The Body and Beyond: Representation of Body Politics in *My Name Is Salma* by Fadia Faqir

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While the definition of body politics has become a large source of debate in feminist and gender studies generally, body politics is conceptualised as the negotiation of power via the body through processes that may operate either directly or symbolically. This paper aims to analyse the politicisation of the female protagonist’s body in the novel *My Name Is Salma* by Fadia Faqir, and how it relates to her state of exile. Furthermore, it attempts to demonstrate that the illustration of the character’s diasporic experience is influenced by the body politics carried out in both the Arab and British settings. The research argues that, while the female protagonist in the novel is subjected to several forms of body politics that are imposed by the patriarchal environment, she also employs a number of strategies as a means of resistance. The study concludes that her resistance is defeated by the interplay of patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism, which takes place first and foremost on the female body, strengthening her external marginalisation and internal exile.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, an emergence of creative writing in English by non-European authors has gained relevance within Anglophone literature, contributing largely to dispensing colonialist stereotypes about ex-colonised countries and bringing women writers to the fore. In addition, a “significant Anglophone Arab literary revival” has been ongoing for the last decades, playing a “crucial role in disseminating through the wider world their images of hyphenated Arabs and of the Arab people” (Al Maleh 2009, x). Through creative writing, they promote and foster a better understanding of the commonly misinterpreted Arab and Islamic (however far from interchangeable these two terms are) worlds. These women writers include Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Fadia Faqir, among others.¹

Fadia Faqir is author of four novels: Nisanit (1987), Pillars of Salt (1996), My Name Is Salma (2007), and Willow Trees Don’t Weep (2013), as well as the editor of In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women (1998). Faqir was born in Amman, Jordan, and later moved to Britain, where she obtained a doctoral degree in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of East Anglia. Although she writes in her second language, English, Faqir largely writes about the issues of women in the culturally patriarchal Arab landscape. Faqir’s writing has been described as a “constant attempt to diagnose and understand the problems and issues she had left behind in her country of origin: women’s rights, human rights, democracy, and reform” (Al Maleh 2009, 18). Her works have become a subject of ongoing academic research as they translate aspects of Middle Eastern culture and issues of Arab women to a wider audience, particularly Anglophone readers.

While Faqir’s earlier novels lay a specific emphasis on the Middle East, her third novel, My Name Is Salma, offers a dual vision of the Arab and European worlds, which serves as an important factor for this study. The novel follows the story of a young Bedouin woman, Salma, whose pre-marital pregnancy causes her to flee from her home country in the Levant to Exeter, England, in order to avoid the honour-killing practice of her tribe. In Exeter, Salma adopts an English name, “Sally Asher,” and undergoes cultural adaptations to assimilate into her new environment. However, the freedom offered by this new country ironically fails to liberate Salma despite her efforts to blend in, and she is incessantly haunted by her past. The analysis of My Name Is Salma² in this study is expected to provide a comparative picture of the impacts of body politics and the legacy of colonialism in different locations, namely the Levant and Britain.

¹ Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian writer, essayist, and translator, whose bestselling novel The Map of Love (1999) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999. Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese author who writes in English and has published five novels, including the widely acclaimed Lyrics Alley (2011) and The Translator (1999). Lastly, Diana Abu-Jaber is an Arab American author and professor. She has won a number of awards including the 2012 Arab American Book Award for Fiction for her novel Birds of Paradise (2011).

² While the novel’s original title, My Name Is Salma, is maintained in the course of the discussion, this study uses the American edition of the novel, which is published under a different title, The Cry of the Dove (Faqir 2007).
A number of previous studies on *My Name Is Salma* focus on themes of identity and ethnic discourses. Fatima Felemban (2012) analyses the linguistic strategies used by Salma to construct her identity(s) as an Arab exile living in Britain. Karine Ancellin (2009) analyses how a constant transition from one self to the other occurs, demonstrated by how Salma grapples with the constant shift of her “names”: Salma, Sally, and Sal. Yousef Awad (2011) uses *My Name Is Salma* to demonstrate how the representation of refugees and unprivileged migrants in Arab British fiction enhances our understanding of the heterogeneity of Arab communities in Britain.

