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A Self-Orientalist Representation of Islam in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*

التمثيل الاستشراقي الذاتي للإسلام في رواية فادية فقير "شجر الصفصاف لا يبكي"

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باحث – قسم اللغة الإنجليزية
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الملخص:

تتطرق هذه الدراسة بشكل نقدي إلى الخطاب الاستشراقي الذاتي المتأصل في الأدب العربي الناطق باللغة الإنجليزية؛ إذ يشارك الروائيون العرب في شكل من أشكال الاستشراق الجديد من خلال تصوير الإسلام بطرق تتوافق مع الصور النمطية السائدة بين الجماهير الغربية.

ومن خلال التركيز على رواية "أشجار الصفصاف لا تبكي" للكاتبة فادية فقير، تكشف الدراسة أن المؤلفة تنسب صفات سلبية إلى الإسلام والمسلمين، ويشير الإطار النظري للاستشراق الذاتي، كما ذكرت ليزا لاو، إلى أن المؤلفين الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية غالبًا لا يرفضون الصور النمطية الاستشراقية، ولكنهم غالبًا ما يعززونها داخل سردياتهم الأدبية. وقد أظهرت الدراسة أن "فقير"، على الرغم من الإرث الإسلامي الذي تحمله، لا تطعن في الصور النمطية السائدة المرتبطة بالإسلام، بل إن روايتها عمدت على إدامة هذه الصور النمطية، وقدمت صورة مختزلة للإسلام بصفه دينًا يتسم بالتعصب والعنف، وأرضًا خصبة للتطرف، ويُصوَّر المسلمون كتجسيد للتخلف، مقدمين الخرافة على الفكر العقلاني، ويُصوَّر الأئمة على أنهم متلاعبون ومستغلون لسذاجة الشباب لأجل تحقيق مكاسب شخصية، علاوة على ذلك لا يُصوَّر الحجاب بوصفه عبئاً ثقيلاً على المرأة فحسب، بل وأيضاً بوصفه أداة للقمع، حتى النساء المحجبات يُصوَّرن بوصفهن "الآخر"، ويُوصَفن بازدراء؛ لذلك تنخرط "فقير" في الاستشراق الذاتي، وتدوم الصور النمطية التي كان ينبغي لها أن تسعى إلى مواجهتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستشراق الذاتي، الاستشراق الجديد، التمثيل، الصور النمطية، الحجاب.

Abstract:

This study critically delves into the self-Orientalist discourse inherent in Anglophone Arab literature, where Arab novelists participate in a form of neo-Orientalism by portraying Islam in ways that resonate with established stereotypes prevalent among Western audiences. Focusing on Fadia Faqir's novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, the analysis reveals how the author ascribes negative attributes to Islam and its adherents. The theoretical framework of self-Orientalism, as stated by Lisa Lau, suggests that Anglophone authors often do not reject Orientalist stereotypes; but they often reinforce them within their literary narratives. The study has shown that Faqir, despite her Muslim heritage, does not challenge the dominant stereotypes associated with Islam. Rather, her novel perpetuates these stereotypes, offering a reductive representation of Islam as a religion characterized by intolerance and violence, and as a breeding ground for fanaticism. Muslims are depicted as embodying backwardness, prioritizing superstition over rational thought. Imams are portrayed as exploitative, appearing to prey on the innocence of youth for personal gain. Additionally, the veil is portrayed not only as a constraint imposed on women but also as a tool of oppression. Even veiled women are rendered as "the other," described with contempt. Therefore, Faqir engages in self-Orientalism, perpetuating the very stereotypes she should have aimed to challenge.

Keywords: self-Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, representation, stereotypes, veil

1.Introduction

The representation of Islam and Muslims has historically been a contentious issue, as articulated in Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978). Said elucidates how Western narratives have not only characterized but also spoken on behalf of Islam and Muslims. This discourse has been significantly influenced by Western interests and perspectives. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks prompted a significant shift in the thematic focus of literary fiction towards Islam and Islamic culture, leading many Western writers to incorporate these events as a prominent theme in their literary works (Djafri, 2021, p. 96). Among the most prominent Western literary work that distorted the image of Islam are John Ubdike's *The Terrorist* and Don Delillo's *Falling Man*. Such work resulted in biased and distorted representations of Islam, ultimately leading to Islam being unfairly blamed. Despite efforts by Anglophone Muslim writers to address humanitarian issues and challenge misconceptions about Islam, some, like Fadia Faqir, align themselves with the Western discourse against Islam and Islamic culture, perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes that conform to the preconceived notions of Islam within Western consciousness. In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Faqir adopts a self-Orientalist discourse that distorts the image of Islam and Islamic culture and engages in questioning its legitimacy and suitability either in the homeland or in Western countries, perpetuating common depictions of Islam as a source of religious extremism and terrorism.

