

Research Article

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Re-thinking the Veil, *Jihad* and Home in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014)

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Abstract: In her latest novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014), the writer Fadia Faqir decided to go against the grain as a Muslim woman coming from the Middle East but lives in Britain and write about *jihad*, terrorism and Taliban. In this novel, the author negotiates meanings of secularism, fundamentalism, *jihad*, fathering, women and wars. The novel's protagonist, Najwa is torn between her mother's secularism and her father's religious fundamentalism. In her homeland, Amman, Najwa is different from many other girls of Amman because she does not wear the headscarf that represents *hijab*, a religious garment, in many Muslim countries. However, when she travels to Afghanistan to trace her father, Najwa meets women wearing the *burqaa*, a head-to-toe veil. This might be an unexpected re-consideration of this garment as a symbol of freedom because she met veiled women who are self-determined and emancipated from within. Therefore, this article sets out to explore how the novel's protagonist re-considers the veil, home and self-discovery.

Keywords: Veil, home, jihadi, religious fundamentalism, secularism.

The *terrorist attacks* of 9/11 not only brought *Arabs* to public attention but also put them at risk and in danger of discrimination. Many Arabs living in the United States and Europe have recently witnessed a terrifying increase of a phobia that is the outcome of a biased misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims. Muslim/Arab women, in particular, are one of the main targets of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim backlash. The latest ban of *burqaa* (face veil), the headscarf and burkini (Islamic swimsuit for women) in many European countries have increased the tension between Muslim/Arab people living in Western countries, and natives of these nations. The veil of the Muslim Woman has now become a representation either of oppression for many non-Muslims or of personal liberty for many Muslims.

To defend Arab/Muslim women's freedom of choice to cover or uncover their bodies, many Anglophone Arab women writers have taken charge of calling for the freedom of Arab and Muslim women both in their home countries and in the Diaspora in their works of fiction. In fact, a commitment to voicing the Arab Woman is a priority for most Anglophone Arab writers. The British Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir, for instance, has kept writing for and about Arabs and Arab/Muslim women in the Diaspora. In her latest novel, *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014), the author negotiates meanings of women's freedom, love, *jihad*, fathering and wars.

In fact, Faqir has become a leading figure in Anglophone Arab literature. After publishing her fifth novel, the reception of Faqir's books in the West has increased due to the rise of interest in understanding the *Other* who is considered as a threat to the West. In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Faqir did defeat censorship and decided to write about the life of a terrorist and his deserted family. The novel exposes the mess the contemporary world is experiencing; while some people think they are fighting to save humanity, they end up horrifying people. This is the case for the protagonist's father who begins a journey to save the Islamic world but metamorphoses into a terrorist. As for his daughter, Najwa, she decides to begin a journey to re-locate herself when finding her father, but she eventually ends as a dislocated immigrant in Durham.

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A story of hatred and love, freedom and oppression, matriarchy and patriarchy, forgiveness and accusation and father and daughter, *Willow Trees Don't Weep* takes the reader on an epic journey with the protagonist to discover the mysterious country of Afghanistan and to know more about Jihad and Islamism. The novel also exposes a different view of both religious fundamentalism and secular extremism.

Initially entitled *The Terrorist's Daughter*, Faqir's novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014) has made a difference in Anglophone Arab literature and world literature by fictionalising a journey the Western world sees as a threat. It was brave of Faqir as an Arab woman author writing in English—and mostly for a Western readership—to write about a man who left home to join al Qaeda. On the novel, the writer says:

It was different because *Willow Trees Don't Weep* is partly set in Afghanistan, a country I could not visit no matter how hard I tried . . . What made the task of writing *Willow Trees Don't Weep* harder is constructing a country out of research material and photographs. The difficulty in relying on books is that you need to read a hundred to get a few useful facts that you could use in fiction. It is an arduous journey, but I hope I did justice to Afghanistan and its brave people. (Faqir 2014)

In another interview where the author introduces her book, Faqir refers to the journey of an innocent when she explains that she wanted the innocent, that is the young daughter, to go on a journey that is so difficult and is going to change her into someone who is aware of what is happening in the world.¹

Najwa's journey represents a multi-layered discovery: discovering the meaning of jihad and fathering, discovering oneself, discovering universal womanhood and discovering love and beauty in many places of the world (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Amman and Durham). The curious case of Najwa, whose mother is an extremist secular and father is a radical Islamist, may represent to readers how moderate Islam must be viewed. In fact, a major concern of this paper is to inspect how and why a young woman, who has been raised by a secular mother, traces her *jihadi* father. Also, special attention is given to the representation of veil in this novel. In what follows, passages from the novel are presented to situate Najwa in a new space that is the very meeting point between her mother's secularism and her father's religious fundamentalism. It is a space where new representations of veil, home and *jihad* are made. Also, this space that she creates throughout her journey is where she finds her final home.

