

# Voicing Liminal Subjects in Anglophone Arab Narratives: A case study of Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*

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## Abstract

Voicing many liminal selves and marginal subjects, particularly Arab immigrants has often been a main pre-occupation for most contemporary Arab writers living in the Diaspora or between home and Diaspora. A commitment to giving voice to unvoiced and marginalized individuals, mainly women and immigrants, is to be found in Anglophone Arab women narratives. Among these writers, the British Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir has been engaged in verbalizing the agonies of oppressed women, discriminated subalterns and dislocated immigrants. Most of her literary productions deal with the hardships of living in milieus where the individual is liminal, i.e. occupying that position on both sides of a social, religious or gender threshold. In her novel, *My Name is Salma*, the protagonist Salma represents a multiplicity of liminal selves: oppressed women of Bedouin societies, non-European immigrants and innocent lovers. In this paper, I aim at exploring the hardships these liminal selves, i.e. marginalized Arab and/or Muslim immigrants living in the Diaspora and women in conservative Arab societies are facing, through an analytical study of Fadia Faqir's protagonist Salma in *My Name is Salma*.

## Introduction

In recent years, the concept of *liminality* has gained an unprecedented marketability in the humanities. In literary studies, more interest in zones like limens, thresholds, margins and borderlands was witnessed since more attention is given to works produced by cultural, gender and religious minorities. As an appealing concept related to other notions like marginalization and discrimination, *liminality* is related to the English word 'limit'. Some scholars have traced this concept to the Latin word *limen* (Shields, 84) while others have traced it to *limes* (Coward, 211; Froman & Foster Jr., 3). However, in the context of this paper, we side those critics who have traced it to both (Moran, 5). The meanings of both words are quite overlapping; *limen* refers to 'threshold', literally and figuratively in the sense of limit, and *limes* in particular refer to 'boundary', 'frontier', and 'limit'<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, by using liminality in this paper, I refer to the state of being limited by and in a particular marginal zone. This zone is where minorities are caught. The gender-based, colour-based, religious-based and language-based minorities, I contend, are examples of *liminal* selves if we consider liminality as an in-between stage between two existences, two identities and two positions outside the centre and inside this centre. For instance, Muslims in European countries are both Europeans and Muslim but this very duality is a luminal position. Mexican-Americans are also luminal selves not only because most of them live on borders but also because their Mexican identity drags them away from their American-ness the same way their American identity draws them away from their Mexican-ness.

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<sup>1</sup> see Glare, 1982:1031

In this perspective, Arab women have always been considered as an archetypal figure of gender-based *liminality*. The liminal position many Arab women occupy is the way they excel in different areas and professions –education, medicine, technology and almost all fields of expertise –but at the same time they are stuck in their oppressed femininity. It is as if they are caught between two zones: a modern liberating zone, and a traditional subjugating zone. The threshold can be the borders they cross from home to outside life, or from home-country to European countries.

In fact, because of the long standing patriarchal oppression and discrimination in most Arab countries, Arab women are still represented in Western academia and art as a liminal self. In fact, women are a semiotic object that is produced according to the law of supply and demand to serve various political and ideological ends (Lamya Ben youssef Zayzafoun, 2005). Women in Middle East and North African (henceforth MENA) countries suffer a “double jeopardy”<sup>2</sup> since they challenge patriarchal societies and *tolitarian* regimes. They are not only marginalized by religious-cultural norms, but are also excluded by domineering male-manipulated regimes. The censor, eventually, is common and is one: patriarchy.

Arab women writers are fully conscious of the almighty Arab censor who drags to the threshold whoever represents the consciousness of democracy and equity. Although contemporary Arab women writers are still in general restricted by socio-political constraints imposed by a masculine authority, many female authors have managed to voice their rage against oppression of all kinds that has become a chief aspect of the MENA region. Those writing in Arabic–Nawal Saadawi, Hoda Barakat, Zhor Ounissi, Liana Badr, Salwa Bakr, Allia Mamdouh, to name just very few–have been furiously fighting to defeat the common censor in their fiction. I quote Faqir’s interesting description of how the act of writing can overpower censorship:

Within theocratic, military, tolitarian and neopatriarchal societies, the writing of a [autobiographical] text becomes an act of defiance and assertion of individual identity. It shows that censorship, in its attempt to turn a nation into a herd, may silence the herd but never the individual. (Faqir, 9)

