

FADIA FAQIR'S FOCALIZATION IN PILLARS OF SALT 1996: A VOICE TO THE SILENCED

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ABSTRACT

As argued by Barthes, a study of narrative could be fruitfully combined to that of ideology. This is what could be demonstrated through the narrative technique used by Fadia Faqir in Pillars of Salt (1996) reflecting her anti-colonial ideology. Faqir's narrative technique uses focalization as a narratological tool to negotiate her space giving a voice to the female protagonist of the novel within the androcentric bias of Arab narrative theory, but not only, she uses it to point to and amend the orientalist discourse typical to colonial literature represented through the voice of the storyteller in the novel. Faqir utilizes storytelling as a traditional material to underline her Arabo Islamic womanist ideology.

KEYWORDS: *Narrative Technique, Orientalist, Focalization, Arabo Islamic Womanism, Ideology*

INTRODUCTION

Pillars of Salt written by Fadia Faqir in 1996 is a good example where storytelling is utilized as a traditional material to underline the author's womanist ideology. As argued by Barthes, a study of narrative could be fruitfully combined to that of ideologyⁱ. This is what could be demonstrated through the narrative technique used by Faqir in this novel reflecting her anti-colonial ideology. Faqir's narrative technique uses focalization as a narratological tool to negotiate her space giving a voice to the female protagonist of the novel within the androcentric bias of Arab narrative theory, but not only, she uses it to point to and amend the orientalistⁱⁱ discourse typical to colonial literature represented through the voice of the storyteller in the novel. Faqir utilizes storytelling as a traditional material to underline her Arabo Islamic womanist ideologyⁱⁱⁱ.

“THE STORYTELLER”: THE IMPERIAL VOICE:

Through the narrative technique used, Faqir intervenes at the level of the tellability^{iv} of both narrators, “The Storyteller” and Maha (the female protagonist), as a way to bring to the fore her ideology.

The author makes of the first narrator, “The Storyteller”, half an Arab and Muslim. Yet, She names him Sami Al Adjanibi to underline his foreign origins and create a conflation through the focal character. On the one hand, he is the Arab man epitomizing the patriarchal hegemony speaking on the 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.

The narrative uttered by the storyteller lacks tellability and relevance when we compare it to Maha's story because there is no evaluation in it. Labov focuses on the importance of evaluation in determining reportability or tellability of the story. (Norrick, 2007: 128)

Yet Faqir gives privileged positions to the storyteller by beginning and ending the novel^{vi}. These are narrative positions that capture Maha's story and image of the Arab woman in the storyteller's orientalist representation and that Maha intends to liberate.

The notion of alterity^{vii} in the 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: 86-7) At this level, Maha or the "Other" is the space of alterity. Faqir refers to the Western travel writing on the Orient through the narrative of the storyteller. It is a hint at the orientalist^{viii} description perpetuating the stereotype of the Arab woman as a "lascivious oriental female." (Ibid: 226)

The lack of mastery of Arabic by the storyteller underpins the unreliability of his version and reflects the impossibility of total comprehension of a culture by an outsider. It also puts his "tellability" of the 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 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: 251)

THE STORYTELLER'S EXOTIC NARRATIVE

Through the storyteller's narrative reviving the exotic within an orientalist representation, the author is utilizing exoticization^{ix} that could be defined as outmoded and orientalist. The exoticism used by the storyteller to describe Maha and her environment remind us of the European description 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." (Ibid, 2003: 87)

Further to this, the clear reference to *The 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: 133) By juxtaposing the storyteller's narrative with that of Maha, Faqir is joining Valassopoulos' definition of exoticism or exoticization as a "process, in authorship, undergone consciously and for a particular narrative effect." (ibid: 139)