Fadia Faqir

Fadia Faqir, a dual citizen of Britain and Jordan born in 1956 in Amman, is a distinguished writer and academic. She studied English literature at the University of Jordan before obtaining her MA and Ph.D. in Critical and Creative Writing in the UK. Faqir held various teaching positions at renowned institutions such as Oxford and Durham, where she instructed on Arabic language and modern Arabic literature while also pursuing her writing career. In 2004, she decided to dedicate herself entirely to writing, leveraging her deep understanding of both Arabic and English literature. Her literary journey began with the release of her debut novel, *Nisanit*, in 1990, followed by four additional novels, including *The Cry of the Dove* and *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, both of which garnered international acclaim and were translated into several languages.

Faqir writes exclusively in English; her decision is informed by the personal and political oppression she experienced in Jordan, which she identifies as a barrier to writing in Arabic, despite her thematic focus on Arab narratives and characters (Faqir, 2016; Moore, 2011, p. 10). From a feminist standpoint, she perceives the Arabic language as a construct of a patriarchal society laden with taboos. This perspective compels her to utilize English as a medium to engage with sensitive subjects that she believes cannot be adequately addressed in her native language (Faqir, 2016). Faqir asserts that writing in English enables her to connect with a global readership interested in critical issues such as women's rights, domestic violence, and patriarchal structures (ibid). Her literary work serves as a critique of the oppressive frameworks within Arab society, particularly focusing on the Personal Status Law that restricts women's freedoms. This critique is deeply rooted in her personal experiences of social and religious oppression within her family (Faqir, 2020), exemplified by her father's enforcement of various religious and social norms, including the requirement to wear a veil, perform daily prayers, and adhere to a curfew at seven in the evening (Moore, 2011, p. 1). She rejects and reacts against such kinds of "institutional religion" through her writing (ibid). Faqir mentions how her mother's liberality influences her ability to articulate her desires and needs, even if this reaction causes her to clash with her father. (Faqir, 2011; Moore, 2011, p. 1).

Willow Trees Don't Weep

Willow Trees Don't Weep is Faqir's fourth novel that was published by Quercus Books in 2014. Faqir addresses two issues in this novel: what happens to lone women in a patriarchal culture, and why would a man desert his family for the

sake of Jihad. The idea of writing the story started when the life story of a member of al-Qaeda, she interviewed, fascinated her and triggered the questions of why people would leave their loved ones behind and what happens to people when members of the family prioritize religion over them (Quercus-Books, 2014). She declares that she does not want to write a quote unquote classic terrorist novel, but instead she wants to narrate the story of exploration of the innocent going on a journey that is so arduous and going to change them into someone who is possibly aware of what is happening in the world (ibid). It is the story of a daughter and her father, the story of love, anger, forgiveness and redemption. Faqir characterizes the novel as a direct reflection of her own experiences as well as those of individuals within her social sphere. It is influenced by her relationship with her former tyrannical father, with whom she eventually reconciled .The novel employs a dual-narrative structure to explore the existential quest for identity and meaning. The narrative follows Najwa as she embarked on a personal odyssey to locate her father, and is threaded with excerpts from the diaries of her father, Omar Rahman, who abandoned the family for involvement in a jihadist movement. Their intertwined journeys reveal the complexities of familial bonds and the influence of ideology. The exploration began with the context of Najwa's father Omar, and her mother Raneen's conflicted marriage. Both pursuing academic careers at the time of Najwa's birth, their relationship strained under the pressure of parenthood. Omar's discomfort with his wife's assertiveness and dominance, coupled with the influence of a friend named Hani, led him to join a jihadist group in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, despite his own lack of strong religious convictions. This desertion left a profound impact on the family. Najwa's upbringing was devoid of a paternal figure and religious practices. Her mother's anger and disillusionment manifested in turning her household 'secular' and removing all religious symbols from the home, a rejection she attributed to religion that led to her husband's involvement with jihad.

