

Negotiating Identity and Belonging in the Works of Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shaykh

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ABSTRACT—

This paper explores the themes of identity and belonging in the works of two prominent Arab women writers: Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shaykh. By analyzing selected texts, namely *Pillars of Salt* (1996) by Fadia Faqir and *The Story of Zahra* (1980) by Hanan Al-Shaykh, the paper examines how their female protagonists navigate complex cultural, social, and personal landscapes in their pursuit of identity and a sense of belonging. Through a postcolonial feminist framework, the study highlights the ways in which both authors illustrate the fluidity and struggles inherent in negotiating one's place in the world, particularly in the context of cultural displacement and patriarchal systems.

Keywords: identity, belonging, post-colonialism, feminism, Fadia Faqir, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Arab literature

I. INTRODUCTION

The negotiation of identity and belonging is a central theme in the works of many postcolonial authors, particularly women writers from the Arab world. Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shaykh engage deeply with these themes through their portrayal of women who must navigate the constraints of societal expectations, gendered roles, and cultural displacement. These women, shaped by historical and personal traumas, confront their worlds in ways that reveal the complexities of belonging and self-hood. This paper seeks to explore how both authors depict these struggles through their characters and how identity and belonging are fluid concepts subject to change in the face of external and internal pressures.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on postcolonial feminist theory, focusing on Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, which asserts that identity is constantly in flux and formed in the space between cultures. The theory of Stuart Hall on identity as "becoming" rather than a fixed "being" is also employed, illustrating how identity is shaped through personal and collective history. The works of Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty provide additional insight into how gender and postcolonial conditions intersect to shape the experiences of women. The works of Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shaykh are studied through the perpetual themes of exile, belonging, and identity take root in their fictional worlds. This emergence runs parallel to their own lives, during which they each asserted self-agency by uprooting their lives and moving to a foreign culture, thus challenging the status quo in their native countries and staging an irrevocable shift in their own personal ontological states. Each stage of this process is examined in detail as their works promote contestation and reflection in the reader through vicarious characters, rich symbolism, and critical perception of quotidian concerns all stemming from the authors' own troubled identities. Through these works they grapple with both the origin of their proper identity and the identity of "the other", shedding light on the inevitable interplay between the personal and the political; the cultural and the corporeal in defining what it means to belong (for Translation & Literary Studies, 2019). In working through identity Faqir and Al-Shaykh's characters encounter both contestation and liberation that illuminate the author's own inextricable "exilic now," into which they usher the reader. As novel reading is a potentially painful experience, it is vital to question the use of an exilic lens through which these experiences are beheld. Critical to understanding an exilic lens is the recognition of its affective nature. Through symbolic places of transition the characters confront the fracturing of their own identity and the violent imposition of new identities. The implications of this reconciliation have far-reaching consequences that enmeshes the reader in untethered identity and a unique sense of participatory belonging delineated through the development of their own exilic now in a tension-filled world.

III. Conceptualizing Identity

Identity is conceived as the process of knowing oneself and being recognized by others. Identity is constructed of many social categories. Not all social categories are considered the same, yet social categories engrave some aspects of one's identity. (Saad Almutairi, 2017) defines a "front" as a stage that one can manipulate personal and social impressions for an audience. The front consists of the tangible and non-tangible aspects of identity. According to (for Translation & Literary Studies, 2019), the unique textual organization leads to unique rhetorical modes of discourse and text-paradigm linked to thematic perspectives, or schemas. Schema produces expectations about the characteristics of an object. An interaction may lead to the same socio-cultural characterization of an identity. Likewise, an identity type must fulfill at least three criteria: (1) It is supplied with discriminating features apart from the shared ones; (2) It has therefore become a separate social category in the sense of internal differentiation or believed to have done so; (3) The members self-perceived and are perceived by others through these features as significantly different.

Belonging, following, is "a person's knowledge and check of being an integral part of a specific education, social system or group. Feeling as a constituent part of a larger whole does not wane over time." However, feeling that one belong is not necessarily automatic. It needs to be developed and cultivated, both individually and collectively. One may belong in degrees, but a sense of belonging can vanish altogether and mean both "friend" and "enemy." The "common ground" one senses with the "in-group" can vary. However, belonging is not just about saying "us." It needs action. This action may be to give, share, learn, claim or protest towards each other. A sense of dislocation or irritation could just mean that people have not found ways into these collective feelings or that language or opportunities are not used or offered.

