



Cosmopolitanism from the Margins: Identity Fluidity and the Politics of Belonging in Fadia Faqir's *The Willow Trees Don't Weep*

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Abstract: Fadia Faqir's *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014) narrates the journey of Najwa, a young Jordanian woman who traverses geographical, cultural and ideological borders in search of the father who abandoned her for jihad. This paper examines the novel's exploration of identity fluidity, hybridity, and cosmopolitan subjectivity as strategies for negotiating displacement and unbelonging in a world fractured by religious fundamentalism, secular absolutism and geopolitical violence. Drawing on postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and cosmopolitan thought, the analysis argues that Faqir constructs Najwa's identity as inherently fluid- shaped by the competing pulls of her mother's secularism and her father's fundamentalism, yet irreducible to either. The novel critiques both religious extremism and secular intolerance, exposing how absolutist ideologies foreclose the possibility of authentic belonging. Through its dual narrative structure, which interweaves Najwa's first-person account with her father Omar's diary, Faqir creates a dialogic space that resists monolithic representations of Islam, gender, and Arab identity. Ultimately, the paper contends that *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* advances a cosmopolitan ethics grounded in vulnerability, cross-cultural encounter, and the refusal of easy allegiances- an ethics that, while precarious, offers a pathway toward transnational solidarity in an age of intensifying borders.

Keywords: Identity fluidity, cosmopolitanism, hybridity, Arab diaspora, postsecularism.

Introduction

In the decades following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Anglophone Arab women's writing has acquired unprecedented visibility in Western literary markets. As Susan Muaddi Darraj observes, Western readers turned to this literature seeking "to understand the 'Arab mind' and the Arab world," granting it a special importance "because it bypasses the need for translation and, poised between East and West, speaks directly to English-speaking audiences about the world on the other side of the divide" (120). Yet this visibility carries significant risks. Writing from what Homi Bhabha terms the "Third Space of enunciation"- a liminal, hybrid position that allows subjects "to approach their tradition from a transcultural perspective"- Anglophone Arab writers may inadvertently recycle Orientalist stereotypes even as they seek to critique their own societies (Bhabha 38). Fadia Faqir's *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014) exemplifies both the possibilities and the perils of this position. A Jordanian-British author who lectures in English Literature at Durham University, Faqir has established herself as a significant voice in contemporary Arab diasporic fiction. Her fourth novel, *The Willow Trees Don't Weep*, is a work of considerable ambition, covering a wide sweep of geography and time while engaging with some of the most contentious issues of our era: jihad, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, secularism, gender oppression, and the fractured politics of belonging.

The novel tells the story of Najwa, a young Jordanian woman whose father, Omar Rahman, abandoned her and her mother when she was four years old to join the global jihad in Afghanistan. Raised by her secular mother, Raneen, in a household that explicitly rejects religious observance, Najwa grows up acutely aware of her difference from the pious society around her. Upon her mother's death, Najwa embarks

on a perilous journey that takes her from Jordan to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and finally Britain, in search of the father she barely remembers. The narrative alternates between Najwa's first-person account and excerpts from Omar's diary, which traces his trajectory from a jazz-loving, alcohol-drinking nursing student to a committed jihadist. As Susannah Tarbush notes in her review, Omar "adores his little daughter but has a difficult relationship with his 'uptight, frigid wife,'" and his narrative reveals a man torn between competing loyalties (Tarbush). At the heart of the novel lies a dual narrative structure that resists simplistic moral judgments and stereotypical representations, enabling a nuanced exploration of Najwa's and Omar's motivations, vulnerabilities, and transformations as they navigate the complexities of history, faith, and belonging.

This paper argues that *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* offers a profound meditation on identity fluidity and cosmopolitanism as responses to the violence of ideological absolutism. Najwa's journey is not merely geographical but epistemological—a process of unlearning the certainties imposed by both her mother's militant secularism and her father's religious fundamentalism. In this sense, the novel participates in a broader tradition of diasporic Arab women's writing that, as Layla Al Maleh observes, is "feminist in scope, diasporic in sensibility, and political in its modes of representation" (13). However, Faqir's novel distinguishes itself through its willingness to hold competing worldviews in tension without resolving them into a facile synthesis. The cosmopolitanism that emerges from Najwa's ordeal is not a comfortable universalism but a precarious, hard-won stance of openness to otherness that acknowledges the irreducible particularity of individual experience. As Ayham Abu Orouq argues, Najwa "develops a fluid identity and a cosmopolitan subjectivity as a

unique means of acquiring agency amidst several disempowering counter-cosmopolitan forces” (15).