In the light of the above quotation, I will explore how contemporary Arab women writings portray the *liminalization* of women in the most conservative and patriarchal society: the Bedouin community. A best literary production illustrating the marginalization of the female body and identity is Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma*. The novel portrays the dreariest facts on gender-based discrimination and liminalization in two different, opposing social contexts; it represents a liminal Bedouin Salma in Hima, and it also represents a marginalized Arab British Sally in Exeter. What follows is a focused introductory section that has the aim of introducing both the novel and its author to better localize the theme of liminality in Faqir’s work.

### **1. Fadia Faqir’s twofold authorial *liminalization***

To write in English about contentious issues related to women status and social conditions in Arab countries is a risky choice for Arab Anglophone women writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf–to name just few. About Arab novels (and other genres) in English, Nouri Gana (2013) argues that the list of contemporary Arab novelists (authors) writing in English is expanding steadily given the phenomenal and continuing rise of *début*

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<sup>2</sup> Fadia Faqir, *In the House of Silence*. Garnet Publishing, 1998. p 9.

novelists<sup>3</sup>. Gana emphasizes the fact that more than half of Arab novelists writing in English today wrote their first novels after 9/11. He also anticipates that the number of new novelists will continue to proliferate exponentially.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, one would claim that most Arab English writers publish their novels, poetry, short stories and other texts primarily to denounce stereotypes, mis-representations and mis-conceptions of their Arab/Muslim origins that have dangerously spread shortly after a series of terrorist attacks—the 9/11, London bombings and other events. As for Arab Anglophone women writers, their English writings are dialogic<sup>5</sup> with both the Western and the Arab world. Their intent is to re-represent their mis-represented image in the Occident, and to escape the imposed censorship(s) in the Orient.

Fadia Faqir, in particular, has jeopardized her career as an author when she decided to dare English as a foreign language, dare its culture, and challenge its people who are curious enough to face more unveiled truths about the Middle East, Arab-Muslim peoples, Arab women and Arab immigrants through their readings of Faqir's English writings which are skilfully woven with an Arab cultural essence. Faqir's choice of English as the language of her fiction is due to two main factors. Faqir's exposure to English as the language of her education and later profession is a first reason. In an interview with the academic Lindsay Moore, Faqir says:

When I was young, I lived next to an English club—a remnant of the British Mandate—that Jordanians were not allowed to enter. East Amman was the place to be then (the late 1950s). I remember that colonial exclusive space very clearly. It reconfigures itself in my writing again and again. Salma, for example, [in *My Name is Salma*] is always looking into other people's gardens in England; she's always on the outside.<sup>6</sup>

Faqir's words quoted above may explain that her choice of English may be a matter of fact for being exposed, and surrounded, by an English club. We also grasp her strong will to assimilate into this foreign space just like her protagonist, Salma, does in *My Name is Salma*, but both are always on the threshold of this language and its culture. A second reason for which Faqir writes in English is that she is currently a British citizen.

In fact, Faqir left Jordan because of her father's oppressive and patriarchal behavior. Like many liminalizing authorities in the Arab societies, Faqir's father wanted her to be someone she was not: a pious Muslim. He wanted to realise his dreams through his children, including Fadia herself. He dislocated her to the West to be educated and wanted her be relocated in her homeland to take on his masculine ideological battles. Nevertheless, her journey of dislocation and deterritorialization<sup>7</sup> in an ex-colonial country, Britain, has helped Fadia to move from the margin to the center as a woman, an Arab and a Muslim. She decided

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<sup>3</sup> Many Arab Anglophone writers have been recently internationally acknowledged after publishing their début works (first novels). Among these writers, women novelists like Leila Aboulela, Laila Lalami, Diana Abu Jaber and many others, were at the core of the interest of the Western readership.

<sup>4</sup> Gana, Nouri. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The politics of Anglo-Arab and Arab-American Literature and Culture*. 1st ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays*. Texas: University of Texas Press. 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Moore. L. *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film*. London & New York: Routledge. 2008. p1.

<sup>7</sup> *Deterritorialization* is defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986) as the movement by which one leaves a territory, and then is dislocated.

to be herself despite of the many obstacles she faced in a diasporic space full of rejection, marginalization and hostility.