Nevertheless, despite the number of critical works on novels by Fadia Faqir on themes of identity, disempowerment and target readerships as their objects of enquiry, there are no studies on Faqir’s portrayal of body politics and how it is used to construct vertical power relations. Additionally, the discussion regarding the relationship between body politics and the diasporic experience of a displaced individual remains missing. Therefore, this study aims to demonstrate how Faqir’s expression of the diasporic experience as shown by the character of Salma is coloured by body politics in patriarchal Arab culture and the capitalist British environment.

**Female sexuality and societal honour**

As a diaspora exiled from home, Salma is subjected to dual objectification in two entirely different societies. Growing up in a Bedouin community in a village called Hima, she is exposed to gender constructions that aim to control her place in the tribe. Within the patriarchal norms, female sexuality does not belong to the individual; instead, it is a public domain and belongs to society (Mehta 2009, 713). An example is when her father instructs her to cover up her breasts, which he compares to melons (Faqir 2007, 6). The comparison of a female’s breasts to melons also appears in Faqir’s earlier novel, *Pillars of Salt* (1996), where the protagonist, Um Saad, reacts in the same way as Salma: overcome with embarrassment of their bodies, they resolve to hunch their backs to hide their breasts. Here, we are reminded of Fatema Mernissi’s (1975) statement on spatial boundaries:

> A woman is always trespassing in a male space because she is, by definition, a foe […]. If she enters them, she is upsetting the male’s order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be. (Mernissi 1975, 494)

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3 The definition of body politics has become a large source of debate in feminist and gender studies. Initially brought to fore by Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1969), the relationship between the sexes began to be seen in a more political light, leading to a greater focus on issues related to the female body, where women’s oppression is most intimately and concretely experienced (Mies 1998, 29). In general, body politics is conceptualised as the negotiation of power via the body, through processes that may operate either directly or symbolically. The construction of the body as a discourse, however, does not reduce the body in its materiality. On the contrary, “the written word becomes […] voice to a body whose vocal chords have been excised” (Cariello 2009, 327). Taking these concepts into account, body politics can loosely refer to the political practice of signifying, demeaning, exploiting and controlling women’s bodies; by taking women’s bodies into surveillance and depriving them of their rights.

4 In a passage in *Pillars of Salt* (1996), the female protagonist Um Saad is described to recount: “My father used to say, ‘You are not a child anymore. Your breasts are as big as melons.’ I was really shy of my melons. I used to bend my back to hide them, bury them in my chest” (Faqir 1996, 72).
In this context, it is believed that a female should not, therefore, be visible in the public space or even take space at all. She is expected to conceal the biological features that define her as a woman lest she attract the unwanted attentions of men and is perceived to occupy their space. By comparing breasts to melons, the male characters embed a crude imagery of women’s sexuality that women such as Um Saad and Salma may internalise, thus objectifying the female body and manipulating it as a tool of patriarchal means. In this instance, a form of self-censorship is implemented, turning the woman – as evidenced by Salma and Um Saad – against her own body, leading to an internal displacement.