The paper proceeds in three main parts. The first examines the novel's treatment of identity fluidity, hybridity and diasporic selfhood, drawing on theoretical frameworks from postcolonial and diaspora studies to illuminate how Najwa's identity is constituted through movement, displacement, and the negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations. The second part analyses the novel's critique of secularism and fundamentalism as competing absolutisms that both foreclose the possibility of authentic belonging, exploring how Faqir complicates easy binaries between religious and secular, East and West. The third part considers the novel's cosmopolitan ethics, examining how its narrative form- particularly its dual structure and intertextual engagements- enacts a mode of transnational solidarity that resists both nationalist sentiment and neoliberal multiculturalism. The conclusion reflects on the novel's implications for contemporary debates about identity, belonging and solidarity in an era of resurgent borders and intensifying cultural conflict.

Identity Fluidity, Hybridity and Diasporic Selfhood: The Fragmented Self in Motion

From its opening pages, *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* presents identity not as a stable essence but as a site of contestation, fracture, and becoming. Najwa's sense of self is fundamentally undermined by her father's abandonment: as one reviewer puts it, “his abandonment has undermined her sense of self and she must find him to discover her place in the world” (Independent). This formulation is significant- Najwa's identity crisis is not simply psychological but ontological. Without knowing who her father is and why he left, she cannot know who she is. The search for Omar is therefore also a

search for self, a quest that propels her across borders that are at once geographical, cultural, and ideological.

The novel foregrounds Najwa's experience of otherness from her earliest childhood. Raised in a secular household in a predominantly Muslim society, she recalls: "I stood out as if I had a birth defect with my unruly hair, western clothes and uncovered legs" (Faqir 14). This striking simile- comparing her difference to a "birth defect"- captures the visceral experience of not belonging, of being marked as aberrant in one's own society. Najwa's mother, Raneen, after being abandoned by Omar, removes her veil and becomes avowedly secular, forcing Najwa to help burn Omar's religious books. She forbids Najwa from covering her head, wearing long clothing, or participating in Koranic recitation (Tarbush). In this household, secularism becomes not a neutral stance but a militant counter-ideology, one that renders Najwa a stranger among her peers.

The concept of hybridity, as theorised by Homi Bhabha, offers a productive lens for understanding Najwa's predicament. Bhabha's "Third Space of enunciation" describes a liminal position from which colonial and postcolonial subjects can challenge the binary oppositions imposed by imperial discourse. For Bhabha, hybridity is not simply a matter of cultural mixture but a disruptive force that exposes the instability of all cultural identities (Bhabha 37-39). Najwa inhabits precisely such a third space: she is neither fully secular like her mother nor religious like the society around her; neither fully Jordanian (her Palestinian ancestry marks her as other within Jordan) nor fully Western (in Britain, she is seen as Muslim and, by implication, terrorist). This in-betweenness is a source of both suffering and possibility. As Abu Orouq argues, Najwa "is exposed to various forms of gendered, cultural, social, ideological, religious, and political stereotyping- constructed prejudices across different

locations” that “push her into a rootless existence, leading to a state of alienation and unbelonging” (7).

Yet it is precisely this rootlessness that enables Najwa to develop what Abu Orouq calls “a fluid identity and a cosmopolitan subjectivity as a unique means of acquiring agency amidst several disempowering counter-cosmopolitan forces” (15). Fluidity here is not an evasion of identity but a strategy for survival in a world that demands fixity. Caught between competing cultural and ideological demands, Najwa can neither embody her mother's secular aspirations, nor fulfil the role of the pious Muslim woman prescribed by Jordanian society, nor fit the image of the assimilated immigrant expected in Britain. She must, instead, craft an identity that is responsive to context, adaptive, and open to transformation. As Fazel Asadi Amjad and Sarmad Albusalih observe, “Najwa is caught in a state of hybridity and unhomeliness” as she navigates “the heaviness of dualism between the Western and the Islamic worlds” (Amjad and Albusalih 15). This condition, while painful, becomes the ground for a new kind of subjectivity- one that refuses the false choice between East and West, secular and religious.