Faqir's choice of English as the language of her fiction is due to a linguistic censorship she may have found in modern standard Arabic that has become too masculine. Like many Arab Anglophone women writers, Faqir finds in English as a foreign language more freedom in dealing with taboo themes and controversial issues to escape a legitimized censorship attributed to Arabic. Her long journey in a Western country metamorphosed her to become a hyphenated woman of two worlds who stands at the threshold of two homes: Jordan and Britain; this position allows her to observe closely facts, events and people.

It is through her writings and the characters she creates that Faqir articulate the different facets of her compatriot liminal individuals: Arab women living in conservative communities, and Arab immigrants living in the Diaspora, particularly in Britain. In this regard, Faqir explains: "*I spent hours in the kitchens of restaurants in this country, because my brother worked as a chef; people I knew held down very modest jobs in difficult circumstances. That is my milieu and what feeds my writing. I love that aspect of Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss* <sup>(2)</sup>—her focus on the underworld of the USA and on immigrants sometimes marginalizing and mistreating other immigrants. That struck a chord with me."<sup>8</sup> ; thus Faqir's experience is that of many immigrants who find it hard to integrate and assimilate in a space where they are always seen as *liminal* because of their religion, color of skin, and culture.

In *My Name is Salma*, Faqir exposes to what extent helpless, uneducated women are liminal in conservative and Bedouin societies. Also, she shows evidence of the race-based discrimination Arabs in the Diaspora confront. The protagonist of *My Name is Salma* archetypes oppressed Arab women by going through a repeated experience of liminality and marginalization everywhere she is—even when she crosses borders to arrive to England that represents a constant asylum and a permanent diasporic space where she becomes officially Sally the British citizen but could never be in the centre of the British mainstream community. In the following section, I shall present a short summary of the novel focusing on the many scenes of gender-based and race-based liminality Salma/Sally was victim of.

## ***2. My Name is Salma: a story of liminalizing femininity***

*My Name is Salma* is the story of a young Bedouin unmarried woman. Salma, the protagonist, is from an unnamed country in the Levant, *Hima*. Growing up more attractive and keen to someone to love her and her femininity, Salma fell in love with a cruel Hamdan and became pregnant out of wedlock. In consequence, she had to flee the bullet of her brother who decided to kill her to restore the family's honour. Therefore, Salma started a long journey of dislocation escaping from one place to another, and from one country to another crossing borders but always standing at the threshold of these new spaces.

In order to save Salma from family 'honour' killing, her teacher took her into a protective custody where she spent several years in prison and she gave birth to her baby girl, Leila. Taken away from her immediately, Leila's image and moaning would haunt Salma for the rest of the coming years. Seven years later, Salma was then rescued and adopted by Miss Asher, under the name Sally Asher, and taken to England. Being a foreigner, with dark skin, Bedouin and Muslim, Salma faced in England another state of liminality. As she had to find a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. :8

new identity and a life for herself in a society, which is generally unsympathetic to head scarves, Salma's struggle doubled in Diaspora because she had to relocate an already liminal self in another liminalizing environment. At the end of the story, and despite the fact that Salma could metamorphose into an educated, successful Sally who got married to her professor, Salma's Bedouin roots dragged her back to Hima to look for her daughter. There, again femininity was liminalised, and this time, exterminated because both Leila and Salma were murdered by Mahmoud, her brother who may represent patriarchy and masculine oppression.

Faqir's novel is a literary multiplicity. If it is to be considered as a feminist utterance, it can be categorized as postmodern as well. The post-modern aspect of *My Name is Salma* is in the literary techniques the author made use of. The narrative mode is a first-person narration. However, the 'I' narrator which represents Salma's disrupted voice is identified as unreliable because Salma recalls scenes and facts from her past, and in evoking images from her memory, Salma may have missed to remember many. Accordingly, there is an excessive use of flashbacks that disrupt and interrupt the linearity of the narration. Both techniques provoke a spiral shift of the narrative voice: from past to present and present to past; from Exter to Hima and Hima to Exter; from Salma to Sally and Sally to Salma.

