

Cultural Dilemma of The Arab Woman Expressed through Nature Imagery: An Ecocritical Study of Fadia Faqir's Pillars of Salt

Shilpa George

Mohanlal Sukhadia University

Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

shilpsgeorge@gmail.com

Abstract

The Arab community is essentially a patriarchal one with a history of women being subjected to various kinds of afflictions and oppression under cultural, religious and societal laws. Though there is a collective consciousness now regarding the position of the Arab woman in the Arab world, with significant progress being made to emancipate and empower them, much needs to be done still. Set in the mid-20th century Jordan, Arab Anglophone author Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* portrays the tragic plight of Arab women at the hands of the traditional patriarchal Arab communities of Jordan. Nature plays a significant role in Faqir's narrative wherein much of the miseries faced by the women characters are conveyed through rich nature imageries and analogies. This renders the novel the identity of an eco-fictional work and provides scope for analysis based on the ecological approaches as perceived in Emerson's *Nature* to the more recent theory of Ecocriticism formulated by William Rueckert. This paper explores an ecocritical approach towards the position of women in the Arab society as expressed through profound eco-comparisons, imageries and analogies in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofiction, Nature, Culture, Arab Women, Oppression

Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and threefold degree

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, Ecocriticism is defined as the study of the connections between literature and nature at an interdisciplinary level. The connections between literature and nature extend towards the exploration of the relationship between man and his environment. Another focus of Ecocriticism is the analysis of connections between nature and culture, thus offering scope for the exploration of literary and cultural texts. Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* has rich nature imagery knitted into its plot offering picturesque depictions and comparisons with profound implications. Faqir employs Nature as a powerful medium to highlight the miseries of the Arab woman trapped in the Arab culture.

Pillars of Salt, which most perfectly fits into the genre of Ecofiction, or nature-oriented fiction is the heart-wrenching tale of two Arab women confined in an asylum - Maha, the Bedouin woman from the Jordan Valley and Um Saad, from the urban city of Amman. The novel follows a unique pattern of narration, where Maha’s subjective narration alternates with the storyteller’s cruel and objective narration, both relating Maha’s story, but from completely opposite angles. While Maha’s narration of her own story unfolds herself as a victimized, tortured Arab woman arousing pity and sympathy in the readers, the storyteller presents Maha as an evil witch, a ghoul, a temptress. Maha’s narration further comprises of two stories, one of her own misfortune and the other of her ill-fated friend at the asylum, Um Saad.

Throughout Maha’s narration of her own story, Nature appears to reflect Maha’s state. Faqir seems to have drawn a parallel between Nature and Maha, an intricate friendship between the two. Maha’s tries to take solace in Nature, turns to Nature in her happiness and sorrow. Perhaps she sees her departed mother, Maliha, in Nature and so looks for comfort in

Nature's embrace. Maha's deep companionship with Nature echoes Emerson's notion that "every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture" (26) from his essay on Nature (*The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature Addresses and Lectures [Vol. 1]*Chapter IV – Language). According to Emerson, it is natural for us humans to associate our mental state to analogous figures or images from Nature - for instance, the association of an angry man to a lion or a cunning person to a fox; firmness to a rock, knowledge to a torch, innocence to a lamb, a snake to subtle spite, flowers to delicate affections and so on. (26)

Maha first introduces herself to the readers as "the Indian fig – 'strong,' ... 'but bitter like colocynth' (5). To begin with, Faqir's deliberate choice of the two fruits – the fig and the colocynth- both native to the Arab region - to compare the protagonist, reflects deep Arab cultural connotations. Figs are important to the Middle East due to their religious significance. In Surat Al-Tin of the Qur'an, it begins by God swearing by the fruit. This mention of the fruit by Allah emphasizes its importance to those who practice Islam.

