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The Madness of Women as an Illusional Power in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt*

By Luma Balaa

**Abstract**

Historically speaking, women have been associated with madness, be it Medea from Ancient Greece, the medieval trials of the witches of Salem, or so called “hysterical” women in the Victorian era. Even in 21st-century literature, arts, and media, the madness of women is widely discussed and often romanticized. Some women authors employed the madwoman trope to show the effects of patriarchal oppression on women. Other studies have associated women’s madness in literature with subversion. This paper, however, claims that the portrayal of madness in both Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* (1996) is not subversive, but rather symbolizes the victimization of women by patriarchy and colonialism. The paper draws on Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s approach to feminist criticism, which argues that madness is not a form of liberation and that a madwoman “cannot speak,” alluding to Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. This study compared two novels written by women from different backgrounds and centuries: one is a British imperial text, while the other is an Arab postcolonial text. Both include the trope of madness in varying contexts. The women characters in the two novels—Bertha, Maha, and Um Saad—are doubly oppressed by colonialism and patriarchy. To silence them and prevent them from rebelling, the men in their lives accuse them of being insane and lock them up in an attic or asylum. Madness is presented in both novels in terms of Western Orientalist and patriarchal stereotypes. It is associated with otherness, witchcraft, a female malady, social control, denied subjectivity, illusional power, uncontrolled sexuality, and final surrender.

**Keywords:** Madness of women, Arab women, Women’s writing, Social control, Agency, Silence, Colonialism, Patriarchy, Orientalism

**Introduction**

Some critics may argue that *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Pillars of Salt* (1996) vary geographically, culturally, and historically so they cannot be compared. However, these texts share many similarities, most importantly in their portrayal of the madness of women. Even though Bertha is a minor character in *Jane Eyre*, her power is enormous, and she has attracted much discussion from literary critics. By referring to *Jane Eyre* and *Pillars of Salt* and how they address the trope of the mad woman, this paper will draw a dialectic link between the past and present, the West and the Orient (Wall & Jones, 2007, p. 72).

*Jane Eyre* is about an orphan who experiences great suffering during her childhood. She experiences moments of insanity when she tries to resist the tyrannical behavior of her cousin, John Reed, during her stay with her wealthy aunt. As a result, she is put into confinement. After finishing school, Jane is offered a job as a governess at Edward Rochester’s house. She falls in love with her employer but cannot marry him because he is already married. Rochester claims that

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his Creole wife, Bertha, is insane. He married her for her beauty and wealth as part of an arranged marriage. Rochester brought Bertha to England and locked her up in an attic, never allowing her to go out. Jane hears her laughing and walking around the house, but one day she tears her wedding dress. Eventually, Bertha sets the house on fire and commits suicide. Rochester becomes blind and crippled by the fire but eventually marries Jane.

*Pillars of Salt* is set in Jordan in the period during and after the British mandate and narrates the story of two women, Um Saad and Maha. Um Saad is not allowed to stay in school, marry the person she loves, or leave the house. She is forced to marry a butcher who abuses her. When her husband takes another wife, Um Saad rebels, resulting in her husband sending her to the asylum. Maha, a Bedouin, rebels against Daffash (her abusive brother), the British, and the patriarchal society; thus, she is accused of being insane. Daffash takes her land and her son, forcing her to marry a man she does not love. Both women are imprisoned in the same room in an asylum. Um Saad and Maha tell their own stories. However, the novel integrates a foreigner to tell his version of Maha’s story and of Jordan; however, Maha immediately tells her own story as a counterpoint. Maha and the foreign storyteller never meet and she only refers to him once, calling him “that drivelling liar” (Faqir, 1996, p. 143). Um Saad and Maha bond and help each other survive the abuse of the English doctor, nurses, drugs, and the triple oppression instigated by patriarchy, misinterpretation of religion, and colonialism.

In *Pillars of Salt*, Fadia Faqir adopts a similar plotline as in *Jane Eyre*: a woman confined and treated as inferior due to being labeled as insane. In both contexts, colonization plays an enormous role in women’s oppression since Britain colonized both the West Indies and Jordan. Faqir draws a similarity between the covert and overt oppressive structure of the Arab family, Arab states, and the oppressive structure of colonization (Moore, 2011, p. 3). From 1922 to 1946, Transjordan was a state under the British mandate and the story is set during this occupation. Maha’s husband, Harb, was rebellious against the colonizers and so was his widow. Harb made his wife aware of how the English were occupying their land, treating them harshly and demanding tax arrears (Faqir, 1996, p. 68). As Cooke (2000) notes, “To be able to rule the men effectively, [the colonizers] had to leave the women in their segregated space” (p. 162). Maha tries to rebel against the British who killed her husband, so she creates danger for them.

Mad women in literature have fascinated critics and created controversy about whether or not to see them as subversive. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a renowned book on madness and women’s writing in the 19th century, reading madness as subversive in women’s fictional writing. Insanity was perceived as a fictional device utilized to express women’s inner frustrations about oppression.

As Western feminist critics in the 1970s described Bertha from the West Indies as the “other,” they saw her through a limited Western Orientalist feminist lens. Although early feminist critics were aware of the colonial oppression of women, the issue only moved front and center in the 1990s and 2000s with the arrival of Arab and other non-Western feminist fiction and the concomitant wealth of interest in colonization, which was now enriching feminist criticism. Perhaps this explains why early feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar did not focus on the “othering” and dehumanizing of Bertha and tended to romanticize women’s madness as a form of resistance to patriarchal control. They were projecting their own hopes for women’s empowerment by treating literary madness as resistance.

Nevertheless, many feminist scholars, such as Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Judy Oppenheimer, support Gilbert and Gubar’s stance, contending that madness is subversive in women’s writing. For instance, Cixous (1976) asserts that the madwoman is rebellious and
redemptive; she believes in creating feminine nonrational language to combat patriarchal language and rationality (pp. 875–893). For Kristeva, madness is also subversive; she refers to her theory of abjection and the prelinguistic phase of a pre-symbolic state which occurs before a distinction is formed between self and other, the stage “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2) and during which the symbolic patriarchal order is shattered. Oppenheimer (1988) argues that the process of transformation into sanity is a “brave noble reaction to [female protagonists’] presence in a world they never made—and do not accept” (p. 164). From the Arab world, Manisty (1994) argues that Egyptian writers, such as Ashour, Bakr, and Fu’ad, employ voice and madness as textual strategies to “resist spatial and psychological confinement” (p. 164). She explains that “the silenced [women] become empowered through the act of narration, and the dominance of the masculine voice and male monopoly over space is challenged” (p. 164). However, it should be noted that the act of rebellion is not actual but fictional or metaphorical since it is merely a literary trope or device.

