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## Men's Folly/Women's Madness

Jacqueline Jondot

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# Men's Folly/Women's Madness

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## TEXT

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A foolish son is ruin to his  
father,  
and a wife's quarreling is a con-  
tinual dripping of rain.  
House and wealth are inherited  
from fathers,  
but a prudent wife is from the  
Lord<sup>1</sup>.

\*

- 1 *Pillars of Salt*<sup>2</sup> by the Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir is a story of resistance in a patriarchal society under colonial rule written in the postcolonial era. Two women, Maha and Um Saad, from both rural/Beduin and urban background oppose resistance to an authority which has lost its legitimacy through its own fault(s).
- 2 The novel begins with the traditional invocation to God: "In the name of Allah the Beneficent, the Merciful" (p. 1) who is repeatedly deemed "the Wise and Mighty" (p. 62, p. 225). Authority and wisdom are therefore closely linked together. In the novel, problems arise from a dissociation of the two. Fathers, husbands, brothers are supposed to hold authority and power over their daughters, wives, sisters. But when they do not show wisdom in the exercise of this power, it becomes illegitimate and is therefore rightly opposed by those who have to bear unjust rules and rulings. From the beginning, the novel shows a certain ambiguity as the Storyteller, who is supposed to be the voice of power, voices an underlying trend which undermines the legitimacy of authority: "Eve, made out of our father Adam's crooked rib, was cast out of heaven." (p. 2). At the beginning was perversion: woman stems from something already perverted, so how could she be blamed for a fault which is not originally her fault.

The novel presents several male figures in their exercise of authority.

- 3     Maha's father, Sheikh Nimer, was a wise, respected man ("Sheikh Nimer of Qasim, the tiger feared by the hawkish Hufour tribe", p. 183) before the death of his beloved wife, Maliha, which weakens him (p. 31), both physically and intellectually. His mourning for his lost wife leads him to self-pity and one witnesses a displacement and reversal of roles in the household: "He was getting weaker while I was getting stronger" (p. 31). The father becomes like a child who needs to be looked after. Fear of the father is replaced by pity ("I pitied the old man [...]. I used to be afraid of him.", p. 31); "I used to fear him when I was young, now my heart reached out to hold him." (p. 77). As a consequence, whereas Maha still shows signs of respect for the old man ("I kissed his hand", p. 77) because she can still see his uprightness ("[he] glowed like a pearl among fake beads", p. 22), Daffash, her brother, becomes "the disobedient son who had never listened to his father" (p. 174).
- 4     The weakening of the father's authority is partly the consequence of his feelings prevailing over his reason, which some will deem folly, but which actually verges on proper insanity when he mistakes his daughter for his wife (p. 172). But it is most certainly due to his wavering between what he thinks is right and what is traditional male solidarity. The two often clash, causing and/or because of his wavering between wisdom and folly. Seeing Maha's hard work as opposed to her brother's laziness, the father tries to make up for his inability to run his estate ("I always wanted to be strong and protect you, but Allah wrote something else.", p. 180) and in his wisdom, he recognizes that Maha's work deserves to be rewarded: "You are better than that scoundrel brother of yours. I wish you were a man because the land must go to its ploughman." (p. 173-174) and he eventually bequeaths the land to her: "The land must go to its ploughman. No, ploughwoman. The land is yours, Maha. This is my will. I have said it in front of the imam and Raai. Daffash does not deserve one span of it." (p. 180). But this is not without some degree of ambiguity. If he departs from tradition by inscribing his children in a female lineage ("Welcome, daughter of Maliha.", p. 77), and by making his daughter, rather than his son, the heiress, he nonetheless adds: "It belongs to your son after you." (p. 180), reverting to a male lineage. Moreover, when Daffash in a fit of anger leaves his father's house to go to the Pasha's, the old man

begs him to stay (p. 174), giving him full powers over his sister, thus going back on his promise: "You are the master of the house." (p. 174). Yet at the same time, he refuses to "stay in the room of the disobedient son who had never listened to his father." (p. 174). More than his actual weakness of body or mind, it is this wavering, this inability to stand for or against tradition, which opens space for disobedience. It is this constant ambiguity which undermines his symbolical authority and which makes a fool of him whom no one will respect in life or in death (p. 201).