By the fig and the olive. And by the Mount Sinai. And by this secure city. We have certainly created man in the best of stature...(Surah 95)

This reveals the significance of figs in the culture of Muslim Arabs as being sacred, increasing the reputation and value of figs in the Middle East. While the analogy to the fig tree mirrors Maha's strength of character, the bitterness of the colocynth reflects her outright straightforward and rebel nature. The reference to the colocynth, a traditional medicinal vine plant used by the Arabs and Bedouins for generations, also connotes to the Arab culture. Thus the analogies to the two essentially "Arab" plants give a glimpse into Maha's character at the very beginning.

But simultaneously, the readers are shockingly made aware of her victimized state in the hospital setting with another nature-comparison where “Maha became an open land where every shepherd could graze his sheep, where every nurse could stick her needles.”(5). Thus, the image of the strong and bitter Maha suddenly collapses to that of a weak, victimized, helpless one. “I am sure in Allah’s everlasting records I do not exist, my name is not even scribbled in the well-kept book of fortune.”(5). In quick succession the readers are transported into flashback through another synaesthetic imagery of nature, “The breeze in my favourite spot under the orange groves touched every part of my body. The scent enveloped the valley and carried me to another world.”(5-6). The immediate switch back to the present is through the new inmate Um Saad’s condescending and dismissing words about Maha, her roommate and companion to be, “What? A filthy Bedouin woman. Cannot you smell the stink of dung you sleep with your sheep?” (6), revealing to the readers Maha’s Bedouin roots, and her life in Nature’s bosom.

Nature is so intrinsic to Nasra’s thoughts and emotions that every important event or occasion in her life has undertones of Nature and natural features. Nature is depicted as omnipresent, all-seeing, all-encompassing; witnessing every significant and insignificant event in Maha’s life - a faithful friend can sense Maha’s agony, “The soil that morning responded to my pick and fork as if it knew how sad I was. I dug the ground, and dug to find the roots of my pain and uproot it with my hands. The air was so bitter and salty that morning.” (15).

Maha’s yearning for the love of her life, Harb is expressed through myriad nature analogies; she admits to have fallen in love with an “eagle” and refers her love for him “like the love of henna for water.” (16). She promises herself that she would love him “as long as camels chew the barley and groves yield oranges.” (16). But She faces a cultural dilemma when before Harb’s proposal and marriage to Maha, he invites her to meet him at midnight.

While her heart and souls yearns to sneak out of her house to meet him, she finds herself chained by cultural and societal shackles. She laments:

It was a long night. The hot and humid wind, carrying the salt of the Dead Sea, surrounded the mud walls of our house, laying siege to the village...The moon kept asking me questions. Would I venture out at that odd hour to meet Harb ? Would Harb look down on me if I did meet him ? Was he like the other men in our tribe ? What if Daffash found out? He would certainly kill me as he would a tiny rabbit.(p. 13)

An obvious reference to the practice of honour -killing is evident here. Maha is certain that if she is caught sneaking out at midnight, her brother Daffash, who, very ironically, is a shameless rapist and debaucher, will kill her like a 'tiny rabbit.' Maha reminds herself that she "was a virgin --- white as a dove --- as pure as dew drops ---a virgin ---honey in its jars." (13) and thus succumbs to cultural norms with a heavy, aching heart, reflected thus through Nature analogy:

...sunbeams sneaked through the small, rounded window finding slight aches in the pit of the stomach. Tears were rushing down my face. The water of a new spring which had been imprisoned by the rocks for hundreds of years. I must have lost the love of Harb. Why should he love a coward rabbit?...What I yearned for was Harb's arms. With his gentle fingers he could push open the petals of my flower. (13 - 14).

Clear enough, Maha's imagination, her comparisons, her similes, metaphors are all nature-replete; so much so that Nature is even eye-witness to her lovemaking and marital consummation with Harb, now her husband. Faqir dedicates a whole chapter to Maha's union with her husband, in the shallow waters of the Dead Sea, in the lap of Mother Nature. "The Hamia Mountains, black rocks, mineral spring, and, beyond them, high, Jerusalem, witnessed the birth of our love."

