

## EAST MEETS WEST: IDENTITY, POLITICS AND GENDER IN FADIA FAQIR'S *MY NAME IS SALMA*

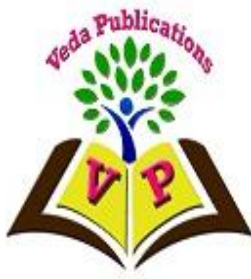
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### ABSTRACT



Faqir's third novel *My Name is Salma* recounts the story of a shepherdess Salma of Hima who becomes pregnant out of wedlock. This puts her life in jeopardy as her brother Mahmoud intends to invoke the custom of honour killing. For her protection Salma lives in a prison and her daughter is immediately taken away from her after delivery. Then she flees to Lebanon and then to England. The text represents Salma's reclaiming of her original identity since she is transported from one setting to another without any deliberate will on her part. She rejects her fragmented self that is embodied in the English diminutives of her name 'Sal' and 'Sally' but is able to participate actively in social life forming connections with people of various cultures. The paper explores how Salma keeps her Arab identity intact and takes charge of her life wherever she goes whether it is her native town, Hima, Lebanon or England.

**Keywords:** *Migration, identity, honour killing, diasporic, outcast etc.*



Structured in episodic flashbacks *My Name is Salma* is set predominantly in Britain with the first person narrative which is about Salma's life experiences in the homeland and in the host land. Salma belongs to no recognizable diasporic community in England since she is an Arab and Arabs are considered as South Asian immigrants in Britain. Salma is constantly being asked where she comes from as she does not fit in, "It was like a curse upon my head; it was my fate: my accent and the colour of my skin. I could hear it sung everywhere: in the cathedral, "WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?" (Faqr, *Salma*91). Even the postman Jack calls her "girl" and not Salma every morning:

Despite correcting him several times, "Salma, Jack. Salma, please," he would forget the next day and call me "girl" again. But Jack never had anything to remind him because I never received any letters with my Arab name, Salma Ibrahim El-Musa, printed on them. . . . But sometimes I wanted Jack to shout abuse at me the way the skinheads did at the White Hare. "Hey, alien! You, freak! Why don't you go back to the jungles? Go climb some coconut trees! Fuck off! Go Home!" I did not deserve to be alive. (37)

It is not easy for Salma to adjust in the foreign land being an Arab woman, "Walking alone under electric poles, whose shadows were getting longer and longer, I hugged my shopping bag. No, it was not easy living here in England as an "alien", . . . I once wrote on the walls of a public toilet: "A dark alien has passed through skies of Exeter" (37). Her past too disorients her "self" wherever she goes, whatever she does it is always in her back of mind. When she reaches Lebanon she becomes nostalgic, "Where was I? How far was I from my mother? How far was I from her?" (82). She keeps her mother's letter, her pipe, comb and perfume given by Noura always with her and covers herself with her mother's shawl whenever she feels alienated, "My mother watched over me. I held the ripe peach with my hands and stuck my teeth into it. . . . "You are like a rabbit, munching, munching all the time". . . . "So hungry for life like a locust, but you must not chew whatever you come across. One day you might chew a snake and it will sting back"" (112).

Salma is so torn between her past and present that while she was eating, "Hamdan suddenly emerged out of a dust cloud and sat next to me. He walked towards me in his white robe like a panther without making much effort." (56). Salma's mind is also haunted by her brother in England, she feels his presence in the cathedral when a stranger greets Salma she looks behind back to see if she is being watched, "If my brother Mahmoud sees me talking to strange men he will tie each leg to a different horse and then get them to run in different directions" (29). Her fear of patriarchy does not die with the change of place and time and she always carries her past wherever she goes, "In exile, you quickly develop a double vision, where images of the streets of Basra merge with those of Kentish town. You begin looking forward at the country of adoption while always looking back at the country of origin" (Faqr, *House* 53).

Salma's boss Max asks her name again and again and it is believed he is the supporter of British National party who wanted to kill Jews, Arabs and Muslims, "Whenever He looked at me with his penetrating eyes, a shiver would run through my body. . . . I once overheard him say, "Sally is in one of her moods. Arabs are obsessed with sadness"" (Faqr, *Salma* 41). This sense of exclusion brings Salma closer to other marginalised people, as a refugee with no family ties and a limited financial income, her survival hangs on building bridges with them who like her are uprooted and rendered powerless in an alien environment, "While "for the middle-and upper-middle-class Arab, British mainstream society may seem less intimidating", it can be more difficult for unskilled working-class Arabs" whose social status tends to perpetuate their marginalisation within the British social hierarchy" (Merriman 78).

Sadiq, her off-licence wine shopkeeper friend wants to marry Salma if she helps him to earn two hundred pounds to send his first wife and children in Pakistan. Sadiq knows that Salma is earning and looking for a life partner and due to Arabness she is not able to find. No doubt Salma is looking for a life partner and does not want to compromise over the stature of second wife but eventually she feels, "Soon I will be thirty-one, hunch-baked, grey-haired and alien. Soon I will be



begging Sadiq to marry me and I would be happy to send two hundred pounds a month to his wife in Pakistan" (Faqir, *Salma* 245).