- 5 Daffash, the disobedient son, takes advantage of the flaws in his father's authority, to impose his power. He has no respect whatsoever for his father ("daughter of the dog", p. 217). As the male in the family, since his father has relinquished authority, he assumes the right to rule over the household in a tyrannical way. His authority has no legitimacy because of his folly. Like his father, he wavers between tyranny and (some) guilt: after picking quarrels with his sister and abusing her, he "would apologize and give [her] a packet of foreign chocolates." (p. 21). Although he plays the tyrant in his tribe, he is a slave to the Pasha and his masters, the English ("Our masters, the English.", p. 161); "Slave to the English." (p. 164); "He is sleeping in the lap of the English and of their servants." (p. 173). In a colonial context, serving the occupiers amounts to being a collaborator or a traitor to his country. This finds an exact parallel in his total unconcern for the family estate. He cares so little for the land that he not only never works on it, but he also lets the foreigners destroy his sister's planted plots and is ready to sell it to these foreigners (p. 7). If his desire for modernity is not to be blamed in itself, he proves a fool when he sells the traditional furniture to buy armchairs instead (p. 72). Daffash's folly lies partly in his fascination for the city; he is "a city-worshipper" (p. 21), lured by the city and its ways without an awareness of when or how they can or cannot be adapted to their rural way of life. He wastes the family heirloom to look/act like a city dweller (p. 78) because the city, the space of the foreigners, means power and he lusts for power.
- 6 His disobedience to a (once) respected father and his betrayal of his country –as opposed to Maha's husband, Harb, who dies while fighting the English– discredit him as a true figure of authority. Therefore, he will exercise his power in a tyrannical way over the weak (his old

father) and over women. His power is based on the debasement of those –especially Maha– who do not acknowledge his authority (“Lick my boots, lick the general’s boots. Obey your masters...”, p. 173), parallel to his lack of recognition by the English despite his servile efforts to please them. He reproduces the ways of an illegitimate colonial power. Moreover, in the same way as he is lured by the English, he is lured by their women who humiliate him by treating him, at best, as “a loyal dog” (p. 43). Because they ignore him (p. 60, p. 89), his frustration turns into violence over the women of the tribe whom he rapes (p. 12, p. 65–66) or beats almost lifeless (p. 202) when they oppose any resistance to his illegitimate perverse power over them.

- 7 Although Um Saad’s husband is not “a womanizer” (p. 21) like Daffash, he is also lured by sexual desire when he marries a second wife, younger and more physically attractive than Um Saad (p. 178) and turns the latter even more into a slave than she was (p. 179). Sexual appetite replaces reason and he cannot see the soundness of his first wife’s complaints about his lack of respect for her as the mother of his eight children and he turns violent (p. 179). Violence replaces reasoning as he foolishly relinquishes a well-run household for what he thinks is sexual “fulfilment”.
- 8 Daffash’s or Abu Saad’s power has no legitimacy as it is based on threat and violence rather than on an upright and just moral stance. Daffash justifies his violence as a means of “put[ting] some sense into those crazy women’s heads.” (p. 13). But what does sense mean when one is a fool?
- 9 “[Maliha’s] beauty exceeded the beauty of our master the prophet Joseph and her wisdom was as famous as the wisdom of our master Lord Luqman.” (p. 26). The origin of Maha inscribes her in a lineage of wisdom, passed on from mother to daughter.
- 10 The first step towards wisdom is good husbandry: “Maha’s mother, Maliha, taught her how to hold the axe, cook the best mansaf, and how to spin the wheel.” (p. 26). Even the Pasha has to accept Maha’s way of doing things because she knows (p. 155). Women’s space is inside the home (p. 20) but Maha extends her office to the groves as her men cannot or will not work the land. The family estate is prosperous under Maha’s wise tending. Although she is wary of the English and of their city ways, she is pragmatic when she sees that they can help her

improve her crops (p. 133, p. 144, p. 173). Um Saad's household too is prosperous as she also makes use of modern means to improve her work and the well-being of her household. Open-mindedness within the framework of traditional values is the basis of Maha's wisdom. Whereas Daffash is always looking for confrontation, she tries to establish peace and harmony through "steady balance" (p. 14). *Steady balance* means a fragile equilibrium between conflicting tensions which needs foresight to reach. When Daffash is the slave of his immediate needs and reacts impulsively, Maha sees beyond appearances. That is why she does not react angrily when abused by Um Saad on their first meeting at the madhouse (p. 6) because she sees the latter's despair beyond her aggressiveness.