Diasporic Consciousness and the Politics of Memory

Najwa's identity formation is inextricably linked to her diasporic condition. The term “diaspora”- from the Greek *diaspeirein*, “to scatter”- captures the experience of dispersal, displacement, and the maintenance of connection to an imagined homeland. Faqir's own biography is relevant here: born in Amman to a Jordanian father and Circassian mother, she moved to Britain in 1984, embodying the very crossings her fiction depicts. *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* reflects what critics have identified as the characteristic features of

Anglophone Arab women's fiction: "feminist in scope, diasporic in sensibility, and political in its modes of representation" (Al Maleh 13).

Najwa's diasporic consciousness is shaped by multiple displacements. Her father's abandonment constitutes an original displacement from family and belonging; her mother's secularism displaces her from the religious community of her peers; her journey to Afghanistan and Britain displaces her from her homeland; and in Britain, she is displaced again by the suspicion and hostility directed at Muslims. As Abu Orouq notes, the 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" (7). This sense of suspension is not merely psychological but structural- a condition produced by the intersecting forces of globalisation, migration, and ideological polarisation.

Yet diaspora is not merely a condition of loss. It also enables new forms of affiliation and identification. Najwa's journey exposes her to encounters that challenge her preconceptions and expand her capacity for empathy. In Afghanistan, she meets veiled women who are "self-determined and emancipated from within," forcing her to reconsider the veil as a symbol of oppression (Abu Orouq 12). This unexpected revaluation of the veil- a garment that in Western discourse has become a metonym for Muslim women's subjugation- exemplifies the novel's commitment to complicating easy judgments. The veil, for these women, is not a sign of submission but a marker of agency and dignity. Najwa's encounter with them disrupts the secular feminist framework inherited from her mother, opening space for a more nuanced understanding of religious practice. As Abu Orouq observes,

“this might be an unexpected re-consideration of this garment as a symbol of freedom” (12).

Hybridity as Survival Strategy

Critical analyses of the novel have emphasized Najwa's embrace of hybridity as a response to the competing demands placed upon her. As one study notes, “the novel's critical analysis indicates that Faqir's protagonist, Najwa, supports the practice of hybridity” (Abu Orouq 8). This is not an abstract theoretical commitment but a practical necessity: “Other characters in Faqir's novel force Najwa to adopt their chosen kind of identity, putting Najwa in a state of hybridity and unease” (Abu Orouq 8). Hybridity is imposed upon Najwa by the conflicting expectations of those around her, but she also actively chooses it as a mode of self-preservation.

The metaphor of the willow tree itself is significant in this context. As Hussein Alhawamdeh argues, Faqir's novel “establishes a new Arab Jordanian feminist trope of the willow tree, metaphorically embodied in the female character of Najwa, who does not surrender to the atrocities of the masculine discourse” (1). The willow tree, with its flexible branches that bend without breaking, becomes an emblem of a femininity that is resilient precisely because it is adaptable. Unlike the rigid, upright trees that symbolise patriarchal authority, the willow survives by yielding. Najwa's identity, like the willow, is not brittle but pliant—capable of withstanding the pressures exerted by fundamentalism, secularism, patriarchy, and xenophobia. Alhawamdeh further notes that Faqir's novel “warns against mimicking the Bard's feminine models and offers a liberating space” for the Arab Jordanian woman (1).

This is not to suggest that Najwa's hybridity is unproblematic. The novel does not romanticise displacement or present fluid

identity as an unalloyed good. Najwa's journey is marked by trauma, including a drone attack in Afghanistan that precipitates a mental breakdown. Her naïveté leads her to be drawn into "the fringes of international terrorism" (Tarbush). Hybridity, in Faqir's rendering, is not a comfortable cosmopolitanism but a precarious existence on the margins, always vulnerable to co-optation or collapse. The novel's title-*The Willow Trees Don't Weep*- suggests both resilience and stoicism, a refusal to capitulate to despair even in the face of overwhelming odds.

