

Crossing Borders: Narrating Identity and Self in *Willow Trees Don't weep* by Fadia Faqir

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Abstract

The novel as a literary genre becomes the subject of critical interpretation with the rapid development of the major kinds of the twenty –first century fiction. The novelist of this epoch is Fadia Faqir who attempts to indulge in ever experimentations of the narrative technique. The present research examines and explores representation of narrative and cultural identities, resulting from crossing multiple borders in Faqir's novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014). Fadia's novel reflects the contemporary situation of fragmentation, rootlessness, unbelonging, and disorientation in a world where a man/a woman finds himself/herself suspended in a void of meanings. Faqir's response to these conceptions is given by those protagonists who become new individuals of their own world by creating new spaces, new voices and representations formed by construction of the identity and the self.

Keywords: identity, narration, self, \

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Many female Arab novelists create new voices and discourses in contemporary literary fiction, gone beyond authorities, broken the rules to present avant-garde impressions, experiences and identifications. These new representations address issues of identity, self, culture, sex, emancipation, and quest for liberation, offering insights into women's subjectivity and challenge or reformulate cultural, familial and societal perspectives. In this light, there has been a stout activity on concepts related to cultural identity and self through creating tremendous formulations in the techniques of narration. Jerome Bruner (1987) holds that "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on." (4) It seems that narrative is presented everywhere, in fictional and nonfictional works. Moreover, it organizes our memories, experiences and the experiences of others through narrative discourse. H. Porter Abbott (2002) quotes Roland Barthes's quotation on narrative (1966)

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances - as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (3)

In the context of the above quotation, Barthes widens the interpretation of narrative to include the cosmology of narrative, new perspectives related to identity, self and culture. In Addition, it encompasses internal and external dimensions associated with culture, religion, psychology, and society. These dimensions are treated as literary spaces in literature, spaces created to unveil stereotypes employed in textual genres. Therefore, a representation of literary discourse cannot be separated from other disciplines; it deconstructs the dominant systems of different cultures and societies. Thus, fiction represents the constellation of spaces to (re)produce autonomous identities and selves and to describe narrative voices which have been dislocated and relocated. In this way, narrative voices are analyzed in lieu of home, belonging, sameness, difference, forgiveness, fundamentalism, existentialism and love.

This paper analyzes Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014), a forceful and cogent novel, about belonging, dislocation, love, forgiveness and loss. Michel De Certeau (1988) states that "Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice," (115) Fadia's novel consists of six parts; the protagonist-narrator is Najawa, keeps on narrating the story in retrospect. In Part One,

Najwa relates the death of her mother; her mother wants to be buried without performing religious rituals. "No Islamic Funeral!"(3) But, her grandmother insists being wrapped in white haj clothes, so she arranges the funeral, and asks the imam to attend to read verses of the Holy Quran. "I walked behind the procession, holding my grandmother's hand.... She threw herself over the grave and began scraping up the soil." (4) Najwa begins with her feelings over her mother's death and her father's departure, " my father, Omar Rahman, who walked out on us when I was three, loomed large in the past, a featureless dark shadow, without eyes, lips or voice. I remembered very little: his strong, bushy hair, a scar at the end of his left eyebrow, the warmth of his bony fingers clasping my ribcage before flinging me up in the air. Why?"(6) Najwa feels of personal crisis after losing her mother and father, she is isolated, confused and fragmented. Her sadness is caused by her sense of existentialism and identity; she undergoes an emptiness of self, disrupted by a kind of otherness. "Being the daughter of an absent father, they saw me as common land, without a fence or border."(15) Here, the narrator-protagonist creates an open space of personal identity, it is avoid of ruptured self. She is without a protection, guardian, assistance and support in a conservative society. The events are narrated from Najwa's point of view, the actions move inward. The aim is to expose Najwa's complexities, especially the multiple factors resulting in any given decision or state of mind. The narrative moves around the protagonist constructing a kind of mental and emotional reflections. The narrator doesn't know the reason behind her father's disappearance. She fluctuates between mystery and reality, the mystery of her father's absence and the proclamation of her mother's "' It's this ugly thing called religion. Allah is more important to him than us' "(11) Moreover, Najwa was not allowed to cover her head. Her mother took off her veil, cut her hair, so they lived a secular life. She wore western clothes without religious deeds and words. The mother was convinced that her husband had left her due to religion; thus, the mother didn't believe in Allah. Furthermore, it is clear that even within this narrative, the absent father relates his story, telling his story in the first person pronoun, so, the voice and focalization is his. He tries to immerse his inner self; he is as present in the narrative discourse as the protagonist-narrator, beginning in Amman on January 1986. He experiences topsy-turvy emotions like a frightened and confused monkey in a cage, wants to escape to create an existential space to achieve stability of identity. Kellner and Stephen (1990) opine that "the body that breaks free from its socially articulated, disciplined, semiotized, and subjectified state... to become disarticulated, dismantled and deterritorialized, and hence able to be reconstituted in new ways."(90)