- 11 Maha uses her own body with the same wisdom as her estate. Although madly in love with Harb, she knows better than to be lured by him before they are married. "Are you mad? For a girl to be out at night is a crime of honour. [...] Stupid idiots who risked honor for love. Did Harb think that Maha, too, the daughter of Maliha, was a fool?" (p. 10) Yielding to her desire would be folly and she knows how folly has led to the displacement of her friend Nasra to the margins of the tribe ("She was nothing now. [...] Absolutely nothing. A piece of flesh. A cheap whore." (p. 11)). Foolishly risking an eye on a boy leads Um Saad still a child to be married off to an old man by her father. Wisdom teaches them to keep control over their desire.
- 12 Wisdom is a constant negotiation within the individual between the immediate fulfilment of needs (sexual, emotional...) and the postponed expectation of desire. This negotiation is expressed in Maha's wisdom drawn from both a female and a male lineage, from women like Maliha or Scheherazade –Um Saad refers constantly to the *Arabian Nights* (p. 18)– as well as from the wise men of God, Solomon, Joseph and Luqman. She constantly refers to this double –male and female– descent: "Daffash, my brother, the son of my mother, Maliha, my father Sheikh Nimer, and the grandson of my grandmother Sabha" (p. 215). Through this double lineage, her wisdom gives her a symbolic authority that otherwise would be denied her. Through her hard work and upright behaviour, Maha gains a de-facto authority over the estate and household. This displacement of authority from the father to the daughter, leaving the son out, would not be resented violently

by Daffash if her authority did not enjoy a symbolical status through her double inscription.

- 13 This displacement of authority is not accepted by Daffash and the likes of him because Maha's wisdom highlights his/their faults. Her father's weakness is enhanced by her own competence and her brother's laziness by her hard work. But her foolish father sees how efficient she is, which is evidence that he remains a wise man at heart, which, in turn, accounts for the respect that Maha shows him. Maha's wisdom and uncompromising uprightness puts her between Daffash and his evil schemes, for instance when he tries to seduce a woman whom Maha saves from dishonour. Again, she has an authority which her father does not have because, in some cases, though condemning his son's behaviour, he still supports the idea that women's folly is responsible for his foolishness ("You [Nasra] should not have tempted him.", p. 13), again wavering between what is right and what is patriarchal tradition.
- 14 Against women's wisdom, there is little argument that incompetent male tyrants can come up with. Acknowledging women's wisdom would mean acknowledging their own foolishness and accepting to relinquish their authority. It would mean acknowledging women as subjects, allowing them a status as equal which is not acceptable in a patriarchal society. To remain in power, they therefore use the only device left them and treat women as non subjects, denying them the right to speak. They treat them as animals, deprived of speech –and Daffash abuses Maha with lots of animal names– or individuals deprived of brains ("I don't talk to women. No brain.", p. 217). From stupid ("a stupid idiot", p. 95) to crazy ("What is the use of talking to crazy women?", p. 217), women are denied sense. The madhouse is the only alternative to the challenge that women's wisdom represents for men's folly and for their authority especially when women expose their faults publicly: "I don't talk to rapists. [...] I don't talk to disobedient sons. [...] I don't talk to servants of the English." (p. 217). The only way to shut them up –in every sense of the word– is to remove them to a madhouse: "She is mad" (p. 207, p. 216).
- 15 In the madhouse, women are under control (p. 206, p. 208). Under a double control, patriarchal and colonial as the doctor is an English doctor. Their bodies –the object of men's folly– are under close con-

trol, handcuff (p. 206, p. 218), straightjacket (p. 17, p. 206), electric shock (p. 223) and their hair is shorn (p. 208, p. 223) –Samson taking revenge on Delilah?

- 16 Yet their speech cannot be controlled. Maha and Um Saad never stop talking in spite of all the attempts to silence them:

“You two never stop talking.”

“Yes,” we said together.

“I will increase the dose.”

I looked at Um Saad's face [...]. She was laughing. I [...] started giggling. Um Saad suddenly roared with laughter. The doctor [...] gazed at us, baffled. (p. 110)

Laughter (p. 188, p. 223) is one of their means of asserting that “we are not mad.” (p. 110). They still have enough authority to silence the male English doctor: “No, you, shut your foreign mouth.” (p. 188)

- 17 In the madhouse, under male foreign control, they still embody the spirit of resistance, a spirit of resistance represented in the narrative by an elusive character, “Hakim, the embodiment of Arabs' anger and resistance.” (p. 55), “Hakim, the wise old man, the spirit of Arab resistance” (p. 195). The narrator insists on the wisdom of the character by the redundancy *wise/Hakim*, in English and Arabic (p. 7, p. 190). Among the characteristics of Hakim are his everlastingness (“Hakim [...] never stopped breathing, would never die.”, p. 55; “the everlasting Hakim.”, p. 115) and clandestineness (“underground”, p. 55). Hakim is a wanderer (p. 7), constantly displacing himself to avoid being taken. As a wanderer, he sets a pattern of resistance throughout the narrative. Maha is also a wanderer (p. 7), so doubly in the wake of Hakim the resistance fighter.