The Father's Diary: Masculinity and the Fragmentation of Self

The novel's dual narrative structure- Najwa's first-person account intercut with excerpts from Omar's diary- complicates any simple reading of identity as either fixed or fluid. Omar's diary traces his transformation from a secular, Westernised young man who "drinks alcohol and goes to western-style nightclubs" to a committed jihadist (Tarbush). His radicalisation is not presented as a simple slide into fanaticism but as a complex process shaped by friendship, political repression, and ideological conviction. His friend Hani is detained and tortured by the Jordanian secret police, who knock out his upper teeth; as a result, Omar reads Palestinian-Jordanian Abdullah Azzam's jihad-promoting work *Join the Caravan*, and, although he initially dismisses it as "drivel," he nevertheless accompanies Hani to Afghanistan (Tarbush).

Omar's diary reveals a man who is himself divided, torn between his love for his daughter and his commitment to jihad. His narrative, like Najwa's, is characterised by fragmentation and self-contradiction. He adores his little daughter but has a difficult relationship with his "uptight,

frigid wife" (Tarbush). He dismisses jihadist ideology but embraces it through action. Is he both a "murderer? A baby-abandoner? A wife-jilter? Or a revolutionary? A chaser of dreams and wider horizons?"- as Najwa herself wonders (Faqir 127). The novel refuses to resolve these contradictions, presenting Omar as a figure who is at once sympathetic and reprehensible, understandable and unforgivable.

This refusal of easy judgment is central to the novel's treatment of identity. Neither Najwa nor Omar is reducible to a single identity category- secular or religious, victim or perpetrator, hero or villain. Their identities are constituted through their relationship to each other, a relationship that is itself defined by absence, longing, and misunderstanding. Najwa's quest is not simply to find Omar but to understand him, to reconcile the father she has imagined with the man he actually is. The novel's structure-the interweaving of their two narratives- enacts this process of reconciliation, allowing the reader to see both sides of a story that, in Najwa's experience, has been defined by silence and abandonment. As the Independent review notes, "The differences between Omar's version of events and his motivation for the life choices he has made, and those imagined by Najwa, drive the story along as, inexorably, their two narratives converge" (Independent).

Secularism, Fundamentalism and the Politics of Belonging: Competing Absolutisms

At the heart of *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* lies a profound critique of ideological absolutism in both its religious and secular forms. As Amjad and Albusalih observe, "the choice of Najwa's father, Omer Rahman, of Jihad and also her mother's secular thoughts and ideas considerably aggravated Najwa's state of life toward a fragmented state of identity" (15). This "torn" condition is not merely a plot device but a structural

principle that organises the novel's exploration of belonging and its impossibility. Raneen's secularism and Omar's fundamentalism are presented as mirror images- each an absolutist system that demands total allegiance and brooks no dissent.

Raneen's secularism, as the novel depicts it, is a reaction to Omar's abandonment. After he leaves, she removes her veil and becomes "avowedly secular," forcing Najwa to help burn Omar's religious books (Tarbush). She forbids Najwa from covering her head, wearing long clothing, participating in Koranic recitation, or taking part in school activities related to Ramadan. She wants Najwa to study French because France is "the most secular country on earth" (Tarbush). This is secularism as counter-religion- a militant, intolerant stance that reproduces the very absolutism it purports to oppose. Raneen's secularism is not a neutral commitment to reason or tolerance but a weapon deployed against the memory of her husband and everything he represents. As the Bookbag review notes, Faqir "demonstrates that there are many routes to the concept we conveniently bundle into 'Muslim fundamentalism'," and in doing so, "opens our minds to concepts and occurrences that today's media skip over" (Bookbag).

The novel does not, however, present religious fundamentalism as merely the inverse of secularism. Omar's trajectory is traced with considerable nuance, showing how political repression and personal disillusionment can lead a secular, Westernised young man toward jihad. The Jordanian secret police's torture of his friend Hani is presented as a turning point, a moment when state violence pushes Omar toward a worldview that offers clarity, purpose and community (Tarbush). As Faqir demonstrates, fundamentalism is not simply a matter of religious conviction but a response to political and social conditions- conditions

that include state repression, economic marginalisation and the erosion of traditional forms of belonging.