Faqir concludes this episode of Maha and Harb's first lovemaking with Maha passionately exclaiming that "every tree in the valley, every blind worm under the soil, every snake curled under the rocks, and every drop of water danced to the song of my recently-found happiness." (55). This sort of nature-imagery and description resonates Emerson's perception of Nature that "at the call of a noble sentiment... the woods wave, the pines murmur, the river rolls and shines, and the cattle low upon the mountains." (Emerson, 31-32)

This very Nature that was dancing to Maha's marital bliss turns dry and dead when Maha is unable to conceive just after five months of married life. Her "barrel" is said to be "empty" (67) by her community of Bedouins, empty just after five months of marital relationship. Maha's sadness and yearning for a child is depicted through deep, dark, negative Nature-imagery. Maha compares her state of barrenness to "dry tree trunks", "sacks of dry hay" and "stretches of arid sand dunes" (68). The Dead Sea, which was a happy witness to the love between Maha and Harb, suddenly turns "too salty", "too stinging to give any chance for life to develop. The Jordan River tried too hard with its fresh water to sweeten the stubborn sea... to shake it back to life to no avail." Moreover, the Dead Sea is said to have "died years and years ago... The whole region was childless and arid." (68).

The 'dying' imagery of the Dead Sea has deeper, ecocritical connotations. From an ecocritical perspective Faqir seems to be calling out for the preservation of the 'dying' or receding Dead Sea. The 'salt lake', as it is called, has diminished to the size of a pathetic pond, with a surface area the size of what it was a century ago. There is a rapid drop in its water levels at the rate of one meter every year. Over-exploitation of the Dead Sea minerals by cosmetic and chemical industries, over-use of water for desalination and large scale agricultural activities in the surrounding regions of Jordan and Israel are the causes of this swift fall in its water levels. The rapidly retreating shoreline of the Dead Sea has given rise to numerous environmental casualties like sinkholes, which has destroyed residential areas,

damaged roads and endangered the lives of people in the Dead Sea area. Faqir also appears to be hinting at the restoration of River Jordan to its former purity and vigour which can help save the Dead Sea. Faqir seems to lament the statistical reality of just 50 mcm of the Jordan water reaching the Dead sea currently as opposed to 1.3 billion cubic meters fifty years ago. She mourns the Jordan River's helplessness despite trying 'too hard with its fresh water to sweeten the stubborn sea... to shake it back to life to no avail..' The author's ecocritical concerns and appeal for conservation of the Dead Sea ecosystem are explicitly voiced here, loud and clear.

We observe that Faqir has depicted Maha's character to be one with Nature. When she is happy, Nature is joyful and full of life; when she is sad and childless, Nature is "childless and arid" as well. Maha's longing for a child is so strong that she sees "rounded babies" in "sparkling rounded oranges"; her craving so intense that she involuntarily "rubbed" her "breasts when" she "saw a camel breastfeeding its calf." (68) she laments. Such analogies with Nature and Nature's aspects appear to go on endlessly in the narrative, "I was besieged by fertility; ripe fruit and children playing in the yard all day long" (68)

The pain of being labeled as barren (just after five months of marriage) leads Maha to accept the agonizingly terrible anguish of cauterization. Maha's account of the cruel act of cauterization, "A blazing iron bar passed over my head and landed on my belly digging its way down my skin" (92) her flesh "tearing itself apart" (93), and the metaphor of "a pack of wild dogs chewing at a shot fox" (93) evoke a deep sense of pathos in the reader. Even in moments of excruciating pain Maha's comparisons are nature-related. Nature's cruelty is further expressed with phrases such as "the cursed zaqqam trees," (93) "boiling sea of sand" (93), "mud-houses with washed-out eyes" (93), the sun referred to as "merciless, scorching everything it touched: the old walls, the scattered palm trees" (93) and Maha herself..