Following her mother's death, societal expectations regarding the "loss of honor" associated with a woman living alone without a male presence compelled Najwa's grandmother to urge a quest to find her father Omar. Driven by determination, Najwa embarked on a journey to Afghanistan, piecing together her father's past. She encountered his second wife, Gulnar, who revealed Omar's heroism as a medic during the Afghan conflict. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to the later discovery of Omar's affiliation with a global jihadist organization upon his travel to England. This revelation complicated Najwa's understanding of her father's motivations and the multifaceted nature of his identity. The timeline of her father's story is eventually intersected with that of hers. She ultimately faces the question of whether her father can be redeemed and forgiven.

2. Statement of the Problem

In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Fadia Faqir addresses themes concerning cultural identity and religious observance. However, her portrayal falls under the category of self-Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses. The narrative perpetuates negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims by selectively portraying Islamic doctrines and emphasizing common depictions of Islam as a source of religious extremism and terrorism, while also deriding Islamic beliefs and teachings, presenting a distorted view of a complex faith. Additionally, the text broaches the subject of the Islamic veil, the hijab, through a lens that caters to Western viewpoints rather than offering a nuanced examination of its significance within Islamic culture and society.

3. Research Objectives

This study seeks to analyze Faqir's *Willow Tree Don't Weep* with the objective of elucidating the narrative's involvement in a self-Orientalist framework. It aims to unveil Faqir's Orientalist depiction of Islam and Muslims: selectively representing Islamic doctrines, accentuating prevalent portrayals of Islam as a catalyst for religious extremism and terrorism, disparaging Islamic beliefs and teachings, culminating in a skewed representation of the Islamic veil that

resonates with the preconceived notions held by Western audiences.

4. Previous Studies

There are many studies that discuss Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*. The most prominent study to address some Orientalist depictions is Ikram Elsherif's "Overshadowed by Neo-Orientalism: The Odyssey in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*." The study investigated and revealed the conflict between the neo-Orientalist portrayals of the characters and their inherent human complexity. The contention of the study was that the work, considering Faqir's preoccupation with the issues of patriarchy and gender, can be interpreted as reinforcing commonly held assumptions of Arab/Muslim suppression of females. Dallel Sarnou's "Re-thinking the Veil, Jihad and Home in Fadia Faqir's Willow Trees Don't Weep" presented another perspective that moved beyond the examination of orientalist representations within the work. The study instead centered on the author's negotiation of various themes, including secularism, fundamentalism, jihad, fathering, women, and wars. The primary objective of the article was to delve into the protagonist's reconsideration of the veil, notions of home, and the process of self-discovery as depicted within the novel. By adopting this alternative approach, Sarnou aimed to shed new light on the complexities and nuances of Faqir's narrative, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dimensions explored within the text.

5. The Significance of the Study

Because most of the studies on Faqir's writings are concerned with examining gender, societal and cultural themes, this study is distinguished by examining Faqir's work from a self-Orientalist viewpoint, which is a rarely literary theory adopted in analyzing Anglophone Arab fiction in general.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study limits its scope by dealing only with the self-Orientalist depiction of Islam and Muslims, highlighting the orientalist stereotypes ascribed to Islam and unveiling the author's attitude towards the veil. It is limited to Fadia Faqir's *Willow Tree Don't Weep*.

7. Definitions of Key Terms

Self-Orientalism: the representation of Arab, Asian, and North African cultures shaped through a Western lens by authors originating from within those same cultural contexts (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 1).

Neo-Orientalism: a term is employed to critically examine the auditory, visual, and literary outputs of Western discourse that attribute notions of terrorism, fanaticism, and extremism to Islam and Muslims. (Samiei, 2010, pp. 1145-1150).

8. Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes the concept of self-Orientalism as the theoretical framework. The concept is derived from Edward Said's critiques of Orientalism and the 'colonial discourse' that introduces the Orient as the Other. Orientalism constitutes an intrinsic framework through which the West not only constructs but also exerts control over the East, operating within a context of power relations characterized by dominance and various forms of cultural and political appropriation, through the use of misrepresentations in literature, art, visual media, film, and travel writing (Said, 1978, p. 3). Self-Orientalism, often referred to as 're-Orientalism,' stands in contrast to traditional Orientalism, as it is grounded in the distorted and contemptuous self-representation of Eastern cultures, which subsequently leads to the glorification and idealization of Western culture.

The representation of the self is just as susceptible to falsification, manipulation, distortion, and insincerity as any other kind of representation. The act of self-representation also involves an essential element of correcting misconceptions and, thus, a critique of colonial culture and its deeply entrenched representations. However, as Aamir Mufti points out, the critique of colonial culture is a two-way street: while it is meant to disrupt the way in which the West narrates its own history as well as the histories of its Others, it also serves as a caution against the possibility that Orientalist descriptions might take root within

the very societies they describe (Mufti, 2000, p. 100). The theory of self-Orientalism begins with the recognition that, in the 21st century, the East has gained significant control over representation. However, this representation is not impartial or unbiased, but rather, it is often distorted and influenced by Western-centric and postcolonial perspectives. Joanna Liddle and Shirin Raj assert that knowledge continues to be predominantly controlled by the West, despite the Eastern attempts at self-representation. They contend that those in positions of power possess a greater authority over knowledge production than those who are marginalized, thereby contributing to the formation of universalized perceptions that differentiate between the powerful and the powerless (Liddle & Raj, 1998, p. 497). Furthermore, Lisa Lau highlights that Eastern perspectives can mirror Western-centric viewpoints, as they often utilize the West as a reference point (2014, p. 4). This tendency in discourse may lead to an emphasis on narratives aimed at addressing Western audiences rather than concentrating exclusively on Eastern issues. Thus, the discourse surrounding self-Orientalism necessitates an exploration of how contemporary authors from the East reinforce Orientalist practices, along with the strategies they employ in this endeavor (ibid).

The portrayal of Orientals as "teeming, corrupt, disordered, immoral, the darker twin, the doppelganger of the enlightened" Westerners is a significant aspect of Orientalist discourse (Dwivedi, 2014, p. 96). This phenomenon is conceptualized as 'Reversed Othering' by Santos and Yan (2009, p. 309) or alternatively, self-othering, which constitutes a distinct variation of the Othering process. Such self-othering is frequently evident in the literary productions of Oriental novelists, who, in contrast to their Western counterparts, often engage in a distancing from their own cultural identities. This tendency ultimately leads to the marginalization and denigration of their own people and culture. The West continues to be regarded as the "Centre" in how these representations are framed and how the audience is anticipated (ibid). Therefore, the West retains its advantageous position as the "Centre." Self-Orientalism theory acknowledges that Eastern representations are, to a significant degree, filtered through Western lenses, within Western discourse frames, and through Western knowledge systems (Lau, 2014, p. 5).

Self-Orientalism encompasses the reinforcement of Western perceptions of Islam and the Islamic world following the events of September 11th (Tuastad, 2003, p. 592), including utilizing a "monolithic, totalizing, and binary logic" (Williams, 2015), as well as promoting moral and cultural superiority of the West over the Islamic world (ibid). The current discourse on self-Orientalism hones in on predominantly Muslim nations, particularly those situated in the Middle East and North Africa. Munawar Anees (2015) declares that it deals with the anti-Islamic literature of the current decade that presents the Islamic world in theological terms—as opposed to Orientalism, which is a way of portraying Muslims condescendingly. He adds that classical Orientalism had neither the means nor the wicked imagination to picture Islam as we observe it today at the hands of self-Orientalists (ibid). Rather than pursuing authentic and impartial representations that move beyond reductive stereotypes of Islam and Muslims to promote a more nuanced understanding, Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees don't Weep* appears to reinforce Orientalist stereotypes and discourses. She portrays Islam as a radical ideology and its followers as regressive and fanatical, often ridiculing specific Islamic beliefs and expressing a clear disdain for the Islamic veil.