Other critics, such as Phyllis Chesler, Rasheed El-Enany, and Dalya Abudi view women’s madness in literature as both subversive and non-subversive. Chesler (1972) maintains that the insane women in women’s writing are both rebels and victims; however, she concedes in her book *Women and Madness* that mental illness in women’s writing is “an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to overcome this state” (p. 16). She explains that she never intended to romanticize madness or confuse it with revolution (1972, p. xxiii). In the Arab world, El-Enany (2006, p. 381) views madness as a double-edged metaphor. Abudi (2011) agrees that texts written by women in Arab literature represent madness as both “a metaphor for female victimization on the one hand and for female resistance on the other” (p. 230). She continues by noting that in female Arab writing, “literary madness has become the language of despair and alienation, protest and rebellion, anguish and salvation” (p. 230). Abudi also remarks that many Arab writers practice literary madness to avoid censorship and the risk of angering the authorities (pp. 229-230).

However, there are many other feminist scholars who believe that the representation of women as insane is not subversive. Showalter (1985, p. 5) highlights that viewing insane women as subversive falls into the danger of romanticizing women’s insanity instead of considering it as a helpless cry. Ussher (1991, p. 7) maintains that the fact that society labels women as insane implies it silences them. In fact, she views madness as a way to control women who do not conform to “the dominant order” (1991, p. 167); when women are labeled as mad, they are automatically categorized as second-rate (1991, p. 11). Moreover, Felman (1997) views madness as the complete opposite of subversion. She explains that insanity is “the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation” (p. 118). Caminero-Santangelo (1998, p. 181) argues that the madness of women is presented as an “abuse” and should not be viewed as an unavoidable and unaltered destiny for women, while Donaldson (2002, p. 102) comments that some critics who focus on the metaphor of female insanity as rebellion forget about the insanity itself and its negative connotations. More recently, Balaa (2014, p. 495) maintains that Hanan Al-Shayk’s short story “Season of Madness” presents madness as “abuse” and should not be considered an inevitable and unchangeable fate for women.

It is understandable to view hysteria or madness in the 19th century as an unconscious feminist protest. However, if we examine feminist criticism over the last half-century and all the revolutionary scholarship on feminist psychiatry, the madness of women should no longer be romanticized and the stereotypes of female insanity should be questioned. Showalter (1985) clearly proves that historically speaking, during the Victorian and Modern eras and movements such as
Darwinism, cultural attitudes toward the mental illness of women were shaped by the social shifts of each age, such as the psychiatric revolutions affecting the diagnosis and treatment of these women. Both these novels discriminated against the women characters by categorizing them as mentally ill and confining them to asylums.

Critics have been split into two groups regarding Bertha Rochester’s madness in *Jane Eyre*. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) view Bertha as Charlotte Brontë’s double, “an image of her own anxiety and rage” (p. 88). They regard insanity as connected to rebellion against patriarchy, and that anger symbolizes protest. However, they admit that the ending of the novel does not solve the problem of patriarchy because the madwoman dies (p. 379). However, if Bertha represents Jane’s double and acts on her behalf, why does Jane not relate to her? She never “sees her kinship with the confined and monstrous double, and that Brontë has no sympathy for her mad creature” (Showalter, 1985, p. 69). Jane distances herself from Bertha, which adds to the weakness of subversion as being an appropriate mode of rebellion. Treating Bertha as Jane’s resistant mad double belittles the impact of the resistance since it is not Jane who is resisting; she must conform to the Victorian norms of her society. Klambauer views the representation of women’s insanity in *Jane Eyre* as subversion (Klambauer & Bauschke, 2019, p. 2). Though Klambauer acknowledges that madness has been utilized as a tool to control women, at the same time she argues that it constitutes “a potential escape, an outlet for the suppressed rage of the contemporary woman” (Klambauer & Bauschke, 2019, p. 11). She adds that “rather than a wilful act of resistance, the descent into madness seems generally more likely to be a reaction to injustice than means to an end; madness then is a last resort rather than a rational act of resistance” (Klambauer & Bauschke, 2019, p. 11).

Other critics do not view Bertha’s madness as subversive. For instance, Maynard (1984) argues that Jane views Bertha as a “live symbol of the dangers of madly uncontrolled sexual feeling” (p. 126). Some feminists might view this as rebellious because Bertha is not conforming to the norms of sexuality; however, in the novel, she acts as a lesson for Jane, who remarks: “I am insane—quite insane, with my veins running fire” (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 302). Caminero-Santangelo (1998) argues that the lesson learned from *Jane Eyre* is that “to achieve happiness, Jane must learn to separate herself in all ways from Bertha, to stifle and finally kill the Bertha in her” (pp. 3–4), adding that “the symbolic resolution of the madwoman as an alternative to patriarchy traps the woman in silence” (p. 4). Bertha in *Jane Eyre* is represented as “subhuman, a beast, invoking a model of madness that had dominated until the end of the eighteenth century” (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, p. 13). Yaeger contends that Bertha’s mad behavior, her “fierce semiosis,” is a release of her sexual desire (Yaeger, 1988, p. 39), which is negatively portrayed due to the period in which the novel was written, a time when it was believed that insanity was linked to women’s sexuality. Rich (1979) explains that Jane must curb “her imagination at the limits of what is bearable for a powerless woman in the England of the 1840s” (p. 99).

In contrast, the representation of madness in *Pillars of Salt* has generally been read as subversive. Some view the female protagonists as rebels against patriarchal and colonial oppression. Sinclair (2012) contends that both women characters “have proven to be capable of the changes necessary to gain the power needed to fight disempowerment” (p. 24). She argues that it is the journey, not the end result, that matters and defines a person (p. 24). Shahd AlShammari (2014) remarks that Maha and Um Saad are both madwomen “who function as embodied agents of political and cultural resistance” (pp. 207–208). Her argument is that the subversive appears in “its ability to ignite fear and offend both the coloniser and the patriarch” (pp. 207–208). Srinivasan (2014) also contends that Maha is not voiceless. She argues that the author “develops a strategy to
empower her women who rise to challenge suppression to prove their rights” (p. 90). Moreover, Hammouche (2015, p. 199) considers the madness in this novel as a mode of resistance and as the madness of nonconformity. Conwell (2011) contends that Maha first speaks and then is permanently silenced (p. 44). She remarks that Faqir, the transnational woman author delivering the story to readers, is not silenced, but the women characters are (p. 49). I concur with Conwell in distinguishing between the author’s voice and that of the characters; the current study attempts to build on Conwell’s argument, employing Caminero-Santangelo’s theory which maintains that a madwoman cannot speak to prove that madness is not subversive in either *Jane Eyre* and *Pillars of Salt*.