Thus Nature's responses to Mahakeep altering with Maha's state of mind, rather, Maha carries the essence of Nature deep in her mind and so it keeps changing with the shifts in Maha's varying perceptions and experiences. "The whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind," writes Emerson (32). Nature thus emerges as something living and thinking and feeling, something beyond human understanding, a Soul or a Spirit, which becomes one with Maha's soul, her innate spirit. According to Emerson:

Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact... Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul he calls Reason: it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property... That which intellectually considered we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. (26 -27)

The Spirit of Nature not only responds to Maha's state of mind but it communicates with her as well. As she awaits the return of her husband from the battle, Nature, or the Spirit in Nature, prepares her emotionally to face the death of her beloved Harb, by displaying to her an aspect of its own death and decay. She goes out to visit her plants – "the radishes, henna and basil", and finds them "all yellow, limp, dead." (107). "A strange wind had blown in the valley and something evil had fallen upon our heads. The brownish leaves which yielded to their maker spoke to me of death and bodies stretched in shrines" (107), she reflects. Maha could "smell the stink of decay and life deserting creatures" (107). This nature-description of death and decay foreshadows Harb's death. Just as Maha is mourning her dead herbs, she receives the news of her husband's death in the battle against the English. "I howled, and the echo of my wounded voice broke over ridges and the tops of mountains, then slid down to the deaf sea" (112). It is as if the dead herbs become a harbinger of her husband, Harb's death.

Once again, Emerson's ideology is proved here when he says that "to a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend." (11)

Another intriguing instance of Maha's deep bond with Nature is the episode of her childbirth in Nature's lap, by the banks of the Dead Sea. The delicate analogy here between the sick, naked orange trees and Maha, who is 'pregnantly sick' foreshadows Maha's delivery on the bare, earthy ground. The rest of the entire episode is a description of the process of Maha's childbirth mingled with rich nature-analogies and details. The setting is as natural as it could be:

I put my pick on the ground and sat next to the canal. With both hands I held my waist tightly. When I placed my head on the freshly turned soil the smell of wet fertile fields filled my nostrils...The twittering of sparrows and the sound of running water mingled in my head. It was cool and damp under the lemon tree. I dug my fingers in the ground and smiled. Two strong hands gripped my waist and started squeezing and twisting. An earthworm slid near my hand, winding its body then straightening it. Curling and straightening. I was brownish-pink. (136)

The synaesthesia or mix of nature-imageries--olfactory (the smell of wet fertile fields), auditory (the twittering of sparrows and the sound of running water), tactile (it was cool and damp), kinesthetic (started squeezing and twisting, earthworm slid, winding its body then straightening, curling and straightening) not only adds to the richness of language but also highlights the depth of the bond between Maha and her natural surroundings. Even through her pain Maha is conscious of every aspect of nature, the smell of the wet fields, the chirping birds, the murmuring waters, the dampness of the air. She smiles through her pain, gripping Nature's hands, enveloped in those comforting hands. Faqir sculpts Maha's persona as if she is the daughter of the earth. Nature emerges as the Mother Spirit, the doctor, the midwife all

at once aiding Maha in her labour. The personification of Nature is explicit. Maha, on the other hand, identifies herself with the 'brownish-pink' earthworm- squeezing, twisting, sliding, winding, curling and straightening through her labour pain.

Nature's multifaceted and ethereal presence is evident through Maha's diverse perceptions of its shifting personae as Harb, her recently departed husband, "Harb's hands caressed my shoulders and the back of my neck" (136) and as Maliha, her long deceased mother, "The water glittered underneath my eyelids...O Maliha, my mother save me." (136). The 'Dead' Sea seems to bring back the 'dead' to Maha.

Maha's childbirth can even be compared to parturition in animals - out in the open, in the fields. Just like an animal offspring, her son "slipped out to the ground... my son fell on his grandfather's land." (136 - 137). Here again, we see that Faqir keeps the setting and atmosphere as natural as it is to animals. Maha extends the metaphorical identification of herself with an earthworm to her newborn son by addressing him as a "worm-like" creature she "fell in love with." (137)

Thus Nature is with Maha at every step, every significant moment - moments of joy, moments of sorrow, moments of pain and moments of loneliness. "As long as the Jordan was beside me I would be fine." (162). That is the trust she has in the rivers and valleys around her, the sea and the mountains, the sun, moon and the birds. She trusts every aspect of Nature and finds comfort in them. After all, "Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things? Throw a stone into the stream, and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful type of all influence," (27) goes Emerson's philosophy on Nature.