9. Discussion

Distorted Representation of Islam

In the narrative, mosques, imams, Islamic scriptures, and certain Islamic tenets are portrayed as key contributors to the global spread of extremism and terrorism. During her journey, Najwa relied on mosques and imams in Jordan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to trace her missing father. Starting from Jordan, the only way for Najwa to find a starting point to search for her father was to go to the mosque and ask "the imam about [her] father's whereabouts, he might give [her] a clue or two"

(Faqir, 2014, p. 23). Indeed, she found a clue and a starting point for her search (39). Everywhere she arrived, she would start by inquiring at the mosque first. When she reached Pakistan, she received a message stating that "if [she] decide[d] to go to Afghanistan to look for [her] father, [she] must go […] straight to the al-Zahrani mosque and ask for Abu-Bakr [the imam]" (77). Najwa's reliance on the imams for information about her father's whereabouts, as well as her subsequent visits to mosques in Jordan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, where she received guidance on her search, suggests that these religious institutions are central to the propagation of extremist ideologies. Throughout her journey, mosques function as hubs for extremist activities, serving as conduits for information related to jihad and as recruitment centers for extremist groups (23, 39, 77, 80). The imams Najwa encountered, during her journey, are depicted as complicit in these activities, reinforcing the narrative that Islamic mosques are breeding grounds for terrorism and extremism. This portrayal aligns with prevalent Western perceptions of Islam and its institutions, contributing to a biased and distorted representation of the religion (Tuastad, 2003, p. 592).

The novel, from the perspective of Omar Rahman, adopts a satirical tone to depict the mosque as a place of tranquility, which he sarcastically described as "so peaceful in the mosque […] condition not conducive to radicalization" (Faqir, 2014, p. 191). However, the novel seeks to emphasize that the issue does not solely stem from the physical space of the mosque, but rather from the teachings of regressive Islam and the manipulative imams who transform young individuals "from enthusiasts into professional combatants" (190). The imams and sheikhs in the narrative are not depicted as the mentors and educators of the community, as they are supposed to be, but are instead portrayed as selfish, opportunistic extremists who exploited the naivety and trust of the youth to brainwash them and incite them to carry out extremist and terrorist acts. Omar Rahman elucidated the tactics employed by religious leaders to 'radicalize' these young individuals:

> I travelled north to meet one of the shabab, who would hook me up with a group of young Muslims ... I have called my course 'Get Even – Closer to Allah. You lure them away from their friends and family, prescribe extra praying, continual fasting, then abstinence. The bombers have to be 'cleanskins', totally unknown to the police. Out of the hardcore, who attended every prayer, I have chosen four. They have an innocence and naivety about them that you see only on the faces of those who think they can change the world. I befriended them, invited them to dinners of chicken and rice, cracked jokes with them about girls and sex, even watched films with them. Then I began to question their identities and made them feel guilty about their silence. They were accessories to the murders of fellow Muslims. I have also given them books to read and tapes to listen to. Now, slowly, they – yes, they are beginning to suggest a way out, a rebirth. (190-92)

Additionally, the novel demonstrates the so-called peril posed by imams through Najwa's mother's caution against entering the mosque due to her own negative experiences, expressing, "I lost my husband to religion, and I have no intention of offering my daughter on a plate to the nasty sheikhs" (23-24). In a moment of reflection, Omar Rahman acknowledged his own naivety and admitted, "How foolish of me. Young and trusting, we were duped, brainwashed and even exploited by the imams" (246). This portrayal closely aligns with prevailing stereotypes of Islam, Muslims, mosques, and imams perpetuated by neo-Orientalist discourses that label Islam and Muslims as inherently perilous.

Faqir's selective approach to Islam and its teachings is evident in the narrative. On the one hand, the novel seeks to circulate certain misconceived beliefs about Islam by portraying them as extremist, while on the other hand, it ridicules or sometimes imposes certain beliefs without proper context. The novel emphasizes the Islamic cultural environment as a fertile ground for terrorism, extremism, and the recruitment of extremists, attributing these phenomena to the connection between some Islamic teachings and these extremist views.