As the story develops, Najwa determined to find out the secret of her father's disappearance, " I had no option but to find my father. If my father died, I would live alone in that house... Only women of ill repute live on their own without a male guardian."(23) Fadia leads her protagonist into a web of difficulties and mysteries, where Najwa is disrupted by unknown future and existence. Fadia's narrator strives towards the catharsis of her own personal trauma, "people thought that I belonged to everybody because my father was not around to protect me." (26) Najwa dreams about her father, coming through the door, kneeling down and kissing her hair, hands, and cheeks, and asks for forgiveness for abandoning her behind. Najwa strives to have a secure identity instead of a confused and fragmented identity, she sells few pieces of jewelry to find her father, she has no knowledge where he is, and what turns him from a normal father, a secular student nurse and a husband into a vagabond, a mercenary.

Faqir defamiliarizes the narrative technique by juxtaposing first person narratives and parallel narrations. The narration moves away from the daughter to the absent father, then, it fades out and returns to the daughter. This juxtaposition (fragmentation) of narrators reveals fragmented identities; want to achieve coherence and stability. Therefore, the two narrators embark on a fictionalized spatial journey to seek self-identification and understanding themselves. In so doing, both enter and experience exterior spaces different of their conceptions to attain awareness of existence. Thus, Najwa visits Hani's family-her father's friend-to ask about her father, Hani's father doesn't know her father's whereabouts, and he says he is a mujahid, one of the soldiers of Islam, and he fights for Allah. Moreover, Hani's father informs Najwa that "perhaps he is in the caves of Tora Bora with Sheikh Osama."(48)

Consequently, Najwa visits the Identity and passport services in Amman to get a passport in order to travel to Pakistan to find her father. Living in a conservative society, men and women are not supposed to eat in public, the testimony of women is not accepted in court, and women are not permitted to get a passport without male guardian's permission. Fada'i negotiates and examines certain attitudes and practices in regards to culture, particularly, in a conservative Islamic society without rejecting and denying Islam and the pillars of Islam. The narrator-protagonist (Najwa) has given money to her grandmother to go to haj in Mecca "I do hope you have a safe journey to Mecca, Grandmother, may Allah accept your pilgrimage and grant you a place in His paradise,"(61) whereas her dead mother wouldn't give her money to go to haj.

In regards to culture, Faqir has interrogates the notion of cultural identity, where she constitutes a space in which interrelations of cultural, social, political and personal issues offer free oases to avoid ideological perspectives. The dislocation and movement of the two narrators emphasize the fragmentation of identity, which results from having a sense of not belonging and no roots that come from multiple dislocations. In this light, Stuart Hall holds that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, and have histories. However, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."(1) Thus, Najwa books a ticket to Pakistan to start her journey of crossing borders to construct a sense of self and identity. "On one side lived honorable women, those protected by their fathers or husbands, and on the other loose women like me. I crossed it towards the aeroplane. No going back now. I could see you at the other end, turbaned, bearded and menacing." (69)

In this context, Najwa enters an unlighted, empty, deserted space; she is miles away from her home, searching for her father. Her departure is an escape, carrying her personal problems. Suddenly, Hani's family sent her a letter "if you decide to go to Afghanistan to look for your father, you must go via Peshawar. Go straight to the al-Zahrani mosque and ask for Abu-Bakr." (77) She met Abu-Bakr who gave her a permission to cross for Afghanistan. She wore blue shroud, and there were American soldiers, her journey was dangerous and arduous. Najwa was caught by jumbled spaces at a time, imagining her father kissing her arm. Even though, she searched answers for like " who was I? What family? Who were my uncles?"(113)