Faqir creates piteous analogies and comparisons to highlight the plight and position of Arab women in the male-dominated, patriarchal Arab community. One such tragic analogy is between Arab women and sheep which are "waiting to be slain." (32). It is Maha's wedding

day and a feast is being prepared. “They forced the sheep to lie on their backs, tied their hind legs together, and cried, ‘In the name of Allah.’ ... The sheep struggled and kicked continuously. Their throats were slit and their bodies writhed as they delivered their souls to their maker.” (32). Faqir makes a statement here about how women are tortured in the name of religion, religious laws and in God’s name:

When the sheep stopped jerking their heads they tied them to hooks attached to the back of the house, they began flaying them with their daggers...The goat would not feel the pain if flayed after being slaughtered. “Hey, women, the slaughtered animals are yours,” cried the watchman and the shepherd. (32).

Slaughtered and then flayed in the name of God. Metaphorically, figuratively, emotionally, many a time, even physically.

Another analogy is drawn between Arab women and ants who toil laboriously all their lives for their family and at last are dead and forgotten. “The women of Qasim were running around busily. Black spots which looked like active ants, no more, no less. All their lives, they sweat and dig the soil to build nests for their men and children and at the end they die and are forgotten. Ants without names, past or future.” (145).

To quote Emerson, “It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects.” (27). And so Faqir, our poetic author creates these analogies which are constant and encompass nature.

Nature’s cruel warning takes the shape of foreshadowing words when Maha narrates that “morning light slapped me on the face. I opened my eyes reluctantly. My muscles were stiff as tent poles. Allah protects us from the evils of the day.” (164). The very next moment her cruel brother Daffash enters her room, violently cursing, hitting and attacking her for refusing to cook and serve his English friends. Maha becomes the sheep, the oppressed Arab

Woman. “I prayed to die and get rid of the piercing pain. A crazy shepherd was flailing my flesh with a sharp dagger.” (165)

Recovering from the beatings and physical atrocities hurled at her by her brutally insensitive brother, Maha makes a comparison between her village Hamia; which represents the society that imposes unjust laws and torture on the Arab woman; and Nature which is above these unfair, man-made laws, providing comfort and solace to women and men equally. “Save me from that village with its narrow alleyways and tiny-eyed mud houses. A leech sucking the mountainside. Unlike earth-worms which are blind but sensitive, the village was blind and thick-skinned.” (171). The village with its laws, blind to justice, insensitively sucks the blood of its very nurturers – Nature and the Arab Woman. Both Nature and the Arab Woman blindly accept the oppressions inflicted upon them by the Man, the power-player, their tormentor.

Finally, when Maha is forced to marry the elderly Sheikh Talib, who has an ailing wife and has now his eyes set on Maha; Maha, with the aid of her two confidantes, Nasra and Murjan, escapes during the wedding ceremony, into the mountains, into the arms of Nature, her protective friend and nurturer. They take refuge for a short while in a cave in the mountains but are forced to run further to escape the “procession of torches” that “climbed up the mountain like a glowing snake.” (211). With muscles aching, eyes watering and feet bleeding, she reaches the Dead Sea along with her companions. “The wings of darkness hid our figures, protected them, enveloped us like a kind mother.” (212). Nature, once again assumes the role of Maha’s protector and Mother figure. Here Faqir paints a vivid imagery of darkness and decay, foreshadowing her dark future:

The sky was a cloud of black smoke suspended over the open plain of the sea...Darkness and heat swathed the vast salt flats...The darkness of the clouds descended and enveloped Nasra and me. The landlocked water held its breath and

nothing moved on that vast coast except water from the mineral springs which gurgled out then glided down the cliffs to the black mirror...I placed my head on a flat stone and tried to listen to the sound of the water streaming down to meet its death. The sapless cloak of death shrouded the low land, the tops of mountains. (212)

Like Emerson writes, "Nature always wears the colours of the spirit" (11), Nature seems to wear a black shroud of darkness when Maha escapes to the mountains, probably suggesting Maha's inevitable capture.