On another hand, *My Name is Salma* may be considered as a post-colonial novel both thematically and linguistically. The thematic of the novel reflects some major characteristics of post-colonial writings: the preoccupation with identity, homeland, the diasporic experience and belongingness vs. homelessness. As for the postcolonial linguistic characteristic of this work, we argue that there is an excessive use of semantic and cultural translation. Also, the blending of Salma's Arabic language with English is recurrent in chapters and parts where Salma is in Exter. According to Bhabha (1990), postcolonial writings are linguistically hybrid as much as postcolonial subjects are culturally hybrid.

[...] 'the immigration officer had asked me and I did not know how to answer. 'Muslim no Christian.'

'Name? Nome? Izmak? He said

'*Ismi? Ismi? Saally Ashiir?*'

[...]When I woke up my mother said, 'Nothing. It is still clinging to your womb like a real bastard.'

My Mudraqa was soaked with blood, my dirty hair was stuck to my head and my face was burning with tears." (41-2)

In the above lines quoted from the second chapter of the novel '*Vines and Fig Trees*', we present three examples of fusing Arabic with English in what Bhabha identifies as hybrid texts. "*Ismi*" is a textual integration/translation of the Arabic word ismi (الاسمي) which means name. "It is still clinging to your womb like a real bastard" might be considered as a semantic translation of what can be said in Arabic "*lissatou mit'ali` bibaTnik ibni lharam*"<sup>9</sup>, and many other similar examples are recurrent in the novel.

In point of fact, the hybridization of Faqir's novels is due to, as Bakhtin (1981) notes, the mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor<sup>10</sup>. There is, in

<sup>9</sup> Arabic transcription: ليساتو متعلأ بيطنك ابن الحرام

<sup>10</sup> Young, R., *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.

the novel, a mixture of English and Arabic at different levels: lexical, semantic and inter-lingual.

However, hybridity has had its own mesh of social and cultural clashes for hybrid non-native immigrants identified by Spivak as subalterns. For those coming from ex-colonized countries to the West, their displacement is a unique diasporic experience which is often interwoven with some *liminalising* behaviours: islamophobia, Arabophobia, racism and rejection. This state of liminality may lead these individuals to a constant feeling of foreignness, inferiority and being on the threshold of the host culture and its mainstream people.

In this regard, *My Name is Salma* represents Salma or Sally as a discriminated Arab British citizen who confronts a racist attitude from the part of many native British people. For instance, when Salma is first displaced to Exeter and finds a room to inhabit, we read:

Using his master keys, the porter opened the door and let in a short, thin, dark young woman ... when she looked at me she could only see the slit of my eyes and a white veil so she turned to him. 'Where does she come from?' 'Somewhere in the Middle East. Fucking A-rabic! She rode a camel all the way from Arabia to this dump in Exeter,' he said and laughed. 'I am not going to share a room with an Arab,' she spat [...] I looked at her straight hair and long fringe and turned in my bed. The smell of hurt and broken promises filled the brightly lit room. (P15)

The above lines, demonstrates the hostility and humiliation Salma had to face at the very beginning of her journey of dislocation to a foreign Western society. Elsewhere in the story, a doctor refuses to treat Salma only because she is dark skinned (54). This orientalist<sup>11</sup> representation fundamentally based on a biased and stereotyped imagination is repeatedly displayed to the readers all through the novel to shake their awareness of such eliminating and liminalising attitudes. Besides this Western oriental behaviour Sally/Salma had to deal with when in Exeter, she had long suffered from what I may call internal Orientalism<sup>12</sup> which I will explore in the following section, that is an orientalist social and cultural representation of Salma's feminine identity.

### 3. The Female body as a liminalizing aspect in *My Name is Salma*

In Hima, Salma suffered from a state of *liminality* among her family members and tribe because she was a woman growing sexier and because she fell in love and had an affair with Hamdan. Inexplicably, Salma was socially excluded for being a beautiful, sexy woman, who was seduced by her lover; this condemned Salma, back home, to death whether a metaphorical death, i.e. ,when being disowned by her father, or a literal death when being haunted by her brother, Mahmoud, who is in charge of killing her to restore the family's honor. We read:

'Your breasts are like melons, cover them up' my father haj Ibrahim said.  
'Your tuft of wool is red,' my mother said, 'you are impulsive.'