When Salma falls in love with a young man, Hamdan, their initially innocent interactions gradually lead to more sexual encounters. Despite her full awareness that her actions deviate from the “moral codes” of her community, which places its honour in the “purity” of its women and strongly prohibits adultery, Salma still chooses to follow her heart. Consequently, she is subjected to another manifestation of body politics in the form of honour killing. This is represented by her mother’s morally-sanctioned advice: “in darkness or at dawn keep your petals shut and legs closed” lest “they will shoot you between the eyes” (Faqir 2007, 20). In contrast to the previous comparison regarding the female’s breasts, the use of “petals” as a metaphor for the labia majora serves to mystify the latter and valorises their fragility, thus leading to the notion that a virtuous woman should guard her “purity” at all times. In referring to her first sexual intercourse with Hamdan, Salma recounts, “In darkness or at dawn keep your petals shut and legs closed! But like a reckless flower opening up to the sun I received Hamdan” (Faqir 2007, 27). By ironically repeating her mother’s warning and positioning herself as the “reckless receiver”, she overturns society’s expectations and underlines her agency as a subject by claiming her body and sexuality, despite being aware of the consequences she may face.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the use of the word “they” as the perpetrators of the death penalty denotes the invisible yet omnipresent hand of patriarchal society, which holds the power to dictate the execution of the sanction. In the case of a “dishonoured” female, the honour of the whole community is stained (Perlmutter 2011), therefore it is believed that the responsibility of restoring the honour and moral righteousness of society lies in the community. The threats of honour killing and sanction from society serve to control the conduct and behaviour of women, as the weakest link but also the moral upholder within a patriarchal community. The control over women and the politicisation of the female body are systemised, starting from society as a whole to the smallest unit within it: the family.

For instance, when Salma’s mother discovers her sexual relationship with Hamdan and her pregnancy, the threat of honour killing is reiterated with a different emphasis: “You smeared our name with tar. Your brother will shoot you between the eyes” (Faqir 2007, 27; emphasis mine). The change of reference from “they” to “your brother” occurs along with a change in the nature of the warning: from being an “empty threat” to curb women’s behavior from misconducts to a punishment that will take place due to Salma’s “dishonourable” act. The role of the patriarch in the family is thus of great importance to guard the honour of the family and, ultimately, society. The concept of honour is manipulated to justify actions that are taken against women within the domestic sphere to defend the family’s honour. This strengthens the notion that, although patriarchal society holds the highest control of the moral system that is applied within the community, the family as the smallest unit in society is responsible of ensuring the reinforcement of the system itself.
Grappling with the veil

Discourses on the female body related to the Muslim and/or Arab world, more often than not, tend to lapse into the discourse of the veil. From a mere cloth to a sartorial practice, the veil has now become a multi-faceted symbol which is prone to politicisation, and thus recurs constantly throughout the plot of My Name Is Salma. While the practice of veiling is initially imposed upon Salma by her parents (Faqir 2008, 108) and their Islamic imam is described to be a central figure in their lives, Salma indicates that her family is not entirely pious itself. Interestingly, while her sense of insecurity with her female body is often mentioned, any kind of discomfort with her veil is not. In this context, the veil is donned as a form of sartorial custom, making it more of a cultural practice rather than a religious one. It is when she interacts with people outside of her native community that she begins to experience a sense of uneasiness with the veil.

In the secular environment of the West, Salma has to face a new challenge: she is under the constant pressure to abandon her veil. The problematisation of the veil is addressed by a number of people, for instance a British doctor whom Salma visits looks suspiciously at her and exclaims, “Your name is Miss Sally Asher? How preposterous!” (Faqir 2007, 95). By generating a strong sense of distrust and suspicion because she is a (veiled) foreigner, the doctor indicates a sense of permanent alienation that people like Salma, whose religious and/or cultural symbols betray their foreignness, “deserve”. The veil is also addressed by her Pakistani friend Parvin, who questions Salma’s choice to wear it despite being a Muslim herself: “We have to look for jobs, but first I must ask you about this scarf you keep wearing […]. It will be much harder to get a job while you insist on wearing it” (Faqir 2007, 102). It is important to note that Parvin wears her shalwar kameez daily, yet no reference of rejection is made to this conspicuous display of “Oriental authenticity”. It can be suggested that there is little religious implication attached to the shalwar kameez, in contrast to the veil that is not only viewed as “Oriental” but also “Islamic”. As a result of the bombarding of these constant pressures, added to her personal urge to adapt and blend in her new environment as “Sally”, Salma ultimately decides to take off her headscarf.