The Critique of Secular Fundamentalism

Faqir's critique of secularism is noteworthy for its refusal to endorse either religious or secular worldviews as unambiguously liberatory. In much Western discourse, secularism is presented as the necessary condition for women's emancipation, religious freedom and democratic politics. Faqir complicates this narrative by showing how secularism can function as a form of coercion, particularly for women who are pressured to abandon religious practices that may be meaningful to them. Raneen's imposition of secularism on Najwa is presented as a form of violence- not physical, but no less damaging for that. Najwa grows up feeling different, "as if I had a birth defect," because her mother's secularism has marked her as an outsider in her own society (Faqir 14).

This critique resonates with broader postcolonial and feminist arguments about the relationship between secularism and gender. As scholars such as Saba Mahmood have argued, secularism is not a neutral framework but a historically specific formation that has been instrumental in colonial and neo-colonial projects. The demand that Muslim women unveil, for example, has often been a demand that they conform to Western norms of modernity- a demand that reproduces the very hierarchies it claims to challenge (Mahmood 1-5). Faqir's novel participates in this critical tradition by presenting Raneen's secularism as, in its own way, as oppressive as the religious fundamentalism it opposes.

The novel's treatment of the veil is particularly instructive in this context. In Afghanistan, Najwa encounters women wearing the burqa who are "self-determined and emancipated

from within” (Abu Orouq 12). This representation challenges the dominant Western narrative in which the veil is invariably a symbol of oppression. As Abu Orouq notes, “this might be an unexpected re-consideration of this garment as a symbol of freedom” (12). The novel does not romanticise the burqa or endorse religious fundamentalism; rather, it insists that women’s relationship to religious practice is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple binary of oppression versus liberation. Some women may find meaning and agency in practices that appear, from the outside, to be subjugating.

The Politics of Belonging

Belonging, in *The Willow Trees Don't Weep*, is always conditional, always precarious. Najwa cannot belong in Jordan because she is a single woman without a male guardian, raised in a secular household that defies social norms. She cannot belong in Afghanistan because she is a foreigner, an outsider to the codes of jihadist society. She cannot belong in Britain because she is seen as a Muslim and, by implication, a terrorist. In each location, she is marked as other, subjected to stereotyping and suspicion. As the Independent review observes, “Najwa has been raised in a secular household, yet all the other children she grew up with were Muslims. She is a single woman living in a household without men in a patriarchal society. When she arrives in Afghanistan and England, she becomes a cultural outsider, too; in the latter, she is seen as a Muslim, and by implication, a terrorist” (Independent).

This experience of unbelonging is not unique to Najwa but is presented as a structural condition of contemporary life, particularly for those who move across borders. The 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” (Abu Orouq 7). This is a diagnosis of a world in which traditional sources of identity- nation, religion, family- have been destabilised without being replaced by viable alternatives. The result is a pervasive sense of disorientation, a feeling of being “suspended in a void.”

Yet the novel also suggests that this condition of unbelonging can be the ground for new forms of solidarity. Najwa's encounters with other displaced and marginalised people- the veiled women in Afghanistan, the immigrants she meets in Britain- create possibilities for connection that transcend the boundaries of nation, religion, and culture. These connections are fragile and contingent, but they are also real. They suggest that belonging need not be rooted in a single identity or community but can be forged through shared experience of marginalisation and struggle.

The Problem of Representation

Any discussion of *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* must engage with the critique that the novel recycles Orientalist stereotypes even as it seeks to challenge them. As Ikram Elsherif argues, “Anglophone Arab writers write from what Homi Bhabha calls ‘the Third Space of enunciation,’ a hybrid space of liminality,” but “their representations of their cultures and traditions are, thus, bound to be influenced by Western perspectives which still perpetuate orientalist, colonial/postcolonial views and ideologies about the East” (Elsherif). The novel may, “taken at face value and given the fact that Faqir is preoccupied with problems of gender and patriarchy, be read and interpreted as reiterating neo-Orientalist stereotypical preconceptions of Arab/Muslim oppression of women” (Elsherif).

This is a serious charge, and it points to the difficulties inherent in Anglophone Arab women's writing. The market for

such writing is largely Western, and as Rachel Bower explains, “authors who must ultimately sell their books may bend to ‘market imperatives’” (qtd. in Elsherif). There is a risk that in seeking to appeal to Western readers, Arab writers may reinforce the very stereotypes they seek to challenge. The novel’s focus on jihad, terrorism, and the Taliban, for example, could be seen as catering to Western fascination with the “dark” side of Islam.