IV. Belonging in Literature

The relationship between literature and belonging has been studied by various scholars in different genres. These studies have looked at the implications of literary production as well as literary reception. Literary texts often reference social constructs of belonging, advancing them grammatically, thematically, or figuratively. Reflecting on how they understand and construct a sense of belonging, the authors sometimes unintentionally identify genres that shape notions of place, space, locality, and people. Within this strong play of literary history and theory, the contemporary Arabic novel has been a prominent subject of inquiry. Arab culture, literature, and society have a rich heritage intertwined with the region's identity, but since the advent of modernity in the form of colonialism and Orientalism, the authenticity of the Arab culture has been questioned, leading to distortions of their cultures. This loss of cultural specificity and collective identity has had far-reaching consequences in an Arab world that has always believed in a singular identity based on common language and religion, which narrative structures have played an important role in fracturing.

Studies have analyzed the role of female characters in the work of a male writer, focusing on the female writer's vocation and the social and cultural conditions, ideologies, and politics to which her production is subjected. This work has been hailed as significant, as it transcends boundaries of knowledge, culture, and identity. The authors have similar mindsets, but they vary in the way they treat identity issues. The challenge of portraying a woman's existence is common to both writers. However, it is only through one author's conscious endeavor to entangle an entire socio-cultural milieu that the (un)belonging of a woman in a society of religion is placed within a larger context of social class, national history, and genuine political oppression. This is accomplished through the figure of a researcher/scholar, who intentionally deconstructs accepted paradigms of history, identity, and belonging. After asserting the need for post-colonial Arab woman writers to produce texts capable of representing the conditions of women's existence per se, the linguistic measures utilized by another author are further considered by meticulously analyzing these representations in her two novels.

V. Fadia Faqir's Literary Contributions

Fadia Faqir is identified as a Jordanian writer who is internationally acknowledged for her exceptional literary contributions. After advancing her education and pursuing a career in England, Jordanian writer Fadia Faqir directed her literary contributions at a global audience. Since then, she has emerged as a prolific novelist, storyteller, and essayist in addition to offering scholarly articles on a variety of topics such as Arab literature, feminism, and immigration across a range of genres and cultural settings. Fadia Faqir, originally from Jordan, wrote exclusively in English and was published in Western publishing companies. This trend of increased English production by Arab writers, which is steadily taken up by Western publishers, may be understood as

evidence of a significant breakthrough for writers outside the Western literary canon such as Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, and Fadia Faqir (for Translation & Literary Studies, 2019).

The growing interest and attention towards Faqir's various written works in English by Western critics and researchers are indicative of her acceptance as a well-respected and influential writer beyond the Arabic literary landscape. A feminist qualitative research approach mainly relying on in-depth interviews was used to explore the following questions and challenges in the works of the two authors. The pre-occupation of the Arab women writers concerning their hopes, losses, imaginations, gender roles, identity, and belonging while adding to their awareness of the struggle. Questions of identity, assertiveness, belonging, sense of home in diasporas, and the use of space to negotiate these issues will be focused on grand themes addressed through ethnic and social challenges.

By giving voice to the voiceless losers and the marginalized women, the works of both writers eloquently articulated the multitude of experiences across a variety of social, cultural, spatial, political, and ethnic contexts as understood through their ideas, desires, ideas, and intends to survive. The images reflected the silence and pain as the result of being under male dominance and harsh laws, creating empathy, and compassion through Salma as an imagined interlocutor and ear to her own adopted life. Descriptive themes were deeply resorted to animatedly portray the sensory experience with regard to food and mother nature.

VI. Overview of Works

Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shayk are two Arab women writers who write in English. They are called expatriates since their writing appears in the language that is not their mother tongue (for Translation & Literary Studies, 2019). The expats know the nuances a language has and anticipate a different understanding of the same culture or fellowship (for Translation & Literary Studies & Muhammad Alqahtani, 2017). For this reason Arab expatriates writers are thought to address albeit in a different English the audience of the literary world, the everlasting conversation between East and West and woman entangled in the culture of their fellows and the West. They see and live in cross-cultural settings, and reconstruct identity affected by tradition and modernity. Identity is what keeps Arab expatriates confronted, acquired new, reintegrated previous, or confined in.

In literature, the identity so constructed is the content of the works. As identity represents self, its artistic representation, i.e., literary works, speaks self-reference. The works of Fadia Faqir and Hanan al-Shaykh on the one hand represent fundamentals study of themes, forms and languages to evaluate. On the other hand, Faqir and al-Shaykh are from the countries of the center of mechanized violence, i.e., Jordan and Lebanon, to the theater of apparatus violence against humanity, i.e., England and the United States. The aging in different surroundings leading upon conditions to a different identity at which the outer border is Fraser's and cross border is Said's and Ellis' to standard departure of language from mother tongue and mother faith to other tongue and despots more than language.