### A Madwoman Can’t Speak

This paper bases its argument on Caminero-Santangelo’s theory that “all forms of protest within [the asylum’s] walls are rendered socially meaningless” (1998, p. 37). In her book *The Madwoman Can’t Speak*, Caminero-Santangelo opposes the claim that insanity is a suitable metaphor for women’s rebellion to oppose oppression and patriarchy (p. 9). She employs de Lauretis’s theory of “technologies of gender,” which contends that gender, in both its states as representation and self-representation, is constituted as a consequence of many technologies such as institutional discourses, daily practices, and cinema (p. 2).

Caminero-Santangelo (1998) borrows de Lauretis’s concept of the “space-off,” which is the “movement from the space represented by/ in a representation, by/ in a discourse, by/ in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them” (p. 26). This term was first coined in film theory and is defined as “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible” (p. 26). Caminero-Santangelo illustrates how the multiple texts she studies have embraced “the discursive space” provided by dominant representations of madness so as “to reconfigure that space from within—to reveal the ‘space-off’” (p. 10). According to de Lauretis (1987), gender can be deconstructed if gendered subjects are constituted by discourse and representation (p. 3). However, Caminero-Santangelo argues that the representation of madness as rebellious can be compared to how her concept of “space-off” can be subversive. They both give the illusion of power, but in reality, the mad subject or the non-subject are both situated outside any “sphere where power can be exerted” (p. 4). Caminero-Santangelo disagrees with de Lauretis’s concept of the space-off and contends that in both cases the postmodern woman occupying the space-off lacks agency (pp. 102-103). She elaborates that this “space-off” is imprisoned within hegemonic discourses: “for if we are constructed within and by discourse and representation, we cannot simply move outside them and somehow start anew” (pp. 102-103).

Caminero-Santangelo (1998) interrogates the idea that madness itself is a metaphor for resistance. She illustrates how authors tend to relapse into the space of prevalent models of madness in literature, medicine, and other texts, “counter[ing] representation with representation” (p. 11). She investigates the dominant social understanding of insanity at the time texts were written. Her study shows that all the works reveal that the madness of women is not subversive but constitutes a surrender to patriarchy. She comments that the texts she studies are “characterized by the (dis)ability to produce meaning—that is, to produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society” (p. 11). For instance, texts by American women authors in the World War II era show insane women as silenced and having illusional power; they self-sabotage themselves. Caminero-Santangelo contends that the authors were reacting to historical issues at the time the texts were written. They present mad women as “murdering mothers” (p. 159),...
“manless women” (p. 55), women with “multiple personalities” (p. 11), and “out-hurting the hurter” (p. 125).

Balaa (2014) defines the term “subversive” as “a state of being able to voice oneself, take action and be able to change her status quo” (p. 483). In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is not able to speak for herself, act without limits, or alter her status quo. In *Pillars of Salt*, Maha and Um Saad try to assert their voices but are not heard, and they are silenced and falsely accused of insanity because no one listens to a mad person. Once they are imprisoned, Maha and Um Saad become helpless and thus unable to change their status quo. They are placed in a space in which power cannot be exerted. It is not enough to just analyze how madness is represented; the historical realities should also be examined, including the dominant social conceptions of madness in Victorian England and the status of women in 1920s Jordan during the British mandate.

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines insanity as “such unsoundness of mind or lack of understanding [that] it prevents one from having the mental capacity required by law to enter into a particular relationship, status, or transaction.” Bertha’s insanity was perceived as not being able to merge into society and as a threat during the Victorian era. Likewise, in the 19th-century Arab colonized world, the law banned insane peoples from staying with their families. In *Pillars of Salt*, their societies decided that Maha and Um Saad had “unsound” minds and as such, they were prevented from living in the society or entering into relationships. They were placed “outside” society. In *Jane Eyre*, the reader is not aware of the extent of Bertha’s insanity because it is simply Mr. Rochester’s verdict after consultation with a doctor. However, Maha and Um Saad are not insane; if they become mad, which is very likely given the conditions of the asylum, it is the fault of their society that has marginalized, subjugated, manipulated, and imprisoned them. Many recent studies view the text as a critique of society but do not place importance on the fate of the women protagonists. Women’s madness is presented in both novels as part of Western Orientalist and patriarchal stereotypes and is associated with stigma, otherness, witchcraft, malady, social control, denied subjectivity, illusional power, uncontrolled sexuality, and surrender.

In both novels, women’s madness is presented as a stigma. By being accused of insanity, the protagonists are looked at with shame and automatically sent to an asylum or isolated. Bertha, Maha, and Um Saad are all seen as shameful by their families, which is why they hide them from society. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester hides Bertha and never lets anyone see her for years. Presently in the Arab world, mental illness is still stigmatized (Sewilam et. al., 2015). If patients are seeing a psychiatrist, they are ashamed because society would brand them as insane. Chesler (1972) argues that the ethics of mental health are masculine (pp. 68-69), and “for a woman to be healthy she must ‘adjust’ to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex even though these kinds of behaviour are generally regarded as less socially desirable” (p. 197). Felman (2003) groups insanity into two categories: the madness of inclusion and that of exclusion. She defines insanity of inclusion as the norm, whereas that of exclusion refers to the mad outsider (p. 13). In this case, Bertha, Maha, and Um Saad are mad outsiders. Porter (2002) comments that “All societies judge some people mad: any strict clinical justification aside, it is part of the business of marking out the different, deviant, and perhaps dangerous… Stigmatizing—the creation of spoiled identity—involves projecting onto an individual or group judgments as to what is inferior, repugnant, or disgraceful… Setting the sick apart sustains the fantasy that we are whole” (p. 63).

**Madness as Other, Inhuman, and Uncontrollable**

In both texts, madness is portrayed as “other,” inhuman, and uncontrollable. All three women, Bertha, Um Saad, and Maha, are othered by patriarchy and imperialistic ideologies. They
are presented as animals, witches, evil, femme fatales, hypersexualized, and suffering from uncontrollable madness. As Blowers (1996) notes, “[t]he consequences of being defined as other are severe and the means of unsticking the label virtually impossible” (p. 79). Because they are viewed as unfit to mix within society, they are abandoned by their families and friends.