Through Omar Rahman's words, the novel suggests that certain teachings in the Quran advocate extremism and violence, leading Omar to question the peaceful nature of Islam, expressing, "why would a religion of peace have 'extreme' views? These commands are all written in the Qur'an. If it has such views, then it obviously is not a religion of peace" (191). Moreover, the novel presents a distorted and superficial portrayal of certain Islamic teachings and beliefs. For example, it mentions that "Muslim men and women were not supposed to eat in public [, as] they [would be] discredited and their testimony would not be accepted" (52). This portrayal aims to exhibit Islamic beliefs in a sensationalized manner, appealing to Western readers' exoticization of the religion and its perceived restriction of freedoms. Faqir's views about religion in general and Islam in particular are explicitly expressed through Najwa, who questioned why anyone would choose to embrace a restricted religion like Islam in a country that values freedoms and a life without constraints. She wondered, "Why would anyone convert to Islam? Why would anyone tie themselves in the knots of religion? Wear a veil! Pray five times a day! Fast during Ramadan! 'Why would you forsake your freedom?" (240). This line of questioning reflects Faqir's critical stance towards Islam and her skepticism towards individuals who choose to adhere to Islamic practices.

In addition to selectively highlighting certain beliefs that may be perceived as extreme from the novel's perspective, the novel also incorporates and imposes some Islamic beliefs out of context for the purpose of creating an exotic and mythical portrayal of Islam and Islamic culture. One instance of this can be observed in the satirical depiction of paradise and its houris during a nightclub scene, as seen through the perspective of young Omar Rahman. He compared the nightclub to "Muslim paradise, where damsels and houris reclined on sofas" (31). Another instance is reflected in highlighting a prevalent belief among Muslims that religion can be transmitted to one's children through specific religious rituals. This belief is described as the idea that "religion could be transferred from membrane to membrane by osmosis. If you recited the Qur'an throughout the day, chanted, praising prophet Muhammad, and invoked Allah in a loud voice, your children would one day absorb all your beliefs" (96). This belief further adds to the exoticism surrounding Islamic practices. The novel also employs mockery and ridicule towards certain teachings of Islam that oppose atheism, dismissing them as "nonsense" (45). Additionally, certain behaviors rooted in Islamic teachings, such as urging men to avert their gaze in the presence of strange women, are introduced in a satirical manner. For instance, Najwa described her encounter with a religious man who "lowered his gaze and counted his prayer beads." She stated, "Allah permitted the first glance, but the second look at a strange woman's face was a sin and the imam tried hard to abide... He raised his curled lashes and looked at me. A sinful second glance!" (38-40). These depictions serve to mock the religious and their adherence to what is perceived as outdated or restrictive practices. Through these exotic and satirical depictions of Islam, the novel seeks to assert, from Najwa's lens, that the "religious people are backward. They believe in magic rather than scientific facts" (244), and to dismiss, from Omar Abdul Rahman's perspective, the notion of Islam addressing contemporary issues. This is evident in his mockery of his father's suggestion that he could find solutions to his problems in the Quran, as he sarcastically remarked, "I almost burst into laughter. Personal problems: an uptight, frigid wife; economic problems: prospect of no job after graduation; political problems: the sultan ruling supreme. He must be joking" (81).

This novel has fallen into the trap of self-Orientalist discourse by allowing the notion of radical Islam to circulate as well as through promoting distorted and sensationalized views about Islam and Islamic culture. Through selective portrayal of Islamic teachings, emphasis on extremist elements, and ridicule for religious practices, the narrative reinforces negative stereotypes thereby undermining the peaceful foundation that the religion is built on. This approach is not only a misrepresentation of Islam but also does not offer a nuanced

explanation regarding the complex factors that lead to extremism and terrorism.

Othering the Veil and the Veiled Women

The theme of the veil is prominently featured throughout the novel, particularly from the perspective of Najwa. The novel engages with the issue of the veil within Islamic culture, explicitly expressing Faqir's opinion on the issue of the veil and veiled women from Najwa's perspective, openly criticizing it and not hiding her attack, disgust, and discomfort with wearing it, which strongly hints at the author's non-acceptance of the idea of the veil as a tradition and personal freedom, but rather as a restriction on personal freedom and a burden on women.