The fact that the storyteller's narrative is contrasted with that of Maha shows that the author is using this concept for an anti-colonial purpose. 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"; (Ibid: 137) In this novel, Faqir re-exoticizes 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 narrative where Maha is the "Other". Yet, Faqir demonstrates that the 'private space' of Maha^x has been violated by the colonial gaze and represented in a spurious manner by the storyteller. He creates suspense through the secret gaze through which he describes what he saw. The gaze of the storyteller may be read as a hint at the voyeurism of *The Nights* and, at the same time, referring to the concept of the orientalist gaze, such as gazing lecherously at the closed door of Maha's room 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^{xi} of penetrating into the prohibited. Another instance is when Maha was 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. (Ibid: 88) The same spying scene is reproduced on Samir Pasha's villa where he watched the semi-naked bodies of dancing women at the party (Ibid: 89).

Every time that this foreigner voyeur starts his narrative he uses Quranic verses to give a sacred and emphatic aspect to his utterances (Ibid: 113). Yet, for a Muslim audience, his credibility is lost when these verses are used without reference to their original sūras and, most of the time, out of their immediate context. The storyteller's narrative is constantly condemning Maha representing the Arab woman. This "unreliable" narrator uses verses from the Quran reflecting the (mis)interpretation of this text by a man and an outsider as the meaning of his name reveals. Such a rewriting of these verses voiced by the storyteller caters to the ideology of the author denouncing the misunderstanding of the Quran when it concerns women. This novel unveils the Arabo Islamic womanist ideology of the author.

FAQIR'S FOCALIZATION:

The juxtaposition of the storyteller's and Maha's narratives is borrowed from the Arabic literary background. It is a strategy, generally found in Anglo-Arab fiction and post-colonial Arab discourse that may be considered as the equivalent to the Arabic literary technique labeled *mu-arada*^{xii}.

Faqir's focalization^{xiii} could be considered as a strategy to liberate the Arab literary production from a male and western hegemony over language and writing. She seeks to give a voice to the Arab woman to tell 'her' story. This strategy aims at critiquing 'her' own culture and at the same time "to turn a critical face both ways, towards the country of origin and its tradition and the country of reception. The challenge, the alienation, the 'offense' are two-sided"^{xiv} (Erickson in Abdo, 2008:243) and this all what "her" womanism is about. The author gives a voice to the female protagonist Maha using a narrative instrument to do more than speaking^{xv}.

Many instances in the utterances of the storyteller may be read as an implicit denunciation of the storyteller's narrative; it casts a shadow over the reliability of the storyteller as the narrator. His false stories provide the necessary contrast with the true story told by Maha. Faqir uses focalization in this novel as a principle element to express her ideology. Maha is the focalizer and the focalized subject at the same time. The difference between male and female focalizers has been well contrasted in the novel.

Through the contrast made by the false version of the storyteller, Maha as a narrator "exerts power and authority". She becomes "the source of values and norms in [the] text". She turns into an important component of what Wayne Booth calls "the implied author." (Ibid in Herman and Vervaeck, 2007: 226)

The storyteller uses abusively the dissonant psycho-narration in the sense that he criticizes openly all the action

and thoughts of Maha. Hecolors the scenes with his description to an extent that achieves lies and misrepresentation. Through Maha's voice, Faqir proposes a consonant self-narration where the distinction between I-character and I-narrator is blurred. We notice no clear criticism about Maha when she is telling her story, "...character and narrator, past and present seem to be continuously interwoven. This ties in with the main theme and ideological focus of the novel, namely, the inescapability of the past." (Herman and Vernaek, 2007: 228)

Although the first person pronominal expression of "I" in English does not inflect for gender, the reader of *Pillars of Salt* is able to distinguish the sex of each narrator since Faqir's makes sure to precise before each narrative who is speaking by naming the chapter "Maha" or "The Storyteller". The story in Faqir's novel is narrated by these two narrators alternating their narratives.

The variable pattern of focalization to which belongs her narrative is a dynamic pattern that allows shifts between patterns. It is in fact, a multiple focalizations if we consider the whole novel. The narrative technique of Faqir produces the juxtaposition of contrary apperceptions^{xvi} characteristic of multiple focalizations. The same events are told repeatedly by two narrators and seen through two different focal characters.