On discovering that her wicked brother Daffash has taken possession of the orchard, the house and her son, Maha decides to stop running and head back to the village. Though Nasra, her aide points out the foolishness of the decision, Maha is determined. Maha's yearning to protect her orchard echoes her ecocritical, nature-loving character and Faqir's appeal for environmental conservation. While Daffash personifies the insensitive, exploiting, nature-harassing face of mankind, Maha represents the conservationist, the nature-lover, the nature-protector. So do the other secondary characters like Maha's father and her bosom-friend Nara. Thus the storyline and the characters have a strong ecocritical appeal which renders *Pillars of Salt* its 'ecofictional' qualification.

The nature-description that follows foreshadows Maha's suppression at the hands of her torturers and her impending doom. "The few palm trees were like drops of fresh water in a salty sea. They could not change the plain to kind green. The forces of the pale desert triumphed over the bright green spots." (215). The analogies of the 'bright green spots' to Maha and the lot of oppressed Arab Women and 'the forces of the pale desert' to the evil forces of the oppressors like Daffash and other Men of the Arab community are evident. 'The few palm trees' probably refer to the handful of righteous men and women, Maha's well-wishers, like her late good-natured father, her mother-in-law Tamam, her, best friend Nasra

and Murjan, the son-like shepherd boy, who helps her heal her physical and emotional wounds .

On her brave return from the mountains to the village to fight for her rights, Maha reflects on how she “left the Dead Sea behind, roaring in its low land” (215), to save her orchard, to rescue her son and to claim her father’s house:

The land belonged to me. Mubarak was my son, a piece of my heart. I planted the lemon and orange shoots, waited for three years, watered them until they threw their first crop. My fingernails were lined with soil, with dung and mud. I had dug, cleaned uprooted. My brother’s hands were clean, were never plunged into mud. The land was mine. It was better to be shot than see the orchard withering away. I would prefer to lie in peace under the ground, entangled with the roots of my orange trees. (215)

The last two sentences from the above excerpt say it all about the depth of Maha’s love for her orchard, her love for the orange trees, her love for Nature, her love for her son. Despite Maha and her women empathizers’ valiant, violent encounter with Daffash and the men of the tribe, their fortitude is squashed and crushed by the brutes who prove victorious against the ‘weaker’ gender, declaring Maha to be mad and landing her in the asylum from where Maha’s entire narration is articulated, as a series of flashbacks with regular switches to her present reality and the torments inflicted on her at the asylum.

The final chapter of Maha’s narration presents Maha hallucinating in the four walls of the asylum’s room where she is in confinement along with her new roommate, Um Saad. She hallucinates about “the strong scent of thyme and mint,” envisions “a herd of black stallions with gleaming bodies galloping towards the morning sun,” and then she wishes that her “soul could gallop to its creator” - a death-wish, so that , “after all these gray years” (222) she could be with Harb, the twin of her soul. She wishes her “heart could fly away to Hamia to embrace...Mubarak,” (222) her son, the apple of her eye. We observe that even Maha’s

delusions are centered around Nature-scents and Nature-visions. Emerson writes that “The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.”(9). Emerson would agree that Maha, in the truest sense, proves to be the true lover of Nature.