However, a more sympathetic reading might argue that Faqir’s novel resists this reduction. As Elsherif contends, “on a deeper level, Faqir appears to be more concerned with her two main characters’ (a father and daughter) expression of human agency as they embark on Odyssean heroic journeys of self-discovery and enlightenment” that “humanize and help them to heal and be reconciled to self and other” (Elsherif). The novel’s commitment to complexity- its refusal to present either Omar or Najwa as simply good or evil, its insistence on showing both the violence of fundamentalism and the violence of state repression, its nuanced treatment of the veil- suggests a writer who is aware of the risks of Orientalism and actively works against them.

Ultimately, *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* occupies an ambivalent position. It is a novel written from within the diasporic third space, aware of its own complicity in the structures it critiques, yet committed to telling stories that complicate rather than confirm Western preconceptions. This ambivalence is not a weakness but a strength- a recognition that there is no position outside the structures of representation, only the possibility of using those structures to open space for alternative narratives.

Cosmopolitan Ethics, Narrative Form and Transnational Solidarity: Toward a Cosmopolitan Subjectivity

The concept of cosmopolitanism has a long and contested history, stretching from the Cynics and Stoics of antiquity to contemporary debates about globalisation, human rights, and transnational solidarity. For the purposes of this analysis, cosmopolitanism is understood not as an abstract ideal of world citizenship but as a mode of being in the world that is open to otherness, committed to dialogue across difference, and critical of parochial loyalties. As Abu Orouq defines it in relation to Faqir's novel, cosmopolitanism is a "concept relevant to marginalised groups in the diaspora" that enables the formation of "a fluid identity and a cosmopolitan subjectivity" (7-8).

Najwa's cosmopolitan subjectivity emerges from her experience of displacement and marginalisation. Excluded from belonging in Jordan, Afghanistan, and Britain alike, she is forced to develop a sense of self that is not tied to any particular place or community. This is not a comfortable cosmopolitanism- the easy, consumerist multiculturalism of the global elite- but a precarious, hard-won stance that is always vulnerable to collapse. Najwa's cosmopolitanism is, in this sense, a cosmopolitanism from below, born of necessity rather than privilege. As Abu Orouq notes, Najwa "does not fully reject either secular or religious frameworks. Instead, she reinvents a hybrid and pragmatic identity that accommodates multiple, even opposing worldviews, allowing her to challenge antic cosmopolitan forces in both gendered and cultural terms" (17).

The novel's representation of cosmopolitan subjectivity challenges the notion that identity must be rooted in a single

culture, religion, or nation. Najwa's identity is multiple, fluid, and context-dependent. She is Jordanian, but also Palestinian (through her father's ancestry); she is secular, but also curious about religion; she is Arab, but also shaped by Western education and values. These affiliations do not cohere into a stable identity but exist in tension with one another, creating a subjectivity that is always in process, always becoming. As Abu Orouq observes, Najwa's "dynamic engagement with cosmopolitanism" allows her to "challenge both patriarchal norms and exclusionary cultural ideologies" (17).

Narrative Form as Cosmopolitan Practice

The novel's dual narrative structure is not merely a stylistic choice but a formal embodiment of its cosmopolitan ethics. By alternating between Najwa's first-person account and Omar's diary, Faqir creates a dialogic space in which competing perspectives are held in tension without resolution. The reader is forced to see the world through both Najwa's eyes and Omar's, to understand both the daughter's experience of abandonment and the father's experience of radicalisation. This does not mean that the novel endorses Omar's actions- it clearly does not- but it does mean that Omar is not reduced to a monster or a stereotype. He is a human being with his own history, his own motivations, his own capacity for self-deception and self-justification.

This dialogic structure is a form of cosmopolitan practice because it requires the reader to engage with otherness, to see the world from a perspective that is not one's own. As Abu Orouq notes, "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," and Faqir "attempts to indulge in every experimentation of the narrative technique" (3). This experimentation is not merely formal but

ethical: it reflects a commitment to representing the complexity of human experience in a way that resists simplification and stereotyping.