To begin with, one ought to start with Joan Wallach Scott's (2007) interesting statement where she proclaims that the West has long encouraged the secularisation of the East (ix). For Scott, and many other scholars, one of these attempts to secularise the East, the majority of which are Muslims, is to condemn the veil, the headscarf or what is known in Islam as *hijab* to be the most terrible garment to impose on women. The colonization of the Orient (from North Africa to South Asia), followed by the Europeanization of the post-independence elite in the ex-colonies of France, Britain, Spain and other colonial powers, has resulted in a wave of early Arab feminists who, themselves, believe the veil to be belittling and demeaning of women rights to uncover their own bodies. Among the early pioneers of this movement is the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi whose intellectual productions have indeed reinforced the European view of the *hijab*. By way of example, in her most prominent book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, the author strongly denounces how the scarf or the veil is a symbol of unjust male authority over women (Bullock 136). Other renowned Arab and Islamic feminists are Nawel El Saadawi and Amina Wadud who are still fighting for the emancipation of Arab and Muslim women. However, the late 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s did witness a rise of a more moderate Arab feminism advocated by less Westernized Arab women writers; these are younger intellectuals who had the opportunity to be educated abroad but took a liminal position between their Arab-ness/Muslim-ness and their modernising assumptions.

Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Mohja Kahf, Laila Lalami, Ahlem Mostaghanemi, Safinez Kazem, Fadia Faqir and so many other contemporary Arab women authors writing in Arabic, English and French hold less extremist anti-*shariaa* views. Fadia Faqir, my focus in this article, articulately describes her standpoint vis-à-vis her Arab-ness in an interview published in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* as follows: “[i]f the discourse in the metropolis aims to de-humanise Arabs and make them disappear in order to justify ‘collateral damage’, my fiction and writing aims to humanise not only the Arabs but the English, the

¹ In an interview posted on youtube.com with the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK4K1V8SreA>, the writer introduces her latest novel in a couple of minutes trying to explain the choice of a terrorist's life journey as the major theme of her book.

Americans, the Indians etc. It is harder, perhaps, to shoot someone you know very well.” In this regard, one may emphasize that Anglophone Arab women writers who have lived between their Arab countries and the Diaspora know both cultures and can, therefore, understand and then better represent people from different backgrounds because of their open-mindedness and tolerance. It is, according to John McLeod, the trans-cultural and/or cosmopolitan consciousness that makes these women of two worlds understand and tolerate differences. I quote: “transcultural understanding is inevitably partial. It is a cognizance of others and a consciousness of limits; a recognition of the existence of other lives and experiences which must not be ignored but cannot easily be phrased from the vantage of one’s standpoint” (12).

Willow Trees Don't Weep (2014), Faqir’s latest novel, is a case in point since it is a story that unveils unexpected truths about *jihad*, *Jihadis*, women rights in Muslim countries, Secularism and parenting. In what follows, a short summary of the story is presented in an attempt to highlight scenes where major truths about Najwa’s homeland, Jordan, are presented.

Raised by her mother and grandmother, Najwa knows her father only through her ill mother’s stories of how her father betrayed his family. Abandoned at the age of three, she grows up a young lady, and after the death of her long-ill mother, Najwa decides to trace the figurehead of patriarchy to a country like Jordan where the patriarch does not allow his women to travel on their own. When the journey begins, Najwa keeps travelling from extreme to extreme: from Pakistan to the centre of Taliban training, to Afghanistan and eventually to Europe where she metamorphoses into a civilised but more alien individual.

Fadia Faqir’s novel explores eccentric journeys of discovering oneself whether for the father or his daughter. It leads the reader to some conclusions about those *jihadis* who have prioritised religion over their loved ones but for some particular social reason such as a cruel wife who could not fill their heart with love, and this may be the case of Omar Rahmane, Najwa’s father.