<sup>11</sup> After Edward Said (2003), the West has always humiliated the *Other* who is not European, who is not white and who is not Christian. In his prominent book *Orientalism*, Said gives evidences of an established and institutionalised mode of discourse that has long made use of art, ideologies, geo-policies to legitimise this inferiorising of non-European and non-white people: Arabs, Africans, Asians and Muslims.

<sup>12</sup> See Dalal Sarnou. *Rebellion and creativity in Arab women writings*. Lambert Publishing. 2011.

My brother Mahmoud kept an eye on me while brushing his horse; I started hunching my back to hide my breasts, which were the first thing Hamdan has noticed about me...I fell in love instantly when I was the reflection of his shoulders in the water. When I started watering the vegetables beds three times a day and fondling the horse my mother shouted, ‘Salma, you stupid child, are you in love?’ (p12).

In the above extract, we spot three situations of gender-based *liminality* that is the very ‘product’ of the patriarchal nature of Salma’s back home Bedouin society. First, we see the father denying Salma’s growing-woman body and disclaiming the appearance of her very feminine traits, the breasts. Her mother, too, accuses Salma for being impulsive because of showing the feminine beauty of her body, her hair. Mahmoud’s resentment is expressed through his hatred and rejection of his sister’s body of a woman. As for the last part of the extract, it shows that love, a natural need for any human being, was denied to Salma by her mother. Salma’s foreignness among her family and tribe, in this case, is a gender-based exclusion of Salma, an exclusion followed by a cruel punishment when falling in love and having an affair with Hamdan, who was the first punisher by giving up on her.

Soon after being condemned by her family and tribe, Salma’s female body that was smuggled outside this patriarchal society was also *liminalised* in Exeter. We read: “I was smuggled out of the country. I held my cloth bundle tight” (p56) as if her aim was to protect her body. Salma’s journey of liberating her femininity in a Western society was confusing to her Arab identity that she still sticks to. For instance, after the night she spends with Jim, a British gentleman, she speaks to her consciousness rebuking herself for liberating this body: “*You stay in bed next to him all night pretending to be content, asleep and all you wanted to do was to jump up and wash your body with soap and water including your insides, do your ablutions<sup>13</sup> then pray for forgiveness.*” (p71) This female body was also the target of sexist old men in the bar where she works: “... Allan saw me pushing the hand of an elderly man away from my backside. He didn’t like the liberties the old man was taking.” (p159).

In the last part of the story, Sally or Salma decides to face every state of liminality that has drawn her to the margin of this world. She succeeds to get an MA degree, get married to her professor, have a baby boy and have a normal life. However, unable to bear the moaning and echoes of her baby girl she left behind in Hima, Salma eventually chooses to go back home to save Leila, her child, from the social and cultural and patriarchal state of liminality the innocent child had to face alone. The child, unfortunately, was killed by her uncle Mahmoud. In facing the horrors of the socio-cultural liminality that identifies many Bedouin societies, Salma is shot dead in the last scene of the novel:

Suddenly, I heard voices behind me. A woman was pleading with a man not to do something. A young man saying ‘it’s his duty. He (Mahmoud) has to hold his head high. *Il ‘aar ma yimhih ila dam*: dishonour can only be wiped off with blood’ [...] I thought I heard my mother say ‘You can have the farm, everything I own, she has a suckling now, I beg you...’ When I turned my head I felt a cold pain pierce through my forehead, there between my eyes, and then like blood in water it spread out. (p285)

### Conclusion(s)

Faqir’s protagonist, Salma, represents many aspects of the state of being *liminal* and marginalised in different contexts. All through this paper, we have presented various scenes

<sup>13</sup> This refers to an Islamic practice of washing the limbs so that one can perform prayer. Muslims call this a ‘*wudu*’

where Salma faces liminalisation whether as a woman or as an Arab immigrant. By creating such an archetypal character, Faqir has managed to voice many silenced people whether those living a cruel diasporic experience where they have to face racial discrimination and thus total marginalisation, or those oppressed naïve women whose destiny is drawn by the patriarchal rules dominating the Bedouin societies. Therefore, Salma represents many unvoiced, silent people: ethnic minorities and gender-based minorities. In fact, Salma is a multiplicity: she is the oppressed woman, the marginalized Arab British citizen, the foreigner, and the lover loser. Salma embodies the state of liminality any one of us may face once being dislocated or being different.

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