In Jane Eyre, Bertha is visited once by her brother, whom she bites because of her anger at his abandonment. She is portrayed as alien, obnoxious, common, narrow-minded, and incapable of improving or learning. Rochester says that he “found [Bertha’s] nature wholly alien to [his]; her tastes obnoxious to [him], her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher” (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 333). Jane describes her as an animal: “It snatched and growled like some strange wild animal” (p. 321). Further, when Bertha attacks Rochester she is described as follows: “the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously” (p. 321). It is not a mere conflict in personalities but “an absolute judgment of moral difference, and marks the first step in his realization that Bertha is, quite straightforwardly, not human” (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, p. 13). Jane defends Bertha once she realizes that she is insane; while Rochester keeps blaming Bertha for her insanity, Jane replies that it is not Bertha’s fault. However, later in the novel, Jane mainly adopts an imperialist patriarchal perspective when describing Bertha because she sees her through Rochester’s eyes. Jane reiterates how Bertha is inhuman, a monster, vampire, beast, and lunatic (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 311). Bertha is not given a chance to improve and remains a beastlike, inhuman creature. At the time, it was common to view the colonized as inferior to the colonizer. For example, Knox, a 19th-century anatomist and ethnologist, in his book The Races of Man (1862) claims that some races are not able to achieve full human development because of their physical type (Knox, 1862, pp. 243–244). Knox adds that he doubts whether black people can be civilized: “They are shrewd, and show powers of mimicry—acquire language readily, but can never be civilised” (p. 158). It was believed that Black people, including people from the West Indies, were an inferior race to White people, claiming that genetic and environmental factors played a role in fueling insanity.

Maha and Um Saad in Pillars of Salt are also “othered” and treated as inhuman. No one visits them, not even Um Saad’s sons, Maha’s friend Nasra, or her mother-in-law. As Blowers argues, “Those who find themselves on the wrong side of the dividing line can only be defined in the negative (irrational, insane, immoral, diseased, sick, defective, cretinous, disabled)” (1996, p. 79). Kukash, the nurse, handcuffs Um Saad and holds her neck down with both hands as if he were slaughtering a goat; then he clips her hair (Faqir, 1996, p. 222). Um Saad is upset; she moans and says “this is what they do to control us” (p. 223). To explain this type of othering and dehumanization, Cesaire argues that the “colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal…this boomerang effect of colonization” (1972, p. 20). Colonialism employs a binary concept of “subject” and “other,” and the doctor sees these women as the uncivilized other. Therefore, the colonized insane women are thrice dehumanized, losing their entitlement to humanity.

The women in both novels are presented as evil witches. Jane describes Bertha as a “vampire” with red eyes and continues with, “The lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes” (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 211). She is presented as a ghost or a demon: “What crime was this that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner?—what mystery...what creature was it, masked in an ordinary woman’s face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of carrion-seeking bird of prey?” (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 224). Often in the Arab world
madness is associated with witchcraft and evil. Um Saad is described as evil, and in wanting to harm her husband and his new wife, she resorts to witchcraft. Maha is perceived by the foreign storyteller as a she-demon, a ghoul (Faqir, 1996, pp. 27, 30). He tells the reader that she is “evil, haunted and capable of slaying a man” (Faqir, 1996, p. 33). Like Bertha’s mother, Maha’s mother Maliha is described by the storyteller as possessed by the devil (Faqir, 1996, p. 29).

Even though the storyteller’s point of view is constantly being negated by Maha’s stories, the final chapter tells the reader his story, which might signify that it is the patriarchal and colonial discourse that is winning after all. Even though Maha is telling her story, Conwell argues that she “does not have control over how she is represented, for her story is falsely presented by a traditional patriarchal storyteller” (Conwell, 2011, p. 45). For example, he narrates that Maha with the help of her friend Nasra tried to kill her brother so that she would inherit the farm, though the reader knows that her father gave her the land (p. 32). The storyteller further narrates that when he saw Maha in the mosque, “she looked evil, haunted and capable of slaying a man” (p. 33). The reader may not believe the storyteller’s point of view, but unfortunately it represents the dominant patriarchal and colonial discourse. For instance, though Maha was not labeled as insane when she could not bear children after six months of marriage, her society believed that she was possessed by evil spirits (p. 79). As AlShammari notes, “The stigma is connected to gender and the concept of ‘purity.’ To be a ‘pure’ and ‘good’ woman is to be healthy, sane, and able-bodied” (2014, p. 454). Aunt Tamima, her mother-in-law, takes her to Hajjeh Hulala (the village healer/sorceress) to ward off the devil from her body.

Bertha and Maha are portrayed in Orientalist language as sexualized femme fatales. Rochester describes Bertha as a mad, mysterious, animal-like, cunning temptress (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 320). He claims that she “allured,” enchanted, or seduced him with her beauty:

I thought I loved her…Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! ... I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her. (Brontë, 1847/1996, pp. 332-333)

Maha is accused of seducing her husband and many other men in the novel such as the Pasha. In the final chapter of the novel, the storyteller’s fantasy shows Maha as married to a white king after she seduced him: “The strong white king fell victim to the arrows of the eyelashes of the black widow when he saw her weaving in the glowing light of sunset” (Faqir, 1996, p. 226). Even her brother and the whole village accuse Maha of being a sinner and an immoral seductress when she refuses to marry Sheikh Talib and give him her land.

**Insanity as a Form of Social Control**

According to Klambauer and Bauschke (2019), madness “has always been the label attached to those who do not fit the mold of what is deemed normal, acceptable, and desirable” (p. 2). In both novels, the women protagonists are accused of being insane as a form of patriarchal and colonial control that is a “way to cement the status quo” (Klambauer & Bauschke, 2019, p. 2). Caminer-Santangelo rightly comments that madness is “a category imposed on women in punishment for unfeminine behaviours” (1998, p. 17). Any woman is punished if she does not conform to what “feminine” behavior dictates. Insanity in these two novels is presented as an occasion for social control, discipline, imprisonment, and silencing. It is a by-product of subjugation and manipulation caused by patriarchy and colonialism. Insanity and asylums “function as mirror images of the female experience, and as penalties for being ‘female,’ as well...
as for desiring or daring not to be” (Chesler, 1972, p. 16; original emphasis). It can even be debated that this social control and imprisonment would eventually threaten women’s mental health. Even if Bertha were not initially insane, Rochester’s bad treatment of her might have caused her insanity.