Najwa’s journey in tracing her father can also represent a journey of finding a home for her unprotected femininity. In fact, what disturbs Najwa is the missing part in her past where the father must have been present. We read: “[n]o, you must go and look for your father. The past might make you whole” (Faqir, 28). Interestingly and exceptionally, Faqir’s novel portrays *home* differently; it depicts a home that is ruled by a woman and inhabited only by women. It must be a different home where matriarchy reigns; however, after the death of Najwa’s mother, Raneen, this matriarchy falls, and the daughter decides to restore back the patriarchy that was excluded or will be forced to leave the house. Najwa says: “[a] few weeks after the death of my mother, the imposer of rules and regulations, I had been free to search the house for clues, photos, documents –anything that would help me construct a father” (Faqir 34).

Folding the many letters, Najwa could find hidden in a box represents a revelation, an unveiling of many truths related to decisive queries that could make her whole again. The letters that her father was sending all through the years of his absence helped her re-construct the father she barely remembers. The first truth she could unearth is that her father was a secular student of nursing and that in four years, from 1981 to 1986, he turned from a normal loving father and a husband into a vagabond (Faqir 36). It was this first truth, and the many letters she came across that would commence her journey of finding a fatherly home after being deserted and exiled from the whole of society for more than twenty years.

Najwa, after that, begins a long journey of travelling from one place to another and from one country to another coming across different people and then discovering different truths. During her journey, she also de(re-)constructs her father via his letters. At this point, I recall Michel Butor’s essay “Le Voyage et l’écriture” or “Travel and Writing” (1972). If Butor sees that “to travel is to write (first of all because to travel is to read), and to write is to travel,” one wonders if Najwa and her father’s divergent journeys and the many letters (narratives) they wrote in their voyages convey a truer representation of home and identity than is being conceived in this paper. In fact, through the letters of Najwa’s father, readers unearth striking truths of *jihad*, why people abandon their families for the sake of *jihad* and other facts that have been fictionalised by the author in order to re-construct verities of a sacred war.

Najwa’s father Omar Rahmane’s letters contain detailed descriptions of untold stories of Taliban camps, battles, training and social life. Taliban is described as a home that Najwa’s father was forced to inhabit

but had to get used to. We read: “When Hani² and I arrived here [Aybak, Afghanistan], we knew what we were doing: we were fighting the communist Soviets and trying to get them out. I was not and didn’t wish to be a combatant like him, no matter how hard the warlords tried” (Faqr 114). In fact, it could be argued that the home Omar was looking for was rather the love his late wife could not offer a few years after their marriage. His journey to Afghanistan was at heart a journey of love for his best friend, Hani. In Peshawar, Omar meets Gulnar and falls in love with her, and during the long years he stayed in Afghanistan to fight, he was not himself. Of the love he found in and with Gulnar, his Afghani wife, Omar says: “[w]as I Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah, the poet who roamed the deserts reciting love poetry for Leila? . . . I looked for the sea in her, migrating birds, fields of wheat swaying in the wind. I searched for a centre, a walled garden with grape vines and jasmine, my country” (Faqr 143). Indeed, Gulnar was Omar’s new home and new country after having been displaced for a while away from his cruel wife and little daughter.

Similarly, Najwa’s home was not Amman, neither Peshawar not even Durham where she ends residing. Najwa was looking for an emotional home where she could be re-territorialized after being exiled in all the places she went to. We may figure out that her father represents this home Najwa is tracing; however, there are many other clues that lead us to re-configure this home according to the state of being the protagonist experiences in every place she visits and with the different people she meets.

In her homeland, Amman, Najwa was different because she was a woman left on her own, that is a woman without a man to control her deeds. She says: “I knew I was different. I was not allowed to cover my head, wear a long school uniform or trousers, recite the Qur’an . . . I would stand by the iron gate, listening to them sing, ‘Welcome Ramadan!’ The house was secular and it took me years to understand the meaning of that word” (Faqr 9). Being different from other conservative and Islamist girls of Amman excludes Najwa from home she inhabits physically but cannot adapt to its traditions. Even in her own family, the protagonist was exiled from a secular authoritarian mother who imposed on her secularism the same way the whole of society wanted to impose its Islamism on her. Najwa blames both her mother and father for her bewilderment; “[y]ou’re as bad as each other. You abandoned me, and she deceived me,” says Najwa. During her journey to different countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan and even the UK, Najwa was looking for a home in which to settle peacefully. The home she was looking for is the only place where she could reterritorialize, to use Deleuze’ and Guattari’s³ concept, her identity that she lost between her mother’s extreme secularism and her father’s extreme fundamentalism. All she was looking for was herself: “[y]es. Lucky indeed. Unlike me, my grandmother knew who she was, where she came from and what she believed in” (138).