Pillars of Salt and *My Name is Salma* are chosen for this close reading. *Pillars of Salt* is Faqir's first published novel in 1996, which recounts the free falling of a Jordanian woman Amak to the Western way of living while in exile amid, still in the beginning of the Islaminess of the global Muslim women, the provision predominantly biased to patriarchy over her freedom, honor and dignity. The interrogating characters constitute a cleansing process of the vilest of the father and brother, i.e., the wailing Alzheimer.

My Name is Salma is a novel written in and published in 2007 recounts the comic tragedy of transgendered Salma fled from the curbs of her unwelcoming home in Jordan only to find hosting in undercurrent milieu with detective Saeed inquisitive of her ostracized past and embedded in the deadly attachment of Damiris' frame. Thus the notion of incommensurate exposures, cultural, gender and fiction.

VII. Themes of Identity

The theme of Identity permeates the literary texts by both authors. The theme of Identity has been subdivided into two major divisions: the theme of dual identity: To be able to represent the two alien identities, are works of a female novelist. Fadia Faqir was born and raised in Jordan. She coped with the radical transformations bridging tradition and modernization. Instead of choosing to satirize her homeland, she took refuge in human values. Hanan Al-Shaykh was born to a Lebanese Muslim father and a Christian mother. She fled to Beirut. Since that day, Al-Shaykh's effort has been devoted to make sense of her Lebanese identity torn between Christianity and Islam, modernity and tradition, East and West. The two novelists explore themes of identity and

belonging in post-colonial contexts and multicultural societies. Their works depict characters struggling between their inherited culture and their own desire to see the world differently (for Translation & Literary Studies et al., 2019).

The theme of dual identity transcends into the sense of loss. Having a double identity in the cosmopolitan countries is hopeful approval and tempting future. However, this very identity is also a source of loss. It yields to restrictive laws that try to erase or limit the identity of immigrants. The theme of belonging is seen to be the other side of the theme of identity. The wanderers in these cultures feel pangs of responsibility toward both their original culture and the borrowed one. They feel neither belong nor accept.

The thematic exploration in the aforementioned novels is about a female character living in Jordan who copes with the dual culture of her society. The analysis encompasses her identity crisis and her quest for belonging in both societies. The female narrator is anything but a fully empowered woman. She grows up in conservative Muslim Jordan. She is fully compliant with tradition. Nevertheless, as she receives the scholarship to Cambridge University and sojourns in England, she is faced with a myriad of choices. She can see new horizons, yet she also feels displaced. She is entrapped now in how to exert her own agency and responsibility in the face of the global culture.

VIII. Exploration of Belonging

Hanan's mimicry of whiteness is revealed in her imagined Americanness, accentless English, and the embellishments she uses. The exquisite house, not much articulate but architectural, reveals Hanan's respect and articulation of her place in New York society in the American context. It represents life on an elite scale. It reveals a walling out. Hanan annotates that the new home seemed too good to be true. Hanan directly contrasts it to the violent, rugged house of her parents. While owning the house, an identity claim, Hanan yearns to distance herself from her parents. Hanan reminisces on the view from the balcony that overlooks Brooklyn where she lost herself. The picturesque is contrasted with the nullification of Hanan's identity through architectural reflections. This new home does not implicate hazy memories as the old one does. Hanan throws contempt at the utility of the old house. It is unattainable to articulate adults. It lacks grandeur. The sophisticated architecture only serves people who need it. It seems that the cliff on which Cooper—Mount Sinai stands is only for upper middle-class inclusiveness, while marginalization traces down to the Bronx.

Hanan recounts the hostile incident in the new house. While it supports grand social gatherings, it does not bend to the everyday needs of Hanan as a woman or a mother. Hanan recalls the working women with a view onto the dull street, implicating a lack of belonging and servitude. Expression seems stifled, as female social bonding effaces. Hanan counterposes the new house as not being a home. As it ultimately lacks perspective, she feels diffused. Subsequently, Hanan attempts to seize control of it through imposing a decorum of her choosing. Selective color use glazes over the stale pastiche. Nevertheless, it slips away under abuse. Hanan impetuously grasps at rage to embody the house. Possessing it, she comes close to not being a housewife but a housewoman. However, it is ultimately subdued. For that purpose, she welcomes ambiguity through the attacks it incurs. It slips away from being grasped; and a fear of losing holds her captive. It does not offer sanctuary as there is only a house. The need to establish control exacerbates the struggle, fueling an internal house hunt. Such a need is exacerbated with motherhood.