Salma comes across an Algerian who pretends to be French to be able to blend in. When Salma attempts to communicate with him, who incidentally is the only Arab she meets in Britain he gives her a cold shoulder because he fears deportation. Faqir illustrates that being an Arab in Britain does not only mean to be displaced but to be a suspect under the threat of deportation, "The first cultural shock comes when you fail to recognise the truth of your experience in the Western perception of it. You feel out-numbered and out-organised by a culture validates and enforces the supremacy of everything that is Christian, Western, white, written" (Faqir, *House* 53).

Salma meets a man Jim in a cafe who asks her why did she leave her country, "'Why did I leave? I wanted to explore, I suppose'" (Faqir, *Salma* 69). After they had dinner together Salma invites him in her rented apartment for a cup of coffee and eventually couldn't resist his sexual appeal, "He placed his cold lips on mine. I had nowhere to go. This country was the only home I had. I shut my eyes, shut out the urgent love making of Hamdan, and received his kiss" (78). After spending the whole night with Jim without inquiring about him the next morning Salma's sense of alienation with her guilt consciousness elevates. After a few days she meets Jim coincidentally but he becomes afraid, "see you around" (128). Salma understands that he is not interested and will never want to see her again because of her Bedouin appearance and Arab identity.

Salma's landlady, Liz treats her like a servant because of her Arab background and is always scolding her if she sees her black hair on the armchair or in the bathroom, "I got out of the bath and cleaned the tub with hot water, making sure that every black hair was sliding down the drain. . . . but my hair was falling everywhere" (12). Salma's Arab appearance makes her so depressed that she starts analysing herself by looking at the mirror. Her "mirror" consists of the reflections she receives from society since everyone she encounters has a different image of her depending on their own opinions. Her

mirror is "fractured" because there is no where she can reflect herself as a whole person. Liana Badr writes, "The mirror has a deadly charm which penetrates deep inside a person, tempting you to look at yourself and examine how you relate to the world, pushing you to the edge of insanity" (28).

Salma's own response to her Arab/Muslim cultural background enhances her feelings of shame and guilt and makes her feel alienated. Her dark complexion becomes "objective correlative" of her guilt and her sense of homelessness, both conceptualise as standing in her way of successful formation of identity. Salma's dark appearance and her feeling of guilt at her pre-marital affair with Hamdan merge with her obsession for whiteness and she is looking for a white mask. She starts acting in a strange fashion by wanting to rub herself against an Englishman so that her blackness would rub off or putting herself in the washing machine so that her blackness and sins would wash off and she would emerge "squeaky clean" (107).

Salma is subjected to many identities that are given to her by others, "Many names I. Salma and Sal and Sally" (Faqir, *Salma* 103). She is called Salma in her native country and, Sal and Sally in the diaspora and each name marks the confusion in her which is different in Hima and England. Loss of self makes her a, "rootless wind-blown desert weed" (35) who belongs nowhere, "Miss in Hima was reserved for virgins, Mrs for married women or widows, but there was no title for those who had sex out of wedlock for they simply got shot" (214). Confused due to her disparate identities and encountering hostility Salma says, "I stopped locating myself. I became neither Salma, nor Sal nor Sally, neither Arab nor English" (191).

Being an outsider, Salma attempts to integrate in mainstream British society by talking about British politics and the royal family. She decodes the latest poll in the paper, whereby Labour is leading the Conservatives by five percent as she asks Liz, "'Was that the shadow Chancellor?'" (Faqir, *Salma* 26). Her constant queries annoy Liz who says she will not understand because of her foreign background. Her boss Max is annoyed to see a picture of Princess Diane in a swim suit and when Salma tries to justify it, Max interrupts, "'Sal, you



don't know anything about us, the British, do you? How we feel when we see our princess naked in a newspaper." . . . I don't blame you, being foreign and all"" (275-276).

Salma has become so determined and confident while working that she follows the immigration guide thoroughly to blend in and does not mind at all what the customers of the bar say and how do they behave with her. It was her constant effort to speak correct English to fit in, so she joins part-time English classes in an open university. She reads Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in university classes and realises, "My mother had nothing of her own, her brother took her share of the farm; when her husband died Shahla was thrown out of her house so she came to live with us; and all I had was a daughter of my own, who cried and cried for me" (210). This makes her so disappointing that she writes about her own experience as an alien in her essay's conclusion assigned by her tutor.

In order to assimilate Salma marries an Englishman Dr. John Robson, who teaches her part-time English classes and converts to marry her. She admits of having a daughter and not a husband to him. In a letter to Noura she writes that she is happy and got married to an English gentleman from a very good family, "He is also so rich. His mansion is old and big. . . . How is my mother? . . . She was half blind with grief when I left so I bought her some spectacles. They are expensive, I know, but my gentleman husband gave me the money and advised me to buy the bifocals" (55).