However, what Western feminists would most likely value as an act of “liberation” from the oppressive and backward patriarchal values does not achieve its liberating effect: “It felt as if my head was covered with raw sores and I had taken off the bandages. I felt as dirty as a whore […] I sat down on the pavement, held my head and cried and cried for hours” (Faqir 2007, 102). While it might be argued that this reaction is a result of an internalisation of the cultural and/or religious imposition of veiling, Salma’s reaction betrays her despair as an exile. While a diasporan usually develops “significant social and symbolic ties to the receiving country” (Faist 2000, 197), an exile finds it harder or impossible to do so, often opting to maintain ties to his/her homeland instead. In Salma’s case, the veil has become both a part of her identity of being “Salma” as well as a symbolic tie to her home: “I cannot take off veil […] My country, my language, my daughter” (Faqir 2007, 159).

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5 Shalwar kameez is a traditional outfit of Southern India, particularly in Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, consisting of a collared long shirt or a tunic (kameez) and a pair of loose trousers (shalwar).
In mainstream, Eurocentric discourse, the veil is often seen as a “supreme symbol of oppression” and the practice of female covering as strictly a gender issue (Abdo 2002, 230), but to Salma, the significance of the veil is less about religious rules than about her identity. When she removes the headscarf in order to become “Sally”, she is also removing a significant part of herself. Despite feeling alienated when donning the veil, when she takes it off, it causes her to experience a perennial sense of uneasiness and insecurity instead of liberation. This shows a severe clash between the “internalised doctrine” within Salma as a result of her upbringing, external pressures to abandon the veil, and Salma’s own identification with it. In the case of Salma, the practice of veiling (or unveiling) is used as a form of control, to exert power over her, and to limit her agency. This aligns with, in Ibrahim Abraham’s words, “the ironic twist of the society seeking to either veil the veiled, or to veil difference, through its very unveiling” (Abraham 2007, 3). By being pressured to take off the veil, Salma is put into a subordinate position where her right to practice her custom and express her cultural identity is denied, to the extent that she feels that it is no longer acceptable to be “Salma”. Salma thus experiences a twofold othering process: first, she is othered for being a foreign, “Oriental” female, and then she is othered for wearing a veil, a symbol which is associated with Islam and is often viewed with disapproval in the “Western” landscape.

In the neo-colonial environment of Britain, Salma experiences a whole new form of subjugation, which has its own ideals of the female body. Salma soon discovers that in “Western” society, the value of women is reduced to the aesthetics of the female body, as Parvin stresses, “Lighten up! Groom yourself! Sell yourself! [...] You are now in a capitalist society that is not your own” (Faqir 2007, 40; emphasis mine). This statement indicates that Salma should be awoken to the fact that “the enemy” has changed, and so have the demands and constructions that come with it. Exiled from her home, Salma is “forced” to believe in the bodily notions of beauty as outlined by white westerners. However, this leads her to experience what Katrak defines as “an exilic sense of non-belonging” (Katrak 2006, 100) in her new country. This causes Salma to critically view herself and her body from the “gaze” of a male foreigner, causing her to internalise that she is “only a Shandy, a black doll, a black tart” that can never be “Sandy, a white beautiful doll” (Faqir 2007, 150). Throughout Salma’s self-adaptation process, she constantly betrays what Frantz Fanon in Black Skin White Masks (1986) described as the “turn white or disappear syndrome” (quoted in Sinclair 2012, 100). The option that she has is either to embody mainstream “whiteness” or cease to be a respected human being with an equal position.

Due to the constant pressure from her environment, particularly in the work place, where her boss Allan insists that she look “presentable” (Faqir 2007, 150), Salma makes an effort to conform to his construction of beauty. Consequently her efforts make a profound effect. Salma observes that “Allan liked the frizzy wild hair and the short skirt. With a stretch of his imagination he could see me now as an air hostess, cooing and flirting, tucking him in, getting him his drinks, kissing him with a lipstick mou” (Faqir 2007, 150). Not only does Salma realise that she has become an object of male fantasy, she also notes that her “make-over” has a greater impact. In the male’s gaze, her “colour had faded away and was replaced by curves, flesh and promises” (Faqir 2007, 150). Once again, Salma’s gender status depends on the “approval” of the opposite sex – she is only worthy enough as a woman if her “woman-ness” is “acknowledged” by men. By “approving” Salma’s femininity, these male figures
aim to exert their power over her while simultaneously establishing their superiority and gaining acknowledgement of their own “maleness”.

