad, "he smashed one of the chairs, picked up the legs, then broke them one after the other on my sides." (p179) As a result, Um Saad describes red as the color of Arab anger and the color of her heart, this violence is always present in such situations, Faqir depicts through the two character's narrations to each other to what extent they suffered an unjust life with unfair patriarchal people, and how all the horrible events led them being in a mental institution. Is it fair for Abu Saad to ask his wife to prepare food for his new Intended, or to take her to bed in front of Um Saad, and harshly beating her for not obeying him? Where are love, respect, ethics, and honesty? Where are all the beautiful aspects a woman imagines and dreams of before marriage? What is her sin being a woman? Is she guilty for being a female, a gender which she did not choose?

It has been increasingly evident throughout the novel that Maha was suffering dramatically after Harb's death, for he was the only male character who loved and respected her, he describes her as his "Arab Mare", and "deer eyes", in addition to the violent horrible way that ended up Harb's life, "the twin of her soul had departed this earth", "her reaction is immediately slapping her face and yanking her

hair.” (p117) Harb’s death is an example of how political violence and struggles affected woman and traumatized their lives depriving them from living a happy life with their people, especially that Maha was pregnant with Mubarak. Then, Maha keeps the sheath of his dagger under her pillow, a sign of an emotional turmoil that would follow her for the rest of her life.

### 5. Common Experiences Among Arab Women as a Façade of Resistance

Additionally, and what was special and significant in *Pillars of Salt*, is sisterly relationship between the two women who met in the hospital, they felt comfortable to each other and started narrating all the experiences they went through in Trans-Jordan during the British Mandate, they narrate to each other for they were aware they share the same oppression, patriarchy and marginalization. Um Saad asks Maha, “Maha are you all right? Your face is as pale as a lemon, yes Um Saad, just keep talking, your voice eases the pain in my heart” (p100), this good relationship between the two ladies was never as such at the beginning; the Urban Um Saad felt classy to share her room with a Bedouin woman, an irony of Classism in Jordan. Moreover, it is useless to keep the colonial oppression out of equation, even the British Doctor, in the hospital practiced his oppression over the two ladies, he kept giving them pills and making them sleep all the time, in other words, he was silencing them instead of helping them, “Dr. Edward dashed into our room and says it is very late, you are upsetting our patients”, and then says, “take these pills.” (p103)

Faqir, though she uses English to depict the experiences of the two Arab oppressed women, the narrative style was typically Arabic, in an interview with Moore (2011) she states,

One thing I wanted to do with *Pillars of Salt* was to push the narrative and the English as far as possible, to Arabize it, to create something similar to what Indian authors have achieved, a hybrid English. Therefore, I used the oral tradition and the Quran and the Arabian Nights in the storyteller’s section. (P7)

It is commonly known that women all over the world have suffered oppression and marginalization due to patriarchy and men’s dictates. Faqir seeks to make this experience special as she uses arabization technique and implements Quranic verses. This helps in giving a deep image about the Arab culture and its constraints which led to women’s tragedies. Despite the fact that the narrative is written in English the context is deeply rooted in Arab oral storytelling. The narrative is arabized in an attempt to make this experience common uniquely among Arab women as it gives details about the Arab thought, religion, and social norms as well. In the same realm, Patricia Geesey illustrates on the notion of hybridity and rebellion,

The value of the notion of the hybrid in colonial studies is that this mixed figure implicitly rejects the passivity implied by the previously accepted notion of colonial “assimilation”. Bhabha’s discussion privileges the fact that hybridity evokes subversion and appropriation of dominant discursive models of power. (130)

*Pillars of Salt* is a clear sample of narratives which reject assimilation and resist imposing the indigenous culture regardless to what extent justice is applied.

### Conclusion

The world of literature written by Arab women writing in English is a rich and diverse field which explores themes of identity, displacement, gender, politics, and culture from a unique perspective. Numerous prominent authors have discussed women issues in their works such as Leila Aboulela, Ahdaf Souif Diana Abu-jaber, Randa Jarrar, ...etc. Similarly, Fadia Faqir contributes significantly to contemporary diasporic English literature, affording powerful voices to women which challenge stereotypical thought and giving a deep insight to Arab culture. *Pillars of Salt* is all about a certain rejection of confinement and patriarchal manipulation in Arab society. It is an image of a prolonged

suffering and a deep oppression used against female characters. What is unique is that these Arab women have manifested against patriarchy and colonialism without taking into account their psychological and physical losses. Faqir's narrative is a strong reminder that Arab women are resistant to injustices and oppression no matter who is the other party, whether an indigenous or an intruder. Women's thirsty desire to freedom and liberation empowered them to challenge all hard circumstances and escape their bitter suffering.

In essence, the author has designed such a miserable ending to send a message to the world, Um Saad's end is not a personal tragic experience; instead, it is a stereotypical end for all women who are given little space to decide their lives. She reveals deeply how society led these women to all these forms of resistance and facades of their losses. A society which gives no support to women to overpass their tragedies, it is symbolic that even the elite in this community could not help them or behave appropriately. The doctor, instead of providing alternative solutions, participates more and sharpens their tragic experiences.

She succeeds to a certain extent to reveal in a subtle artistic style the Arab Society, Jordanian in particular, and its Cultural constraints during the English Mandate, and its effects on women! As the title of the narrative *Pillars of Salt* summarizes the dramatic experience, the two ladies went through, which costs their mental well being. "Pillars of Salt" as a modern English idiomatic expression describes someone who is frozen in place by shock or incapability to move. Therefore, Faqir has chosen this expression as a symbolic title to her narrative to summarize the hardship women went through in the Arab society.

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