Throughout the novel, the reader travels with Najwa who—while searching for her father—unveils bitter truths about women’s status in Jordan and in other countries she visits during her journey. For instance, in chapter one “Behind the Poppy Field,” Najwa’s grandmother unveils a truth about single women living on their own in Jordan. She says: “you know how it is in Amman and particularly in this neighbourhood. Chaste women don’t live on their own” (Faqr 6).

Najwa was aware of her alien-ness as a woman and as a daughter of a *jihadi* father and a secular mother. She confesses: “I knew I was different. I was not allowed to cover my head, wear a long school uniform or trousers, recite the Qur’an, participate in the Ramadan procession or wear prayer clothes and go to the mosque in the evening with the other children, who carried lanterns” (Faqr 9). For Najwa, both her father and mother are guilty of this alien-ness and dislocation: “[y]ou’re as bad as each other. You (for the father) abandoned me and she (for the mother)” (Faqr 7). However, Najwa was neither an extremist secular nor a religious fundamentalist. For instance, the protagonist admits that Qur’an can heal people: “if only she [her mother] had read this verse [Chapter 94] from the Qur’an, she would have realised that each trial carried the seeds of healing within it” (Faqr 79).

The novel also reveals many aspects of women’s life in different places and countries. On women in

² Omar’s best friend whom he wanted to help and sustain in his journey to Afghanistan.

³ The two concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization were first coined by the French scholars Deleuze and Guattari (1986). The two terms are used to characterize a constant process of transformation: while deterritorialization is the process in which to undo what has already been done, reterritorialization usually follows. It is the process to re-do what has been undone to what has already been done.

Jordan and other Arab countries, the life of Najwa, her mother and her grandmother represents the life of Arab women who are caught between patriarchal practices, misinterpreted religious texts and unsuccessful attempts to be emancipated. In Afghanistan, Amani and Gulnar, Najwa's step-mother and half-sister respectively, are archetypes of Afghani women who were accidentally trapped in a war zone under Taliban ruling but they still have love and affection when their men are romantic and caring. In fact, many Afghani women may represent disturbing, yet interesting, evidence that Muslim women can be veiled and still feel free. What may be seen as oppressing by Western feminists and Arab feminists (Mernissi, El Saadawi) can be considered as a social, cultural and more importantly individual practice for many Muslim women. As Scott (2007) explains, as the headscarf controversy raged, the question of the intention of its wearers nagged at those who claimed they already knew what it was (124).

Being a Muslim who wears the veil is not a key factor for women's oppression in Muslim countries. In fact, even in London, we hear and meet other female characters who are also deserted for one reason or another. Isabel, the lonely kind lady, is one example. She was deserted by her lover the same way Najwa's mother was deserted by her husband, Omar. It could be claimed that women's subjugation is universal rather than religion-related. The sociologists Anthony Giddens and Simon Griffiths (2006) assert that patriarchy is viewed as a universal phenomenon that has existed across time and culture (471). Therefore, this novel may also be considered as a women's book in essence. However, other critics would argue that the ideas and journeys in the novel are human rather than gender-based. One way of defending this standpoint is the parallel synchronic re-telling of events by the daughter and the father simultaneously.

The most interesting representation to be found in Faqir's novel is that of the veil, *burqaa* and the veiled women Najwa comes across in different places: Amman, Pakistan, Afghanistan and London. Najwa's encounter with the headscarf was in her childhood with the girls of her neighbourhood from whom she was detached. If we consider the notion of emotional exile as being explained by Carla Brewington, who argues that emotional exile can be a separation caused by trauma or heartbreak, relationship breakdown or withdrawal (30), then Najwa is an emotionally exiled subjectivity. Najwa feels separated not only from her mother (who died and her father who gave up on her when she was a child) and her father but also from the entire Ammani community: "[c]hildren in the nearby kindergarten sang rhythmically, 'I am a bird, I could fly, I could also say goodbye'. I was not a bird and I could neither fly nor say goodbye. Although I was free to breathe, walk, work, I felt like a prisoner, condemned to my life" (Faqir 5). One may deduce that even when growing up as a secular woman, Najwa was not free. It is the case with Najwa's mother, Raneen, who "when he (the husband, Omar) left, twenty-four years ago, [my mother] changed. She took off her veil, cut her hair, packed my father's clothes, Qur'ans, books, prayers beads, aftershave comb and tweezers in suitcase, hurled it in the loft" (Faqir 7). However, she was never happy even when she became secular, took off the veil and was be herself.