Medicine and oppressive psychiatry have been used for social normalization and control. In both novels, medicine controls the women’s behavior and marginalizes them. In the Victorian age, medical doctors such as Henry Maudsley described madwomen in terms of a “raging fury of lust” (1871/1973, p. 85). Wilson argues that “feminist historians of psychiatry have nuanced their arguments and explored the ways in which psychiatry has been used to discipline women in particular” (2018, p. 105). Moreover, Caminero-Santangelo comments that “insanity and moral principles are antithetical, an idea implied by Victorian descriptions of moral insanity” (1998, p. 13). Therefore, if any woman displayed immorality according to the norms of patriarchal Victorian England, she was labeled as insane. In Jane Eyre, Rochester tells Jane that when he married Bertha, no one warned him about her insanity and that her mother was insane. This reflects Victorian beliefs about psychiatry and the notion of the “daughter’s disease” regarding “the transmission of madness: since the reproductive system was the source of mental illness in women, women were the prime carriers of madness, twice as likely to transmit it as were fathers” (Showalter, 1985, p. 67). He claims that Bertha’s mental health worsened but does not tell us what she is suffering from exactly. She is presented as an obstacle to his marriage to Jane, which is partially why he locks her up and hides her away.

Foucault and others have discussed the ways in which medicine has historically been used as an instrument of social control (Foucault, 1979; Szasz, 1960). Foucault comments that “for the first time in history [starting from the late 17th century but mostly in the 19th century]… biological existence was reflected in political existence” (1979, pp. 142-143). Foucault defines biopower as “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (1980, p. 136). In the novels, the medical doctor has control over the women’s bodies through biopower. Bertha is sentenced to solitary confinement and guarded by a nurse. When she tries to escape, she is tied to a chair. Um Saad and Maha are continuously being monitored and punished if they do not conform to the rules. They are all treated inhumanely. Foucault’s theory of biopower considers health institutions as sites that control nonconforming subjects (1980, p. 140). Biopower tries to control the identities of the subjects, to the point of denying them their own identities. When the subjects take drugs, they feel numb, weak, and cannot think properly. Instead of giving them support, and healing these three women, the asylum or Rochester’s attic deprives them of the freedom to be themselves and makes them feel worse. They are silenced and not allowed to tell their stories, which is similar to the situation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s insane protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” who is isolated, prescribed the rest cure, and not allowed to write her story. In his book Discipline and Punish, Foucault comments that punishment has grown from physical torture to include psychological torture (1997, p. 8). After punishment, the mind and body lack agency. The doctors try to isolate the women from their societies and remove any leftover memories of their past; they try to make them believe that they are insane.

Fanon comments that doctors abuse patients under colonialism: “professional morality, medical ethics, self-respect, and respect for others, have given way to the most uncivilized, the most degrading, the most perverse kind of behavior” (1967, p. 131). The men in these women’s lives collaborate with the English mandate to control these women. Daffash is both a victim and an accomplice in the colonial game. The Pasha, Samir, is a wealthy man who owns a villa and
collaborates with the English, so Maha attacks him as well. She says to herself that the *Pasha* is “feeding the people who had chewed on my husband’s flesh” (Faqir, 1996, p. 172).

There is no medical evidence to support these two women in *Pillars of Salt* being insane. Maha is accused of being mad because she rebels against patriarchy and the English. She tells them: “Foreign killers, all of you” (Faqir, 1996, p. 172). Um Saad is accused of being mad because she expressed how unhappy she was with the way her husband was treating her when he married a younger wife. They are tied, injected with drugs, given electroshocks, and tortured. Maha narrates that Kukash, the nurse, “flung Um Saad’s old body onto the bed and tied her legs and hands to the iron bedposts” (Faqir, 1996, p. 7). He then injected her with a drug to calm her down. The medical doctors accept what patriarchy does and exert further oppression and abuse on the two victims. Wilson (2018) questions the colonial treatment of the insane in *Pillars of Salt*, pointing out that the British doctor never listens to the two women’s stories and is not seen diagnosing the patients. Wilson refers to one incident where Dr. Edwards is puzzled by the laughter of the two women despite being scolded by him for spending the night talking (Wilson, 2018, p. 48). Um Saad is telling the story of how her husband raped her and the doctor comes in, hearing them talking. He becomes upset so he tells them: “I will increase the dose” (Faqir, 1996, p. 118). Their reaction is to start laughing and giggling. Wilson interprets this moment:

> Dr. Edwards, and the nurse Salam, interrupts—on this occasion as on so many others throughout the book—their conversation, but it is Edwards who is also disturbed in this encounter. Baffled by the behaviour of his patients, Edwards is unable to—and unwilling to try to—understand their experiences and their own apprehension of their conditions. He can only loosen his tight collar and gaze at them, confounded by their laughter. (Wilson, 2018, p. 48)

He does not care to listen to the women’s stories, diagnose them, understand them, or try to cure them. His goal as a colonizer is to treat them as criminals, punish them, silence them, drug them, and basically annihilate their personalities.

Um Saad was imprisoned and beaten from an early age by her family and then her husband. She even tells Maha that sometimes they beat her for no reason (Faqir, 1996, p. 85). When she falls in love with a Circassian boy, she is imprisoned at home and never allowed to go out. Her father believes that Circassians are beneath his race because historically they were led into exile by the Russians in the 19th century. Um Saad is punished for falling in love and treated as if she were insane. The only function she attends is her own wedding. One time she lifted her window shutter to look down at the street and her father hit her with a leather belt (Faqir, 1996, p. 85). Her husband also beats and rapes her on their wedding night (Faqir, 1996, pp. 117-118). She is, like Bertha, initially imprisoned in her own home, that of her father and husband. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault describes the coercion of the asylum:

> The asylum as a juridical instance recognized no other. It judged immediately, and without appeal. It possessed its own instruments of punishment, and used as it saw fit. The old confinement had generally been practiced outside of normal juridical forms, but it imitated the punishment of criminals, using the same prisons, the same dungeons, the same physical brutality. (Foucault, 1973, pp. 252-253)
It is not the mad person’s behavior that imprisons them but how society views that person. Blowers (1996) comments that “Foucault’s analysis suggests that it is not a person’s essential behavioural characteristics that put her or him on the wrong side of the fence; it is how society, institutions and psychiatrists choose to define and read those characteristics” (p. 83). Basing her argument on Foucault’s grouping of mental hospitals in the “heterotopic category” (Foucault, 1986, p. 25), Sinno (2011) comments that despite the imprisonment of Maha and Um Saad in Pillars of Salt, they have their own “heterotopias of deviation” (Foucault, 1986, p. 25), or “other spaces” in which they can rebel (Sinno, 2011, p. 69). No matter how rebellious they are, they are ultimately silenced; they are marginalized and isolated from society.