We observe that the pantheistic presence of Nature is intrinsically woven into the life-story of Maha, the Bedouin, but not in the story of the urban Um Saad. Faqir has so crafted the plot that Nature appears to be the country-girl’s companion but not the city-girl’s. The sheer absence of Nature in the urban tale of UmSaad is as striking and deliberate as its powerful presence in Maha’s tale. This makes the story of Um Saad all the more distressing and agonizing to read; it’s as if Um Saad is all alone to face her agonies and torture at the hands of her cruel parents as a child and her brutal, elderly, butcher of a husband in her youth, and, in her sunset years, at the hands of her husband’s new wife. All these torments and agonies she must bear all alone, with no companion at her side, ignored by her ten young sons, abandoned even by Nature itself. This is probably what Emerson means when he talks about “the advantage which the country-life possesses, for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of cities.” (31) It’s not surprising that Um Saad ends up insane at the asylum, only to bear more suffering at the hands of the English doctor and his team.

Meanwhile Maha, in her confinement and at the English doctor’s mercy, ends her deeply tragic narration cursing her luck which “is like scattered flour.” (223). In fact, this analogy of Maha’s luck to scattered flour runs throughout the novel, like a refrain, right from the time she yearns for Harb’s love despite not accepting his invitation to meet him at midnight hour before his proposal, “My luck is like flour scattered on a plain” (14), through her cauterizing, “My luck was like scattered flour”(92), her childless agonies while she awaits Harb’s return days after her cauterization, “My luck is like flour / Scattered in a thornfield” (106), even in the Storyteller’s horrific, twisted narration when Harb dies in

battle, “My luck is like scattered flour / Collect and count the dust’ (116); to the sad conclusion of Maha’s narration of her own tragic tale and that of Um Saad.

My luck is like scattered flour. On a windy day, they ask barefooted men to collect the flour. The wind is howling and whirling in the deserted thornfield. My luck is like scattered flour.(223)

“All writers and their critics are stuck with language, and although we cast nature and culture as oppo- sites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing stream.” (Howarth 69, *Some Principals of Ecocriticism*). As if resonating Howarth’s ecocritical line of thought, by the use of profound, heart-wrenching nature imageries, Fadia Faqir appears to have molded Maha’s character in such a fashion that both nature and culture amalgamate in her ethereal personality. Strangely, profoundly, Maha personifies both nature and culture at once.

Maha is ‘an open land where every shepherd could graze his sheep’ (5). She is the ‘dry tree trunk’, the “sack of dry hay’, the vast ‘stretch of arid sand dunes’ (68) when she is labelled as barren. Maha is the ‘childless and arid’ (68) Dead Sea, dying, receding, depleting, banking on River Jordan to save her. But Faqir is hopeful of the Dead Sea’s future “As long as the Jordan was beside me I would be fine.” (162). Like Nature, tormented by Man, the victimized, cauterized Maha becomes “the cursed zaqqam tree,” (93) the “boiling sea of sand” (93). She becomes the ‘merciless’ sun ‘scorching everything it touched.’ (93). Maha is the ‘brownish-pink’ earthworm- squeezing, twisting, sliding, winding, curling and straightening under excruciating pain. Maha is the ‘flour’, ‘scattered in a thornfield’ (106) and ‘on a plain’ (14). Maha is the orchard with the orange trees, struggling to save herself from her tormentors. Maha is all these aspects of Nature and more. Maha is Nature herself.

At the same time Maha is the Arab woman, tortured and trapped in her tyrannical Arab culture. She is at the risk of being honour-killed, ironically enough, at the hands of

women-torturers and rapists; she has no scope for forgiveness whatsoever, if she ever fails to protect her virginity or her chastity. Maha is the slaughtered sheep, “waiting to be slain.” (32). Maha is the ant “without name, past or future”, the sheer “black spot”, representing the lot of those forgotten Arab women who, “all their lives...sweat and dig the soil to build nests for their men and children and at the end they die and are forgotten.” (145).

Thus, Maha is Nature, Maha is the Arab woman and her culture all mixed into one tortured being. At the conclusion of the narrative, Faqir recreates an image of a caged Maha who embodies Nature and Culture, in confinement at the hands of their ultimate tormentor, characterized by the English doctor. Faqir, through this pitiful depiction of a deranged Maha, reiterates the ecocritical imploration to save the Arab woman and thus, to save Nature.

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