An interesting comparison between Najwa's secular unveiled mother and other head-to-toe veiled Afghani women was made by Najwa herself: "[t]he women flocked in burqas in all the colours of the rainbow. They flung them off as soon as they stepped in. Happy to have them in her house, Gulnar embraced and welcomed them . . . Life was a journey for her, not a source of anguish, like it had been for my late mother" (Faqir 137). "The colours of the rainbow" may refer to beauty of *burqaa* as a garment; it may also refer to the freedom of choice of what colour women in Afghanistan like to wear, and it can refer to the diversity of this community. Gulnar, though covered from head-to-toe once outside her house, was happy with her life, unlike Raneen who was abandoned by her husband, became secular but had not been happy ever since.

While trying to trace her father from one place to another, from Pakistan to Afghanistan then to the UK, Najwa was also experiencing different odd moments that would help her re-construct her lost identity. In Afghanistan, for instance, while travelling in a car to going to Peshawar, Najwa wears a chador, head wrapped in hijab and sits next to a woman wearing *burqaa*: "My mother, who went out of her way to secularise me, would vomit blood, if she saw me wearing the blue shroud" (Faqir 101-102). Also, when Najwa meets her step-mother Gulnar and half-sister Amani, she discovers the cruel, dark side of her personality due to the absence of affection in her life: "Amani sat next to me playing with a cloth doll . . . Perhaps you had spoilt her so much that she could hang on her childhood? You must have showered her with your love . . . Her tears spurt out at the least provocation. I, the abandoned daughter, on the other hand, weathered

and dried-up like a prune, would always remain dry-eyed” (Faqr 151). Even when her sister is murdered, “her sister [Najwa] couldn’t shed a tear” (Faqr 162). In this passage, Najwa understands that having been abandoned by her father is behind her cruelty. After the death of her half-sister, Najwa leaves “the land of the wronged, of victims and hard-done-bys, and entered the country of the guilty” (161), that is Britain, understanding that Afghanistan is never the home she can belong to just like her father Omar.

Arriving in Britain, Najwa meets her father in Durham; she also meets other British people there. Some are orientalist like Andy with whom she had her first sexual experience. After having hosted her with unexpected generosity in their “pigeon loft,” Andy and his mother give up on her knowing she is coming from the Middle East and that she is the daughter of a terrorist: “I got up and walked towards him. He stepped back . . . Why was he so cold with me? My grandmother had said that men were predators . . . He might not have wanted to get involved with a foreigner” (Faqr 208-210).

However, there are other good British tolerant people Najwa met in Durham, particularly Elizabeth; Najwa could find inner peace and tranquillity in Elizabeth’s house. In Durham, next to Elizabeth’s house, Najwa is interested in knowing all the trees in the neighbourhood: “[a]s the days got longer and the nights shorter, I began to wake up early and go for a walk by the river just after sunrise. I took Herbert Edlin’s book *Trees*, which I borrowed from Elizabeth’s library, with me and tried to recognise some of them” (251). It is as if Najwa’s obsession is to look for roots—her roots.

At the end of her journey, Najwa realises that her father’s love for Hani, his friend, was the only motive for which he deserted his family: “[y]ou loved him, dad? He took off his glasses and wiped them. Too much, perhaps” (Faqr 274). Najwa feels released after having seen and talked to her father who was sentenced to death. She was like her name indicates in Arabic: “Najwa: a whisper or a secret conversation” (Faqr 269) which as his father explains to her: “[a]t dawn and after morning prayers, I imagined you . . . I whispered my answers and blew them, hoping that the breeze would carry them to you. Also, life is secret conversation” (Faqr 269). Najwa’s final home is liberation, daring and knowing: “liberated by the spaciousness, I stretched my arms out and said to the chariot-shaped cloud, ‘Peace be upon you, wherever you are!’ After months of studying British trees, and much quizzing by Elizabeth over many dinners, I had begun to recognise them . . . I must go back to sweep my mother’s grave” (Faqr 276). In the last sentence of the novel, one can suggest that Najwa decides to come back to Jordan to change some cruel things her society has long been practising. I also argue that Najwa could finally find a way in-between her father’s fundamentalism and her mother’s secularism: a way that perceives the Truth from a neutral and ideology-free position. The novel represents different forms of extremism. It also represents how those who are ethnically, religiously and ideologically different should be tolerated.

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