The intertextual dimensions of the novel further reinforce this cosmopolitan project. As Alhawamdeh demonstrates, Faqir “appropriates a direct text from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* and an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Othello*” to “dismantle the Shakespearean dramatisation of the submissive woman” (1). This engagement with the Western literary canon is not an act of cultural submission but of creative appropriation- a way of claiming a place within the tradition while simultaneously challenging it. Faqir’s novel “warns against mimicking the Bard’s feminine models and offers a liberating space” (Alhawamdeh 1). It establishes “a new Arab Jordanian feminist trope of the willow tree” that stands in opposition to the passive femininity of Shakespeare’s heroines (Alhawamdeh 1).

This intertextual strategy is cosmopolitan in the sense that it refuses the opposition between “Western” and “Arab” culture. Faqir draws on Shakespeare not as a representative of a superior civilization but as a resource that can be reworked and repurposed for new contexts. The novel’s cosmopolitanism is thus not a matter of transcending cultural difference but of engaging with it creatively, producing new meanings through the encounter between different traditions. As Alhawamdeh puts it, in Faqir’s novel, “Shakespeare has been ‘Arabized’” to “revise and redefine new roles of the Arab Jordanian woman” (1).

Transnational Solidarity and the Politics of Vulnerability

One of the novel’s most striking features is its insistence on the vulnerability of all its characters, regardless of their

ideological commitments. Najwa is vulnerable as a woman, as a foreigner, as a secular person in a religious society, as a Muslim in a secular West. Omar is vulnerable as a political dissident, as a torture survivor, as a man caught between competing loyalties. The veiled women of Afghanistan are vulnerable as women under Taliban rule, yet also, in their own way, agents of their own lives. Even the jihadists are presented as vulnerable- not in the sense that their violence is excused, but in the sense that their radicalisation is shown to be a response to conditions of political and social vulnerability.

This emphasis on vulnerability is central to the novel's cosmopolitan ethics. Cosmopolitanism, in this rendering, is not a matter of asserting universal values or claiming a privileged position above particular loyalties. It is, rather, a recognition of shared vulnerability- the recognition that all human beings are subject to suffering, loss, and death, and that this shared condition creates the ground for solidarity across difference. This is a cosmopolitanism that does not deny the reality of power and inequality but insists on the possibility of connection even in their presence.

The novel's treatment of the drone attack in Afghanistan is exemplary in this regard. Najwa experiences the attack not as a distant political event but as a visceral trauma that shatters her sense of safety and order. The drone is a symbol of the asymmetrical violence that characterises contemporary geopolitics- the violence of the powerful against the powerless, of the West against the Muslim world. Yet the novel does not present this violence as simply one-sided. It shows how jihadist violence emerges in response to state violence, how cycles of violence perpetuate themselves across generations and borders. This is not moral equivalence but moral complexity- a refusal to reduce the politics of the Middle East to a simple narrative of good versus evil.

The Limits of Cosmopolitanism

The novel is also aware of the limits of cosmopolitanism. Najwa's journey does not end in a comfortable resolution or a harmonious synthesis of East and West. She does not find her father, at least not in the way she hoped; she does not achieve a stable sense of belonging; she does not transcend her condition of displacement. The novel's conclusion is, as one reviewer notes, "underwhelming"- not because Faqir fails as a writer, but because the novel refuses the false comfort of closure (Independent). The problems it addresses- religious fundamentalism, secular intolerance, geopolitical violence, the politics of belonging- are not solved by the end of the novel. They persist, as they persist in the world.

This refusal of resolution is itself a cosmopolitan gesture. Cosmopolitanism, in Faqir's rendering, is not a destination but a process- a perpetual negotiation with difference that never achieves finality. It is, as the novel's title suggests, a matter of not weeping, of maintaining resilience in the face of loss and disappointment. The willow tree bends but does not break; it survives but does not triumph. This is a modest cosmopolitanism, one that does not claim to have found the answer to the problems of our time but insists on the importance of continuing to ask the questions.