Nevertheless, such acknowledgement does not provide her with satisfaction because she never becomes the subject of the gaze. Salma is indignant when she catches Allan stealing a glance at her legs, as she “wanted to be just a friend without desires and stolen glances” (Faqir 2007, 169). As an object of the male gaze, she is constantly subjugated to a position lower than her male counterparts, and is subject to their wishes and desires. This results in a status quo: Salma is in a permanent state of exile, both internal and external, because she does not belong to her female body, her native tribe, or her new country. She is perpetually an outsider.

**Regaining agency**

Despite the constant oppressive acts that are imposed on her, however, Salma actively demonstrates a sense of agency by attempting to transfer the power that patriarchal societies hold over her body into her own hands. Salma seems to determine her ultimate decisions based on her own choices. When her pregnancy became known, instead of helplessly surrendering to fate and the wrath of her tribe, Salma had decided to take her fate in her own hands by leaving her village and going to the police to be kept in protective custody (Faqir 2007, 41). After giving birth in prison, however, Salma has to bitterly acquiesce to the fact that her daughter has to be taken away from her and transferred to a home for illegitimate children (Faqir 2007, 126). From then on, she refuses to eat for days and speak for weeks until she has to be force fed (Faqir 2007, 232 – her inmates call her “the pipe-mute” (Faqir 2007, 52). In alignment with this, Katrak states that women under confinement or restriction commonly attempt to resist domination and exile by using their bodies, through speech, silence, or starvation (Katrak 2006, 2). Salma’s hunger strike and silence demonstrate her resistance to societal norms, which disallow her to keep her illegitimate child and force her to stay in hiding. Her resistance ultimately fails, yet, to an extent, Salma manages to find a space to express her grief and overcome attempts to control her completely through several means of self-expression.

On the other hand, in England Salma experiences difficulties in challenging Eurocentric biased assumptions and racial discriminations. An instance of this are the numerous rejections that she and Parvin receive when they apply for jobs, on the implicit ground that they are foreigners and people of colour. This is proven in the initial reaction that Max, Salma’s future employer, shows. When Salma applies as a seamstress in his tailor shop, his first comment is, “She cannot speak English, for Christ’s sake!” (Faqir 2007, 123). Max’s attitude betrays the Orientalist, neocolonial tendency of positioning people of colour as inferior, and as such, this ideological framework is manifested in an interaction that ensures a sustainable hierarchy of power. In Salma’s encounters with other men, all of them insist on asking, “Where do you come from?” followed by, “Why did you leave your country?” (Faqir 2007, 55). This reminds Salma endlessly of her difference, causing her to internalise that “it was like a curse upon [her] head” (Faqir 2007, 161). Moreover, she mused that “it was [her] fate: [her] accent and the colour of [her] skin. [She] could hear it sung everywhere: “WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?” (Faqir 2007, 161). These constant reminders result in bewilderment on Salma’s part and a perpetual sense of alienation, as she explains her state of exile: “I felt ‘like a fish out of water’ […] in this new land” (Faqir 2007, 246).
However, Salma insists on sticking to what she calls her “immigrant survival rule” (Faqir 2007, 246), which is to stay silent and acknowledge their superiority in order not to draw attention to herself, to blend in and to “shed” her immigrant differences. The bombarding and constant reminders of her alienness exile her further from the environment she is trying to adapt, and she desperately performs certain strategies to achieve that purpose. One of the strategies that Salma adopts in order to “pass” as less foreign is ordering apple juice when she goes to a bar one night, as the colour makes it look like beer, so “whoever approached [her] would think that [she] was open-minded, not an inflexible Muslim immigrant” (Faqir 2007, 52). This act leads to her first sexual experience with a stranger – the basis of her consent described in her statement: “all that fumbling in the dark so that you would forget who you were for a few minutes” (Faqir 2007, 86), mirroring how she seeks to escape from herself, her body, and her past. However, she soon finds out that it is impossible, and she is faced with a “hard-hitting realisation” that the body and what it signifies are inescapable (Katrak 2006, 173). Salma’s regret of the experience reflects how her initial consent to such domination stems from the experience of internalised exile, “where the body feels disconnected from herself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (Katrak 2006, 2). Not only does Salma undergo self-exile, she also experiences external exile. Edward Said points out that “beyond the frontier between ‘us’ and the ‘outsiders’ is the perilous territory of not-belonging” (Said 2001, 140), and exiled from her body, community, and environment, it is exactly within that “not-belonging” territory that Salma finds herself. In the unfamiliar and disparaging situation that she is relocated in, survival is the main objective and resistance is out of the question.