**A Female Malady**

Insanity is viewed as a woman’s malady in these two texts because only the women are represented as insane, reinforcing the patriarchal stereotype that women are more emotional than men and need to be controlled. Bertha and her mother are presented as insane and no men in Pillars of Salt are shown to be detained in the asylum. It can be argued that the storyteller shows signs of insanity, but he is not locked up. Ironically, Maha and her mother are accused of insanity by the storyteller. Showalter argues that throughout history madness has been considered a female malady (1985, p. 3), and madness in the past was associated with femininity (Ussher, 1991, p. 167). As Klambauer discusses, in the 19th century the link between “mental illness and parts of the female reproductive system, however, increasingly rendered madness in all its forms an exclusively female malady” (2019, p. 9). In this period, insanity was connected to women “by its medical attachment to the uterus, and secondly via the treatment of hysteria utilising an orgasmic cure” (Klambauer, 2019, p. 10). During the Victorian era, it was believed that women tended to be more emotional and less rational due to their physiologies, uterus, ovaries, cervix, and the bodily functions of menstruation, menopause, and childbirth.

In an interview, Faqir explained that in the Arab family, the father is the patriarch “who makes all the important decisions” (Moore, 2011, p. 3) and that is why the men believe that they are superior to women. Both women in Pillars of Salt reject the conventional roles offered to them. Maha rejects having her husband marry another wife, though it is very common in the Arab world. She rejects working as a housewife cooking and cleaning, not just for her family but for the new wife. Maha refuses to get married to a married man whom she does not love. Therefore, being insane in this novel is a punishment and not a romantic route to freedom. During the 1920s in Jordan, women were expected to be housewives who raised children, especially for Bedouins. Many girls were not sent to school, like Maha who is illiterate. They were not allowed to work, except in rare cases such as in farming. At times, they were not allowed to leave the house; Um Saad, though she lives in a city, is not allowed to leave her parents’ home.

In the Arab world, many women are driven to insanity because of patriarchy. In her novels, Nawal El Saadawi portrays the effect of patriarchal oppression, such as female genital mutilation, rape, incest, and domestic abuse, on women’s psychological health. For instance, the woman protagonist Zakeya in God Dies by the Nile (2007) is driven insane after being abused politically, economically, and socially. Chelhi argues that the causes of women’s insanity, in Tunisia, for example, result from the way their society oppresses them rather than from biological reasons (1988, pp. 110-116). In many Arab countries, there are more women than men who are insane. For example, Zurayk (2014) remarks that mental health conditions are more common among women than among men in Lebanon: “They result from the difficult social and economic conditions that face Arab women and men, and also from the situations of conflict and war that are spreading in
the region.” Many feminists explain the high rate of female mental illness as being a result of patriarchy, mistreatment of women, or misogynistic doctors (Abudi, 2011, p. 221).

Women’s madness is shown as incurable in both texts. Lerner (1989) argues that madness in the Victorian age was equated with incurability; he adds that madness “can be equated with (incurable) drunkenness or even with the class gap if it is seen (as it seems to be by Thackeray and George Eliot) as unbridgeable in marriage. Madness, like minor-character status, is a device for keeping certain items off the agenda” (Lerner, 1989, p. 299). So, by labeling Bertha as insane and incurable, Rochester tries to justify why he has lied to Jane about his first marriage. He did not place Bertha in an asylum but tells Jane that “the medical men pronounced her mad” (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 335), implying it was a hopeless case. The two women in Pillars of Salt are wrongly accused of insanity and are treated as if their supposed insanity is incurable by gradually increasing the dose of their medication. Um Saad says, “They brought me to Fuhais where Christians live and where mad people go” (Faqir, 1996, p. 19). Um Saad describes the hospital as a suffocating space; it is “a narrow hospital room with no air at all” (Faqir, 1996, p. 51).

The Subaltern Cannot Speak

According to Spivak (1988), the subaltern is deprived of voice, so being an insane subaltern is even worse. These three women protagonists have been silenced by patriarchy and colonialism. Bertha is not given a chance to speak at all except to utter animal-like noises. Bertha is triply marginalized because of her gender, ethnicity, and her madness. Spivak (1995) reads Bertha’s function in the novel as to “render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law” (p. 271).

Though Um Saad and Maha tell their stories to each other and not to the colonizers or their patriarchal oppressors, they are also silenced. The men do not listen to them because they say that women in Islam are “irrational and have lesser brains. Sinno (2011) comments that “Faqir’s mental patients devote much of their time at the asylum to introspection and self-expression” (p. 89). She argues that each woman has a voice that evolves throughout the novel through telling stories and engaging in self-reflection (p. 89). They do speak to each other, but one cannot deny that they are controlled by doctors and nurses. The women are continually being inspected, punished, and asked to stop talking and laughing; their bodies and minds are policed. Sinno acknowledges that the only thing that threatens their sanity is the asylum (pp. 91-92). They can survive but for how long? The two protagonists cannot prove that they are not insane. Yousef comments on the novel and connects it to Spivak’s concepts: “The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence the silence of the female in the novel is not the result of her lack of articulation but the outcome of the refusal of society to listen to her and interpret her words appropriately” (Yousef, 2016, p. 382). Even if the readers view them as innocent, their societies see them otherwise and they cannot change their status quo. They are permanently segregated from normal society for a crime they did not commit. If Maha and Um Saad speak in the asylum, they are attacked. They are denied their basic rights of living freely amongst their families and children. They are fed unhealthy food, have their hair cut very short, and have kerosene put on their hair even though they have no lice. The English doctor disrespects the Muslim culture by removing Um Saad’s veil; she is a Hajjeh and is supposed to cover her hair in front of men. The above incidents prove that these subaltern women are not heard.
Women as Symbols of Land

In both novels, the mad women can be viewed symbolically as a colonized land deprived of its independence. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha can be interpreted as symbolic of how the British wanted to occupy the West Indies and obtain its resources, and her imprisonment symbolizes how the colonizers extinguished the culture and identity of the colonized. Likewise, in Arabic literature, women’s bodies act as sites of political conflict; locked-up women are symbolic of usurped land. For instance, Ujayli contends that in *Pillars of Salt*, the “narrative of colonization is rendered familial in the bodies of Maha’s husband and brother, taking larger political conflicts and descaling them into physical human bodies” (2017, p. 67). In this case, Harb and Maha would represent the Bedouin life, while Daffash symbolizes the British colonizers and the modern urban lifestyle, which threaten to destroy Bedouin culture, traditions, and lifestyle. Maha’s brother works with the English and tries to destroy the land that his father left behind while Maha tries to preserve it. Daffash sells the herd and wants to “modernize” the farm, build a villa, and bring Indians to work in the field (Faqir, 1996, p. 83). Locking up Maha is representative of the loss of sovereignty over the Bedouin’s land and their culture. Daffash tries to force his sister to sign a paper giving up any of her claim to their family’s land. When she refuses to sign it, he threatens to kill her with his gun pointed at her temple. Maha runs away with Nasra and hides in a cave but he takes her son and her land, so she goes back home to fight him. However, Daffash beats up Maha and then brings the men in white to take her to the asylum.