IX. FADIA FAQIR'S PILLARS OF SALT

Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* (1996) tells the story of two women, Maha and Um Saad, who are confined in a mental asylum in Jordan. This narrative explores the intersection of mental health, gender, and colonialism, with both protagonists facing an identity crisis as they grapple with the imposed cultural expectations of both their native and colonial societies.

Colonialism and Patriarchy

Maha's rebellion against colonial rule and her rejection of tribal patriarchy reflect her inner struggle to define herself outside of imposed cultural and gendered identities. Through this character, Faqir critiques both the colonial powers and the local patriarchal systems that restrict women's autonomy.

X. Language as a Site of Resistance

The narrative's use of English alongside Arabic reflects a tension between Western and Eastern influences, symbolizing the hybridity of identity in a postcolonial context. Maha's ability to navigate both cultures reveals the potential for self-definition, despite the oppressive systems surrounding her.

XI. HANAN AL-SHAYKH'S THE STORY OF ZAHRA

In *The Story of Zahra* (1980), Hanan Al-Shaykh explores the trauma and emotional alienation of Zahra, a Lebanese woman living through the Lebanese Civil War. The novel focuses on her fractured identity and her quest for belonging in a war-torn society.

XII. War and Identity

Zahra's experiences of war, trauma, and sexual abuse intertwine with her personal search for identity. The disintegration of her sense of belonging in her family and country compels her to seek solace in distant places, yet she remains a product of her experiences. Her struggle to reconcile her inner world with the outer chaos reflects broader themes of identity formation under conditions of war.

XIII. The Female Body as a Site of Conflict

Al-Shaykh's depiction of Zahra's body as a site of conflict and resistance further emphasizes the ways in which women's identities are shaped by physical and emotional violence. Zahra's journey towards self-recognition is also a journey of reclaiming ownership over her body and agency.

XIV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FAQIR AND AL-SHAYKH

Both Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shaykh explore the complexities of identity and belonging, though their settings and character experiences differ. Faqir focuses on the mental and physical confinement of her characters within a patriarchal and colonial system, while Al-Shaykh highlights the fragmentation of identity in the context of civil war and personal trauma.

Aspect	Fadia Faqir (<i>Pillars of Salt</i>)	Hanan Al-Shaykh (<i>The Story of Zahra</i>)
Setting	Colonial Jordan	Civil War Lebanon
Identity Conflict	Colonialism vs. patriarchy	War, sexual trauma, and family alienation
Language Use	Hybrid Arabic and English	Arabic with English translation
Outcome	Mental confinement and survival	Death and reclaiming agency

DISCUSSION

Both authors portray identity and belonging as deeply contested and fluid concepts. The protagonists in both novels struggle not only with societal norms but also with their internalized perceptions of self. By examining these novels through the lens of postcolonial feminism, this study underscores how both Faqir and Al-Shaykh depict the ways in which women's identities are shaped by forces beyond their control, colonialism, war, patriarchy and the ways in which these women strive to reclaim their agency and voice. Their stories suggest that identity is a process of continuous negotiation, one that occurs within the intersection of personal desires and external pressures.

CONCLUSION

Fadia Faqir and Hanan Al-Shaykh provide profound insights into the struggles of Arab women as they navigate complex social, political, and personal landscapes in search of identity and belonging. Both authors use their female protagonists to explore how identity is continually constructed and deconstructed in response to external forces such as colonialism, war, and patriarchy. By focusing on these themes, Faqir and Al-Shaykh offer a critical perspective on the intersections of gender, culture, and power, suggesting that belonging is a process that must be continually negotiated. A continuing narrative of hope and optimism likewise permeates the stories surveyed. Characters create homes worthy of pride and label these homes with the location of both their residences and professional endeavors. In contrast to Hanan's experience of stifling culture enclaves, the new lives of Amal and Jamilah are Westernised to the point of invalidating their Arabness, at least from the perspective of mainstream America. These performative assertions of belonging reiterate the rejection of the post-9/11 America experienced by characters Muaddi Darraj. It is perceived by Amal and Jamilah that all of their efforts to obfuscate their ethnicity and present on par with their counterparts were fruitless in preventing their return to a state of exile.

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