Najwa's reaction and attitude towards the veil is the most relevant aspect to Faqir's self-Orientalist discourse. In contrast to numerous Arab anglophone writers who advocate for and romanticize the veil as a representation of religious heritage in diaspora (Djafri, 2021, p. 104), Najwa's portrayal challenges this narrative. Positioned by Faqir as an Arab woman who strongly opposed and condemned the veil, Najwa consistently diminished its value and viewed it as a constraint and a burden on women. Through her critical questioning, such as "How do veiled women function under those? Honestly! And the heat is overbearing," (Faqir, 2014, p. 27) and her vivid description of the physical challenges she faced in wearing it, such as "My grandmother yashmak, which I wore to disguise myself, kept slipping back and I pulled it down over my hairline. My scalp was damp and sticky under the layers of cloth. I never wore a veil and was not used to its tightness under my chin" (21-22), Najwa's perspective serves as a direct critique of the veil's societal implications and its impact on individual autonomy.

When flirted by a man while wearing the veil inside a car, Najwa expressed her perspective regarding the veil's purported association with notions of virtue and purity. She remarked, "He thought I was a prostitute in disguise [because] some wore the Islamic dress to hide their identity" (26). Her incisive commentary on the man's assumption that her veiled appearance signified a lack of virtue showcases her beliefs on the disconnection between the veil and moral integrity and virtue, positing it as a mere piece of cloth placed on the head that is devoid of inherent virtue. By highlighting how even women engaged in prostitution adopted the veil as a tool for concealing their identities within a conservative society, Faqir challenges prevailing perceptions regarding the veil and debunking its purported correlation with virtue, and confirms that the veil brings only suffering to women.

The novel refers to the growing prevalence of women wearing niqab and hijab In England and other Western countries in general. Najwa expressed her disdain for this trend by sarcastically commenting that "the army of Allah has invaded Great Britain" (185). Witnessing a group of veiled women entering a café, she reflected on the supposed secular nature of the country and her mother's likely disapproval of the situation (ibid). Najwa's reaction was one of disgust and disapproval, as she questioned the reasons behind these women's presence in a country she perceived as a symbol of freedom and secularism.

On the one hand, this disdain and rejection of the veil could be interpreted as a product of her secular upbringing and the deep-seated set of stereotypes and biases that had been internalized in her over time. However, on the other hand, a more ideological resistance towards the veil can be perceived and noted in a way that simply reflects the author's personal perspectives and beliefs. Faqir herself refused to don the hijab and adhere to certain religious beliefs enforced by her father because she considers them as restrictions on her personal autonomy and freedom (Moore, 2011, p. 1).

While on her way to London on the plane, Najwa "took off [her] veil, folded it up and put it in [her] duffel bag" (Faqir, 2014, p. 165). This action is portrayed as one that would make her mother proud, prompting Najwa to contemplate whether her father, regardless of his unknown whereabouts, would share the same sentiment. Therefore, it seems that Faqir employs Najwa as a vehicle to articulate what she believes is the sense of constriction and confinement experienced by numerous Arab women, who often find themselves restricted in their ability

to shape and assert agency over their own destinies.

In conclusion, Faqir's portrayal of the veil dismantles romanticized notions of the veil and challenges its association with religious devotion and female virtue. Through Najwa's discomfort, frustration, and eventual rejection of the veil, the novel demonstrates its role as a potential constraint on women's freedom and autonomy. Whether a personal reflection of Faqir's beliefs or a broader commentary on women's experiences, Najwa's experiences with the veil do not urge readers to critically examine the complex and multifaceted issue of the veil within Islamic culture, but rather cater to Western readers by reinforcing the perception of the veil as an oppressive tool.

10. Conclusion

Faqir, originating from a Muslim familial background, has not sought to contest the prevailing stereotypes associated with Islam, particularly in the aftermath of the literary trends that emerged following the events of September 11. Instead, her work, *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, reinforces these stereotypes, presenting a reductive depiction of Islam as a faith lacking in tolerance and peace, and as a fertile ground for extremism, terrorism, and exploitation. Within this narrative, Muslims are characterized as backward and fanatical, prioritizing superstition over scientific reasoning. The portrayal of the Imam emerges as one of exploitation, manipulating the innocence of youth for personal gain. Furthermore, the veil is depicted not only as a burden imposed upon women but also as an instrument of oppression wielded by male family members. Even veiled women are rendered as "the other," described with disdain. This narrative aligns closely with both classical and neo-Orientalist discourses surrounding Islam and Muslims. Consequently, despite being an Arab novelist, Faqir engages in self-Orientalism, perpetuating the very stereotypes she should have aimed to challenge.

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