The Willow Tree as Cosmopolitan Emblem

The willow tree that gives the novel its title functions as a complex symbol that ties together the novel's various themes. As Alhawamdeh argues, the willow tree becomes "a new Arab Jordanian feminist trope" that embodies Najwa's resistance to "the atrocities of the masculine discourse" (1). But the willow is also a cosmopolitan emblem. Willows are found across the world, in diverse climates and cultures; they are adaptable,

resilient, and capable of thriving in conditions that would defeat more rigid species. The willow's flexibility- its ability to bend without breaking- is precisely the quality that Najwa must cultivate in order to survive her journey.

The willow's association with weeping is also significant. The title- *The Willow Trees Don't Weep*- suggests a refusal of grief, or at least a refusal to be defeated by grief. Najwa has every reason to weep: she has lost her mother, her father, her home, her sense of self. Yet she continues, she persists, she does not give up. This is not stoicism in the sense of emotional suppression but resilience in the sense of continued engagement with the world despite its pain. The willow does not weep because weeping would not help; the willow survives by adapting, by bending, by finding ways to continue living in conditions that are not of its choosing.

This resilience is, finally, what the novel offers as its answer to the problems it poses. In a world fractured by fundamentalism, secular absolutism, geopolitical violence, and the politics of exclusion, the only viable response is a cosmopolitan ethics of openness, flexibility, and persistence. This is not a comfortable answer, and the novel does not pretend it is. But it is an honest one, and it is perhaps the only answer available to those who, like Najwa, find themselves suspended between worlds, belonging fully to none.

Conclusion

Fadia Faqir's *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* is a novel of considerable ambition and complexity, one that engages with some of the most pressing issues of our time- religious fundamentalism, secular intolerance, geopolitical violence, gender oppression and the politics of belonging. Through the story of Najwa's journey across geographical, cultural, and ideological borders, the novel explores the possibilities and

limits of identity fluidity, hybridity and cosmopolitanism as responses to a world fractured by absolutist ideologies.

The first part of this paper examined the novel's treatment of identity fluidity, hybridity and diasporic selfhood. Drawing on postcolonial and diaspora studies, the analysis showed how Najwa's identity is constituted through movement, displacement, and the negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations. Her hybridity is both imposed and chosen- a strategy for survival in a world that demands fixity. The novel's dual narrative structure, which interweaves Najwa's first-person account with her father Omar's diary, complicates any simple reading of identity as either fixed or fluid, presenting both characters as divided, self-contradictory, and irreducible to single identity categories.

The second part analysed the novel's critique of secularism and fundamentalism as competing absolutisms. Raneen's secularism and Omar's fundamentalism are presented as mirror images- each an absolutist system that demands total allegiance and forecloses the possibility of authentic belonging. The novel's nuanced treatment of the veil, its refusal to reduce religious practice to a simple binary of oppression versus liberation, and its insistence on the complexity of women's relationship to religious tradition all contribute to a critique that resists easy alignment with either secular or religious worldviews. At the same time, the paper acknowledged the risks of neo-Orientalist reading, recognising that the novel's focus on jihad and terrorism may inadvertently reinforce Western stereotypes even as it seeks to challenge them.

The third part considered the novel's cosmopolitan ethics, examining how its narrative form- particularly its dual structure and intertextual engagements- enacts a mode of transnational solidarity that resists both nationalist sentiment

and neoliberal multiculturalism. The novel's cosmopolitanism is not a comfortable universalism but a precarious, hard-won stance of openness to otherness that acknowledges the irreducible particularity of individual experience. The willow tree, as a symbol of flexibility, resilience, and refusal to be defeated by grief, encapsulates the novel's modest but persistent cosmopolitan vision.

In the final analysis, *The Willow Trees Don't Weep* offers neither easy answers nor false comfort. It does not resolve the tensions it explores or provide a blueprint for a more just world. What it does offer is a way of seeing- a way of holding competing perspectives in tension, of refusing the comfort of simple binaries, of persisting in the face of loss and disappointment. This is, perhaps, the most that literature can do: not to solve our problems but to help us see them more clearly, to expand our capacity for empathy and understanding, to remind us of our shared vulnerability and our shared humanity. In a world that seems increasingly defined by walls and borders, by fundamentalisms of all kinds, by the refusal of otherness, Faqir's novel is a reminder that there is another way- a way of bending without breaking, of weeping without giving up, of continuing to seek connection across the divides that separate us.

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