Salma's relationship with Parvin proves vital for the former's survival in England. Parvin advises Salma to forget her country of origin and think about her future in Britain thus becomes Salma's mentor, ""What is left of the Empire are those little islands of nostalgia"" (15). When Salma keeps thinking of her past and wears veil, Parvin says, ""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"" (123). Parvin urges Salma, ""Lighten up! Groom yourself! Sell yourself! . . . "You are now in a capitalist society that is not your own."" (51).

Parvin insists on Salma to consider Britain as her home and become an active member of the

multicultural British fabric. When the GP refuses to prescribe medication for Salma, Parvin shouts at him, "You call yourself a doctor! This woman is ill and you send her off without any medicine, afraid to spend some of your precious budget . . . You also think that we waste the NHS, us Pakis. Well, I have some news for you. We are both British and soon we will be sitting in your very seat" (167-168). Parvin's anger encourages Salma's sense of belonging as a British citizen. When Salma decides to enrol for a B.A degree, it is Parvin who properly fills her application form and when Parvin goes for a job interview, Salma tailors a suit for her and accompanies her to the interview. Not only this when Parvin gets married Salma becomes her bridesmaid subsequently their dependence on each other underlies their survival possible in England.

Salma appears to be a conservative Muslim when she is in Hima she wears a scarf, a shawl, a black dress and loose pantaloons. As she changes her country veil begins its process of changing. Lebanon, the second country she lives in witnesses the second stage of her relationship with veil she still covers her hair with veil and wears jeans along with a t-shirt and refuses to drink wine and eats halal meat only. In England, initially she dresses conservatively however, after spending some years she suddenly takes off her veil and completely transforms herself.

As Salma takes off her veil she does not only modernise herself but becomes confident as her narrative grows stronger, "Gone were the days when I was a farmer, a shepherdess, a peasant girl. I am now seamstress, an assistant tailor in a shop in Exeter, which a few years ago was voted the most beautiful city in Britain. Now Salma the dark black iris of Hima must try to turn into Sally an English rose, white, confident, with an elegant English accent, and a pony" (Faqr, *Salma* 10).

Even after Salma tries to fit in England her daughter is always in her back of mind though she has been told to cut ties with her home and family in order to establish a new life in England by the doctor. But she locates her sense of home with a white baby dress in England, "I had a glimpse of a white satin and chiffon dress. A line of pearls was stitched carefully above each frill. It looked like a luminous white cloud, like dawn; the pearls shone like tears of joy. It was a



promise of reunion, a return. That white dress was home" (17). For Salma, the white dress symbolises her home which is associated with her daughter Layla since she has been taken away from her immediately after delivery. In the prison Salma stitched a similar white dress and had imagined how Layla would look like, "I tried to make the shape of the dress similar to that of a lily. I was willing the life of whoever wore it to be happier and whiter than mine" (63).

Her motherhood always pulls her back to her daughter which she associates with the white dress and her nipples, "I would press on my sore nipples gently to relieve my breasts of the unused milk, . . . The dried-up milk felt like pebbles inside my raw breasts. My nipples became darker and longer with all that futile pulling and squeezing with all that grief" (64). So she buys the white dress and keeps it under her pillow and when Parvin inquires Salma becomes emotional, "'I no stupid, I family, I tribe'" (136) and again immerses in her daughter's thought, "She was calling me. I pressed my ears with my hands. A shiver ran through me as if I had caught a sudden chill and my ugly dark nipples, which were one and half centimetres long, the size of my little finger up to the first joint, stood erect" (53). Parvin insists Salma to forget her daughter but she visualises Layla again and again.

After Salma delivers a baby boy in England her thoughts again turn to dreaming and imagining Layla and she imagined her calling. After drafting a letter seeking help to trace her daughter, she tears it up because it could disclose her address and she could become a victim of honour killing. But she still wants to help Layla, "I had the same dream again, but this time Layla's muffled cries intensified. My heart knew that I had to go and find her before it was too late" (312). Subsequently she rewrites the same letter indicating her willingness to come out of hiding and enter into dialogue those who can potentially help her in locating Layla in Hima, "I began seeing her swollen face everywhere, on window panes, in my breakfast bowl swimming in the milk, in the water whirling down the drain of the kitchen sink, in all the mirrors. I began hearing her muffled cries whenever a breeze hit my face" (315). Finally, Salma musters courage to go back to her homeland despite the objections of Parvin and her husband. But

unfortunately she finds that her illegitimate daughter has been killed by Mahmoud. Salma collapses on the floor as she is grieving for Layla, Salma hears that her mother is pleading with her brother but he says that it is his duty and dishonour can only be wiped off with blood. Abruptly, Salma feels a cold pain pierce through her forehead, there between her eyes and like water blood spreads out, and both mother and daughter become victims of honour killing.

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