Denied Subjectivity

There is a slight difference between *Jane Eyre* and *Pillars of Salt* in regard to denied subjectivity because feminist scholars argue that Bertha does not get to tell her story, whereas Maha and Um Saad do. Nevertheless, in both cases, they are not heard and are speaking from an asylum or a prison. Seaboyer (2000) comments that insanity for Caminero-Santangelo “removes the subject from meaning, from the symbolic order, so from the possibility of collective resistance” (pp. 133-135). These women cannot speak if they are still seen as the “other,” as irrational. During the 1920s, Arab women in Jordan were second-rate citizens and were further silenced by being madwomen. Derrida claims that “madness is what by essence cannot be said” (1964, p. 43). Caminero-Santangelo comments that social labeling and public perception are the means which differentiate between the “‘No’ of the political protest and the ‘No’ of the madwoman: society completely withholds credibility from the ‘mad,’ thus rendering their protests powerless” (1998, p. 37). The moment that society and the doctors pronounced these two women insane, they silenced them; as Felman (1975, p. 219) comments, madness is associated with silence.

It could be argued that the title of Faqir’s novel shows the two protagonists as pillars of strength. However, I interpret the title *Pillars of Salt* as showing how Maha and Um Saad have been transformed into pillars of stone–statues, meaning objects—dehumanized and silenced. This refers to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose people committed a sin and were punished by God. Upon fleeing, Lot’s wife was warned to not look back at the burning city of Sodom. She did look back, so God turned her into a pillar of salt (*The Holy Bible*, 1952, Genesis 19:24). Maha and Um Saad are also “looking back” at their memories of home, but Dr. Edwards keeps punishing them. The doctors will keep increasing their medication dose until there comes a time when their memories will be affected along with their bodies. Interestingly, Brontë alludes to Lot’s wife because Jane is also warned not to look back at Rochester when she knows that he is married.
According to Haaken (1998), “the judgment of madness does undermine, sometimes even erases, the subject’s authority to evaluate reality and to speak convincingly about it” (p. 88). Therefore, these women’s stories are undermined by their societies, and their authority is erased. Society would question what these women are saying and associate it with instability. When Bertha utters unintelligible words complaining about her situation, she is seen as inhuman. Hearing Maha screaming, Daffash screams back: “I don’t talk to women. No brain and no faith”. The Imam nodded his head approvingly. ‘Second, what is the use of talking to crazy women?’ The men laughed in unison. Like the cracked voice of the raven of parting, their laughter soared in the blind valley” (Faqir, 1996, pp. 232-233).

Abuse of Religion

In *Jane Eyre*, the novel does not tell us about Bertha’s religion, but reveals that Rochester is a Christian and, thus, is not supposed to have another wife. He tries to fool the Church and the law by hiding his first wife and attempting to marry Jane. Westerners often argue that Islam is oppressing women; however, it is a misinterpretation of Islam and its traditions that reinforce patriarchy and marginalize women. For instance, in *Pillars of Salt*, the Imam, who is supposed to be a pious, honest, leader, declares that Maha is insane even though he knows that she is not. Also, the whole village views Maha as a sinner and that she should be stoned; the novel is not clear whether this is because she spent the night outside her house and thus is seen as a prostitute or whether they believe the storyteller’s story that she slept with the Pasha. The Imam shouts: “Stone the sinner” (Faqir, 1996, p. 232) and the children throw stones at Maha. In Islam, if a woman is suspected of sinning, she is declared innocent unless there are four witnesses. The storyteller, Sami Al-Adjnabi, can be an allusion to “the misinterpretation of Islamic texts—evidence for which we find in the fact that he does not even know how to pray” (Abdo, 2009, p. 244).

Even before being placed in the asylum, the women in *Pillars of Salt* are oppressed, exposed to domestic violence, and imprisoned, which all goes against Islam. This abuse is a means “for men to assert power over women” (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, p. 3). Abdo (2009) argues that “Faqir’s novel both implicitly and explicitly attacks Islam” (p. 242). I contend that Faqir is criticizing the misinterpretation and hypocrisy in these societies and not the religion. The Imam also tells Daffash that according to the *Qurān* he should beat Maha (Faqir, 1996, p. 233). This is mentioned in the *Qurān* but as a gentle slap and not domestic violence; first, the *Qurān* notes that the husband should try to reason with his wife and advise her. Daffash beats up his sister just because she humiliated him in front of the English (Faqir, 1996, p. 174). Her father does not stop the abuse. Maha remains helpless while her brother beats her and questions why she has no energy to stand up for herself (p. 176); meanwhile, the rest of the men are watching. The Imam, who works at the mosque, is the one who wants to marry Maha off by force, and he is part of the scheme to lock her up. *Sheikh* Talib is already married but his wife is ill and blind. He sexually harasses Maha when he sees her going home. The storyteller, Sami Al-Adjnabi, tells lies even though he claims to be very pious and speaks in the name of Allah; he alleges that Maha begs Daffash to find her work at the *Pasha’s* house as a cook. He accuses Maha of seducing the *Pasha* late at night by undressing in his bedroom. She tempts him to the extent that he becomes like a ring on her finger and she gets anything she wants from him, including money, food, and gold. The storyteller says the reason why Daffash beats his sister is that he found her in bed with the Pasha. Also, the father of Um Saad forces his daughter to get married to someone she does not love; in Islam, this is not acceptable. Moreover, Sheikh Saleem, who claims to be pious, is a convict who stole Um Saad’s
money and gold, claiming he could make her husband abandon his second wife. Therefore, the above evidence shows that religion is manipulated to serve patriarchal oppression.

Absence of Political Solidarity

Even though there is solidarity between Maha and Um Saad in *Pillars of Salt*, Bertha has no one on her side. Sinno (2011) contends that Maha and Um Saad are able to transform their sites of imprisonment into sites for the critique of society and forums for creativity, solidarity, and self-expression to emerge (p. 68). She explains her view that despite being imprisoned and abused by the medical staff at the asylum, they were able to console, joke, and tell stories (p. 71). In these two novels, there is no political solidarity among the insane. Caminero-Santangelo (1998) comments that the asylum narratives she examines “describe alliances, friendships, and sacrifices for others among inmates, they also all ultimately point toward the impossibility of political solidarity among the mad” (p. 24). At times Maha gets annoyed by Um Saad’s tragic stories and wishes she could sleep in peace, while Um Saad, a city woman, has an initial bias toward Maha because she is a Bedouin (Faqir, 1996, p. 137). Maha tells the reader that she is bored of stories about city life and craves news about her village (p. 104). Also, most of the time it is Um Saad telling her story to Maha and not the other way around; this weakens the solidarity between them.