The same scenes in both versions, that of the storyteller and Maha describing the scenes of the spying gaze of the storyteller, are ambiguously depicted by the storyteller through "mirages, light, and shadow" (faqir, 1996:4) to pinpoint the credibility and reliability of Maha's precise and detailed description and to form an Arabo Islamic womanist narrative to that constructed by an orientalist representation.

Focalization is a literary technique used to demonstrate the path followed by her female protagonist to negotiate her space, free her image from the storyteller's orientalist representation's trap and break the silence imposed by such misrepresentation.

We recognize two narrators and two focal characters in the novel. The storyteller as his name indicates is a declared narrator "who speaks" (to borrow Genette's formula^{xvii}), he is also the one who perceives since he is a focalizer and a character whose third-person narrative mirrors the story-world. He is a narrator-focalizer in Bal's terms^{xviii}. Yet, this very story-world he narrates is contradicted by Maha who is a character living the story told by the storyteller, Maha becomes the one "who perceives" and the second narrator "who speaks" and is aware of the presence of the storyteller that she calls "the foreigner." She is an autodiegetic narrator through whose eyes the story-world in her narrative is perceived. She is the focal character of her own narrative. And thus, the story or the narrative is disputed between these two narrators. Yet, Faqir uses elements to render Maha's version more reliable and "truthful" than the storyteller's. The first element is that Maha is an autodiegetic narrator whereas the storyteller is a homodiegetic one.

Her narrative technique intervenes on another narratological level that constitutes another element. Both Maha's and the storyteller's perceptions are offline perceptions. Yet the offline perception of the storyteller is purely imaginary and thus less realistic than Maha's perception that is a result of a recollection and a subjective analepse or offline flashbacks (to use Genette's terms). Through this literary representation, Faqir strengthens the storyteller's unrealistic perception and highlights his misrepresentation. Then she dispenses her declared narrator (the storyteller) his narratorial intervention, and Maha, the focal character, becomes the narrator. Through this technique, Faqir gives the voice and the function of her declared narrator to the silenced Maha to tell her story and finally achieves directness.

Within the narrative of the storyteller, we recognize the mode of internal focalization (in Genette's sense) and external focalization (in Bal's sense). The first pattern is where we recognize the storyteller as a character used by Faqir to highlight to which extent orientalism that characterizes his narrative is in fact, a misrepresentative of the Arab woman epitomized by Maha. In fact, the restriction of information is applied with degrees but clearly with this character to show that the narrative information is so restricted that he invents the story of Maha. Yet, in the same narrative, we may deduce that there is an external focalization (in Bal's sense) that Faqir applies to reinforce the origin of the storyteller being a foreigner (Sami al-ajanibi), showing he is a narrator that sees things imaginatively since he is external to the story, an external focalizer or "narrator-focalizer" in Bal's terms. The storyteller is a narrator but a flat character in the narrative of Maha. She is not really aware of his existence but mentioned him only once in her narrative as "that driveling liar" (Faqir, 1996: 135). Faqir's focalization succeeds to mix two opposed patterns in the case of the storyteller, Genette's internal focalization and Bal's external focalization.

CONCLUSIONS

The narrative technique used by Faqir in *Pillars of Salt* is a post-colonial counter-discursive strategy. As stated by Tiffin: "Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve mapping of the dominant discourse, reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified local." (Ibid, 2003: 98)

Faqir uses the storyteller and his unreliable version of Maha's story to refer to knowledge and power. It is to underline how the Orientalist discourse becomes a canonical pattern representing the Arabs and their culture. It demonstrates Faqir's awareness and the refusal of such a representation. It is an indictment denouncing the prejudice caused to the Arab and Muslim woman in the history of orientalism and orientalist discourse. Through this narrative strategy juxtaposing two voices, Faqir borrows a traditional material from Arabic literature to claim the power of knowledge the imperial force was handling up to now.