and "where was I?"(114) Najwa feels a sense of loss, unbelonging, rootlessness, and experiences of migration. She struggles with her shattered identity and loss of self by her remembered past, current life and imaginative future. She is on a quest to unearth the orbit of her existentialism, obsessed with a sense of alienation; indeed, she has no voice here and there. Moreover, her father joined a fundamentalist Islamic organization; though he was not a religious man" I panicked because I couldn't remember the rituals and I realized that I hadn't prayed since my father took me to the mosque during the Eid celebration."(95) This means that her father's aim is not religion; it is an escape throughout a journey of self-identification and self-recognition. Therefore, Omar chooses Gulnar as his second wife to break free from his sexual repression and frustration. Moreover, he is evidently frustrated by his first marriage, his late wife control and unstable position of sexuality. This is particularly apparent in the love scene with Gulnar- an Afghani girl- he is like a crowned king." I wondered what the hell I was doing in this country. Why did I follow my heart and travel with Hani? What am I fighting for? What am I running away from? A controlling wife?"(116) What seems evident is that Omar has no knowledge of his presence in this country. His life is a maze, and he seeks escape from his present situation. Of course, he knows that he is miserable and isolated, but he lacks understanding of this implosion. He is emotionally and intellectually confused; his world is shattered between reality and illusion. Omar has entered the world of Islamic fundamentalism and Gulnar as embodiment of not-loneliness. Roaming around multiple locations, ongoing search for roots, he opens up a space, it is a space of wandering into abysses of nothingness. He succeeds in possessing Gulnar sexually. When he believes she loves him, he suddenly abandons her.

In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Najwa moves through inner and exterior spaces to an existential destination in a succession of confrontations scenes. To begin with, she does this as a kind of dream, imagining her father writing letters to her and asking for forgiveness, her mental space is trapped in the loneliness of selfhood. In a meeting with Ashraf, he tells her that Sheikh Omar Rahman" joined the resistance in 1986 and travelled to Afghanistan in 1987. He worked as a medic in Mazar... Seven years after he had arrived here, he got married.... He joined global jihad and travelled West."(148-149) Through the narration of the story, the narrator-protagonist strives to find her father, her last destination is Britain. "I had dreamt of visiting London and there it was before me with its churches, cafes and shoppes.... 'Oh! Lovely country! King went to Sandhurst.... I'd never seen so much brightness at night. Electric bulbs lit up pavements, doorways, shop windows, double-decker buses and restaurants. My mission was to melt into this city like a grain of sugar in hot tea." (174-5-6) Najwa creates a spatial image of the descent into London, enters into human participation out of the long journey, where she wants to melt into this culture like a grain of sugar in hot tea. She is depressed by her father, who is supposed to provide her with protection, warmth and love. Her grief is caused by his departure; he is the culprit of her agonies. "In the faint light, she looked like a creature from outer space who had just landed on planet earth and was trying to learn its language." (183) Najwa leads an existential as well as emotional journey of transference as a victim of her father, culture and labyrinths of life. In London, she experiences a sense of peace, she feels some psychological relief, enters into an intimate relationship with a different culture, she creates a cultural space, that is a Western space of humanity.

In spite of Najwa's tragic situation, she thinks of the interior space, the relief of the self can be accomplished by means of a human action in her interior space. Thus, she expresses a sense of excitement and grows despite the labyrinths of her life. She insists on accomplishing her mission in finding her absent father. Omar is indulged into negative spaces and distorted images. At one moment he is a secular man, at the next he is a religious man, at another time he is a terrorist. In this sense, Omar says "Brainwashing young men used to be my job.... My job was to isolate, convert, radicalize." (239) After a long journey of travelling, the narrator-protagonist meets her father in Frankland prison, Durham, June 2011; she blames him for abandoning her, for the death of her mother, and the death of her half-sister. But, he justifies all his deeds and motives for the power of divine and for the fate and destiny, "our life is mapped out. Our characters are, therefore, our fate." (268) Omar gives Najwa his diary; it is his legacy, a gift to her to unearth the secret of his disappearance. He also refutes his disappearance for saving the life of his friend Hani. Becoming a devout individual is a transitional moment and an answer for the instability, uncertainty and shattering that result from his status qui, family, and national identity. In this way, he realizes that his mental space is brainwashed, exploited, and duped by the imams. Omar generates a mutation and transformation away from the dominant conventions and perceptions into existential, humanistic and realistic religious individual. Consequently, Omar emerges from this dark, empty, inner space a different free man of his own identity. So, narration is considered as an intrinsic pillar for the representation of identity and self, whether they are personal or collective. In this view, the narrator-protagonist finally accomplishes her fictional journey in meeting her father, but she is not satisfied by his excuses and justifications for his disappearance, Najwa says "there is nothing left for me here, except you. But you're in prison." (273) A corollary of this, Omar in his last reunion with his daughter asks for forgiveness "one day you will forgive me for leaving you. Perhaps when I am dead."(273) she wants to create a new life founded on lessons she learned and the riddles she solved. She decides to go back to Jordan, to live the rest of her life without her father but with her new identity and self. It is a new beginning, a creation of a new space for her. She feels as if she finds herself reborn. In addition, the representation of these identities is through crossing borders, these borders that construct a sense of having roots, belonging and integration of identity that drived from multiple dislocations.

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