It is crucial to note that Maha speaks for Um Saad because she is the one telling her story; Um Saad never gets the chance to tell her own story. Maha tells Um Saad’s story, utilizing dialogue and the third-person narrator, i.e., “Maha, sister,’ called Um Saad” or “I [Maha] turned my head and said, ‘Yes, Um Saad’” (p. 40). Occasionally, Maha remembers some incidents about her past and wants to interrupt Um Saad’s tales, but the latter does not stop talking to listen to her. To illustrate, Maha remembers her son’s footsteps and misses him, but when she informs Um Saad about this memory, she ignores her and continues narrating her own story (Faqir, 1996, p. 54). As for the argument of finding strength in the maternal, which is argued by AlShammari (2014, pp. 207-208), this incident is before they are accused of being insane. After imprisonment, Maha never sees any of her female relatives or friends and Um Saad is abandoned by her family.

Illusional Power

It can be argued that Bertha is powerful because she does not follow any of the rules or norms of her society. She burns the house, hurts her husband, and tries to tear Jane’s wedding dress. However, in the long run, this power is only a delusion. Bertha’s madness seems subversive, but in reality, it shows an illusion of power because this rebellion cannot be sustained and is controlled. When Bertha commits suicide, she sabotages herself. Furthermore, it appears on the surface that Maha and Um Saad are powerful, but in practice they are not. It takes more than what they did to have political solidarity. According to Caminero-Santangelo, to “share an interpretation of madness as an illusory self-representation of power…offers an imaginary solution to the impasse” (1998, p. 11, original emphasis).

When patriarchy and colonizers accuse these two rebellious women, Maha and Um Saad, of being insane and place them in the asylum, they dismiss them. Haaken (1998, p. 88) calls the madwoman in literature a fantasy. Bertha, Maha, and Um Saad have illusional power because they cannot keep rebelling against the colonialists and patriarchy. They are still trapped and do not get any of their demands met. In an interview, Faqir comments that “when expression and self-actualization [are] not possible, madness is the only way out” (Moore, 2011, p. 6). Faqir here is referring to how a character in her novel, Nisanit, a Palestinian prisoner who cannot speak the truth, goes insane. However, if the two imprisoned women cannot speak their truth to the
colonizers and their patriarchal society, they will eventually go insane; talking to each other is not enough in the long run. It would be very tragic to believe that madness is the only way out. Um Saad calls upon El-Shater Hassan (a character from an Egyptian fairy story) to save her while she is at the asylum. This means she needs a miracle to be saved. Throughout her life, Um Saad is never able to act and dreams of El-Shater Hassan coming and saving her (Faqir, 1996, p. 109). Also, she dreams of being in paradise as a reward for suffering instead of trying to combat the oppression.

A Final Surrender

As Faqir notes in an interview, her characters are always “victims of the human condition—always confined” (Bower, 2012, p. 10). Madness is “the final surrender” (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, p. 11) and “the final removal of the madwoman from any field of agency” (p. 12). Bertha in the end kills herself and surrenders to her fate. She must die so that Jane and Rochester can get married. Even though in Pillars of Salt, Maha and Um Saad try to construct a counternarrative by telling their stories, the storyteller has the last word because society cannot hear them; both victims remain in the asylum. Maha’s grandmother’s carpet remains unfinished. It is a pessimistic ending.

When asked to comment on the ending of the novel, in an interview with Lindsey Moore (2011), Faqir revealed that a happy ending would not have been possible and realistic as “the subordination of Arab women is an ongoing problem” (p. 8). Therefore, this is evidence enough that, in the end, the two protagonists are forced to surrender. In the last chapter narrated by Maha, there is a foreshadowing of death portraying Um Saad’s cold body after electrocution, signaling that she might die soon. She describes Um Saad as having blue lips like dead people: “Kukash wheeled into the room a long trolley on which Um Saad’s body was convulsing. Dr. Edwards followed the trolley as if it was a funeral procession” (Faqir, 1996, p. 237).

It is important to examine how the protagonists view themselves. It seems that Maha has a stronger, more resistant self than Um Saad. Maha believes she is sane, whereas Um Saad believes she is insane. Maha tries to convince Um Saad that they are both sane. However, Maha does have her weak moments. For instance, she views herself as “insane” after her husband is killed (Faqir, 1996, p. 125). Nasra finds Maha slapping herself and yanking her hair because she refuses to believe that her husband has died and is upset that her husband will never see their unborn child. Even if the women do not see themselves as insane at first, they are likely to eventually surrender to the representation of others because of the confinement. Sinno (2011) rightly comments that “as the prison isolates and restrains, the past existences of inmates are set aside, and their future dreams and aspirations are inevitably put on hold, if not completely dismissed” (p. 86). Because of electroshock therapy, drugs, and isolation, they will not be able to sustain the positive feeling resulting from introspection and self-expression. The drugs affect their speech, memory, mental ability, and mood; sometimes the patients hallucinate and are disoriented. Some critics might consider Bertha, Maha, and Um Saad as tragic heroines, but if we were to apply the Greek definition, their downfall is not because of their character flaws; it is due to patriarchy and colonialism.

Conclusion

Bertha is completely silenced, whereas Maha and Um Saad get the opportunity to tell each other their stories, but no one else listens to them apart from the reader. Madness is “a manifestation of female subjugation and manipulation” (McDaniel, 2011, p. 4). The novel Jane Eyre does not question the sanity of Bertha. The novel Pillars of Salt may challenge the women’s
insanity, but their societies do not. Eventually, Maha and Um Saad will become insane due to the isolation and the harsh treatment at the asylum. Insanity is “not rage or even hate but hopelessness—not a challenge to constraining representations but a complete capitulation to them” (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, p. 17). Critics who view insanity as subversive should separate the author from the characters. The author’s voice may be heard but the characters’ voices are eventually silenced by the patriarchal and colonial powers. These powers are used to send them to the asylum, not for treatment but to get rid of them. They will never come back home. Hysteria has “no power to affect cultural change; it is much safer for the patriarchal order to encourage and allow discontented women to express their wrongs through psychosomatic illness” (Showalter, 1985, p. 161). Women should be able to unite with other women and defend their rights. Critics need to be careful not to romanticize the madness of women; nor should they view it as a symbol of resistance. These perceptions simply serve to lock women into stereotypes that have long been used to oppress them.

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