Another strategy that Salma attempts to carry out is that of writing. Having enrolled in English Literature at university, she concludes an assigned essay on “Shakespeare’s sister” with her experience “as an alien in their land”, which expresses her discomfort and dissatisfaction, as she recounts: “they, and I, think I don’t live here, but I do, just like all the women who were ignored in these tales” (Faqir 2007, 187). However, her tutor John dismisses the aspect of originality in her essay and instead sharply criticises her for its lack of academic excellence and how “ignorant, simplistic and subjective” the writing is (Faqir 2007, 235). An English education is often seen as both empowering and disempowering people from ex-colonised countries, especially educated women who may find themselves marginalised from their own community (Katrak 2006, 98). Conversely, in Salma’s case, accessing education outside her home country serves to underscore her outsidedness and alienate her even further from the receiving community. Unable to find a medium to express herself in and through which resist the neo-colonial domination that is enforced upon her, Salma is left with no other option but her imagination – resulting in her finding fault in her body and ceasing to be herself as an individual:

Sitting in a cloud of steam, tea with the Queen and whiteness. What if I woke up one morning a nippleless blonde bombshell […] What if I turned white like milk, like seagulls, like rushing clouds […] I would turn white just like Tracy […] no more unwanted black hair; no more “What did you say your name is?” (Faqir 2007, 90)
By valorising whiteness and rejecting her “colouredness”, Salma’s internalisation of colonial racism perpetuates her differences further and places her at the bottom of the hierarchal ladder in the power relations between the white English citizens and herself. As her last attempt at resistance is denied by the very system that seeks to “liberate” her, Salma ultimately surrenders.

Conclusion

While this text may seem to strengthen representations of Muslim women as oppressed, through the analysis of the strategies Faqir carries out to challenge male repression the novel proves that Salma does exercise a sense of agency. Despite the oppression imposed on her through physical violence, humiliation, and cultural traditions, Salma ultimately challenges the mainstream portrayals of Muslim women as passive. The fact that Salma takes her agency by politicising her body, in the very act which is often used against her, is of particular importance in the postcolonial feminist framework. It is essential, however, to underscore that her attempt to resist repression fails due to the existing system. While in her native home patriarchal Arab culture is Salma’s main challenge, the novel suggests that in the postcolonial English context Salma’s struggle to dismantle male oppression is curbed by the imperialist and capitalist patriarchal environment. The politicisation of her body is exacerbated with the alienisation that she experiences for being a displaced, veiled and coloured immigrant, leaving her with no space to seek refuge. It is thus necessary to critique the simplistic reproach of the “Arab and/or Islamic” culture and patriarchy for such subjugations without taking into account the interwoven factors of colonialism and capitalism. In My Name Is Salma, all these factors put an end to Salma’s agency as an individual and perpetuate her traumas as an exile, leading to a sense of internal displacement and exiling her further from her body.

Works Cited


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