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NOTES

- ⁱ Roland Barthes used the word narratology to refer to the study of narrative and narrative structure. He also indicated that it is possible to combine it with the study of “the beliefs, norms, and values that constitute what has come to be termed ideology.” (Herman and Vervaeck, 2007: 217)
- ⁱⁱ Edward Said developed the concept of Orientalism in the context of the Middle East as an “influential paradigm in studies of travel writing.” Briefly, he defines it as: an academic tradition, a style and, most importantly, a way of ‘making sense’ of the Middle East that draws on a binary epistemology and an imaginary geography that divides the world into two unequal and hierarchical positioned parts: the West and the East, the Occident and the Orient, Christianity and Islam, rationalism and its absence, progress and stagnation. (Melman, 2002: 107)
- ⁱⁱⁱ This ideology is a term coined in a comparative analysis between Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* 1975 and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* 1996. It refers to the multiple criticisms present in this text. “Arabo Islamic Womanism is to be recognized in Arab and Muslim women’s writings, in addition to the aspect of sexism, the impact of racism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, orientalism, exoticism and psychological disorientation of Arab and Muslim women’s lives. Through the use of traditional means to carve one’s a space for more freedom, we notice the predominance of the native culture claim over the claim of sexual politics.” (Hammouche, 2016: 34)
- ^{iv} “The tellability of a story is [...] something [the storyteller] negotiates in the given context ... A would-be narrator must be able to defend the story as relevant and newsworthy to get and hold the floor and escape censure at its conclusion.” (Norrick, 2007: 134)
- ^v During 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: 111)
- ^{vi} “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.”” (Bridgeman, 2007: 57)
- ^{vii} In a post-colonial analysis, otherness or alterity may be regarded as “a reflection of the colonial scenario in which imperial power and knowledge impact on the native population.” (Fludernik, 2007: 266)
- ^{viii} 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 lifestyle 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 issues.” (Faqir in Suyoufie and Hammad, 2009: 300)
- ^{ix} The term “exotisme”, or in English “exoticism”, appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century. It has two meanings: “one signifying an exotic-ness essential to radical otherness, the other describing the process whereby such radical otherness is either experienced by a traveler from outside or translated, transported, represented for consumption at home.” (Forsdick in Valassopoulos, 2007: 137)

^x 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 innermost asylum of Arabo-Muslim identity.”(Ghoussoub in Cooke, 2000: 162)

^{xi} “The sexual puns rampant in travelogues and other colonial texts are, therefore, merely a continuation of the phallogocentric patterns of romance that is of the imposition of male sexuality on the way in which we perceive action.” (Fludernick, 2007: 264)

^{xii} “Which sets two voices in opposition to one another and allows the author to tell two contrasting stories.” (Banita in Bibizadeh, 2012: 2)

^{xiii} It is very important for our analysis to distinguish between narration and focalization as used by Faqir. The narration is “the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience.” Focalization is “the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter.” (Jahn, 2007:94)

^{xiv} John Erickson identifies this form of “multiple critiques” in the works of many Muslim writers as “écriture métissée,” a third narrative space created by the use of the colonizer’s language. (Abdo, 2009: 243)

^{xv} “Shahrazad then speaks. But woman’s voice is more than a psychological faculty. It is the narrative instrument that permits her to be a literary medium, to vie with the male in the process of textual creation. To control the narrative process, however, is not small task.” (Malti-Douglas in Gauch, 2007: ix)

^{xvi} This term is used to refer to the possible reason why the same story is perceived and narrated differently. It designates “both the interpretative nature of perception and one’s understanding of something in “frames” of previous experience.”(Jahn, 2007: 101)

^{xvii} (Genette in Jahn, 2007 : 94-7)

^{xviii} (Bal 1991 in Jahn, 2007 : 101)