- 18 The novel is shaped around a dialogue between two women, inside the madhouse. Their narratives provide their version of the events leading to their displacement into the madhouse through a misuse of authority by illegitimate tyrants. However, this dialogue is embedded in the framing text of the Storyteller who wanders in and out of the



women's narratives at the same time as he claims to provide the patriarchal point of view. Does he indeed?

- 19 The Storyteller equates himself with the ultimate authority, God himself: "Allah the Mighty King revealed the Qur'an. [...] I, Sami al-Adjnabi [...] will reveal to you the tale of Maha." (p. 1). He, as a representative of men, grants himself authority over the narrative. However, through displaced signifiers, Maha is equated to the Prophet Muhammad: "Our prophet Muhammad whose soul is like the moon" (p. 1); "She [Maha] was like a perfect moon" (p. 4); her female narrative has therefore the same authority as the Prophet's. Then, the Storyteller delegates the narrative to his "monkey Maymoon" (p. 2), displacing the authority back to a male voice but a male made ambiguous by the signifier "moon". The Storyteller repeatedly deems himself "the yard-spinner" (p. 4) which identifies him with Maha whose spinning, inherited from her mother, is one of the leitmotifs of the novel (p. 26). The Storyteller is also a wanderer, like Hakim, the wise man, and Maha (p. 7), a new equation. So from the very beginning of the novel, the limits between genres are displaced so that the authority of the narrative which seemed to belong to patriarchy is in the hands of women, all the more so as the Storyteller's wise (p. 2) she-ass Aziza refuses to endorse "the accursed story" (p. 2) i.e. the patriarchal version of the story. Maha's words endure, even when she is shut up in the madhouse: "Listen, listen. I can still hear her words carried by the breeze." (p. 4) As the breeze carries her words from within the madhouse, so does the storyteller who seems to shut them up within a patriarchal discourse. As mentioned before, the narrative begins with an invocation to God, immediately followed by a quotation from the Qur'an, "Confound not truth with falsehood, nor knowingly conceal the truth." (2:42), warning the reader not to take the narrative at its face value. The warning will be repeated later: "[Poets] say that which they do not." (p. 57). The Storyteller plays on the implicit and the explicit and uses irony to undermine the patriarchal system (p. 29). The limits of truth are constantly displaced: "As for poets, the erring follow them. [...] The erring follow storytellers to the abyss of their inner souls." (p. 57), a constant displacement which allows space for subversion. Because patriarchal authority is considered as unjust, Maha and Harb twist the rules ("We can fool them", p. 45). Subversion

is one of the means through which *Pillars of Salt* displaces authority across genders.

- 20 The Storyteller wanders between both patriarchal and female narratives but in the end, the true narrative of authority surfaces: “to put the pieces together and give you a perfect moon, I went astray in every valley” (p. 57). The moon and the wanderer are Maha, who has the final word: “she combs the hair of the mighty king” (p. 227), Delilah-figure, while the land, in the hands of Daffash and fools, is laid waste (p. 224).
- 21 Woman cannot be foolishly tyrannically locked up into madness. She will always escape and start anew, wandering from land to land, like Hagar and Ishmael chased from Abraham's house: “I saw footprints of a woman and a three-year-old child.” (p. 226).

## NOTES

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1 Proverbs, 19:13-14.

2 FAQIR Fadia, *Pillars of Salt*, Northampton (Mass.), Interlink Books, 1996. References to the novel will appear directly in the article.

## ABSTRACT

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### Français

Dans *Pillars of Salt* (1996) de la romancière jordanienne d'expression anglaise, Fadia Faqir, l'autorité se déplace des personnages traditionnellement investis de cette autorité (pères, frères) vers les personnages féminins qui gagnent cette autorité à force de travail et de rectitude, de refus de compromissions. Sagesse contre folie. Ce déplacement de l'autorité contesté par les hommes conduit les femmes dans un asile d'aliénés. La structure narrative du texte cependant, par l'intermédiaire du personnage ambigu d'un conteur, déplace les lignes de perception de cette autorité.

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