

Revising Trauma Theory: Trauma as Identity Construction and the Discontented Self in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007)

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ABSTRACT

This essay will examine the concept of traumatic identity in *My Name is Salma*, exploring theories of traumatic identity and their relationship to the self in Arab Literature, the social context of the text and its historical resonance, and representation and identity via the female traumatic experience. The analysis will seek to reflect upon the impact and convergence of feminism, trauma and post colonialism within issues like the construction of the self, belonging, and the juxtaposition of homeland and exile. This essay argues, in part, that Arab women writers embrace trauma in their texts, while simultaneously critiquing the effects of trauma on the construction of personal identity. In particular, the work of Jordanian author, Fadia Faqir, in her novel, *My Name is Salma* (2007), provides a first-person narrative of the narrator and protagonist, Salma, who defines her personal identity as constructed from trauma, yet who is unable to process, mediate, or overcome her traumatic past. As she nevertheless attempts to construct a coherent narrative of self, the character of Salma allows readers insights into her thoughts, actions, and the way she views herself. This essay asserts further that the types of trauma that inform Salma's narrative of self also speak to the experiences of many women in Arab states, such as the social stigmatization of so-called illegitimate birth, the violence of honour killing, racial abuse, Othering, and the dire circumstances and suffering inherent in life as a refugee.

Key words: Identity, Trauma, Arabic Novel, Homeland and Exile

INTRODUCTION

In his article "Trauma and Literary Theory," literary critic, James Berger, notes the relationships between trauma and literary theory, stating that psychoanalytic theories of trauma have influenced several disciplines, including historiography and contemporary culture (1997; 569). His assertion concerning the importance of trauma theory has been echoed in the work of Cathy Caruth, in which she argues there is an important need to explore "the impact of the experience ... of trauma... on other aspects of culture, such as literature and pedagogy. [because] trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience" ("Introduction," 4). Both Berger and Caruth's underscoring of the importance of the widespread influence of trauma on personal experience suggest that there is a significant link between trauma and the construction of identity, and that trauma can even be a seminal factor in the process of identity formation. In terms of personal trauma, there is a growing interest in Arab literature, in particular the works of Arab women writers who draw upon their own experiences of trauma, while straddling the boundaries between feminism and postcolonialism (Amireh & Hassan 413). This essay argues, in part, that these Arab women writers embrace trauma in their texts,

while simultaneously critiquing the effects of trauma on the construction of personal identity. In particular, the work of Jordanian author, Fadia Faqir, in her novel, *My Name is Salma* (2007), provides a first-person narrative of the narrator and protagonist, Salma, who defines her personal identity as constructed from trauma, yet who is unable to process, mediate, or overcome her traumatic past. As she nevertheless attempts to construct a coherent narrative of self, the character of Salma allows readers insights into her thoughts, actions, and the way she views herself. This essay asserts further that the types of trauma that inform Salma's narrative of self also speak to the experiences of many women in Arab states, such as the social stigmatization of so-called illegitimate birth, the violence of honour killing, racial abuse, Othering, and the dire circumstances and suffering inherent in life as a refugee.

This essay analyses the construction of traumatic identity as presented in Faqir's novel, *My Name is Salma*, while critiquing Western theories of trauma from the perspective of Arab women writing Arab literature. Since personal experiences of trauma also occur within social and historical contexts, these are also taken into consideration. Rather than provide a comprehensive textual analysis of Faqir's novel as read through existing theories of trauma, the purpose of

this critical analysis is instead to examine the intersections of feminism, trauma theory, and postcolonialism as presented the novel in terms of how these contribute to identity construction and a sense of belonging for Arab women, as well as the fraught relationships between the memory of homeland and the sense of loss embedded within the experience of exile. The aim with this approach is to propose a newer theory of trauma and identity construction in the work of Arab women writers, by revealing a more nuanced theory of traumatic identity as one that necessarily embraces the discontented self. This revision of existing trauma theory thus provides a method for tracing trauma in Arab literature in ways that reveal how trauma shapes a sense of personal identity for many Arab women.

ARAB LITERATURE AND THEORIES OF TRAUMATIC IDENTITY

In the context of Arab literature, one of the major criticisms that has been levelled at Caruth's theories of trauma has been the absence of cross-cultural engagement, primarily because her work concerns traumatic experiences within a Euro-American context (Craps & Buelens 2). Because Caruth's trauma theories focus solely on white Westerners, thereby perpetuating Eurocentric views, her theories necessarily exclude minorities, such as Arab women, who have endured trauma in their own homelands under patriarchal rule and cultures, and who have therefore previously had no voice. However, Craps and Buelens importantly note Caruth's assertion that history is composed of events and incidents that implicate people in each other's trauma (*Unlimited*, 24), suggesting that the experience of trauma is both broadly and profoundly human, while positioning human action or inaction at the very heart of traumatic experience. While it can be argued that this may be a valid theory of how traumatic identity may be engendered, Craps and Buelens further note that this shared experience renders colonialism as a source of an historical traumatic experience; however, current theories of trauma only provide a means of mediating one side of that trauma (2). Their view is also shared by Irene Visser, who asserts that attempting to reconcile trauma theory with postcolonialism is problematic because, in its current form, certain voices are excluded from trauma theory. In addition, melancholia is viewed an appropriate and responsible response to narratives of trauma (270). Such limitations of current trauma theory are key to understanding why theories concerning traumatic experience must be interrogated and revised from non-Western perspectives.

In this re-examination of Western trauma theory, Arab literature is uniquely positioned to reveal the kinds of complex, discontented identities that emerge from trauma. For example, the short fiction that has become synonymous with Gaza arose from Palestinian authors seeking to tell their stories of the experience of inhabiting a territory that has been oppressed, censored, and repeatedly traumatised by its Israeli neighbours (Qarmout & Shawish 1). For such reasons, the literature written by oppressed Arab authors is necessarily difficult to reconcile with current trauma theory, thus drawing into question the dynamics of power between those who

can speak and those who choose to silence others. The depiction of traumatic identity in the case of Palestinian short fiction is, of course, not as extensive as in full length novels such as *My Name is Salma*; however, it is nevertheless potent. In regard to Arab women's literature, Lindsey Moore points out that their explorations of trauma and identity are intrinsic to their work published over the past thirty years. Representations of Arab women within Arab women's writing are highly complex, often focusing on the excessive demands that are placed on the female body and psyche, with the accompanying societal shaping of these through the hostility of man (*Arab, Muslim, Woman*, 54). Such complex narratives of trauma do not allow for easy exploration and analysis, which may also explain why current trauma theory does not sit easily with Arab women's writing. However, it is still possible to read Arab women's voices as feminist, especially wherever patriarchal oppression is still at work.

Trauma, as Caruth asserts, is by its very nature, an unsettling force that compels individuals to rethink their experiences ("Introduction," 4). Her insight works very well when analysing literature because texts often provide a forum through which authors can mediate the past, while reconciling it with the present. This ability to do so is particularly important in Faqir's *My Name is Salma* because the protagonist is forced to confront her traumatic experiences in her homeland, while attempting to reconcile the consequent disconnection she feels from it. The lack of mastery she exhibits over her painful memories are indicative of a traumatic experience that is expressed through literary techniques such as flashback as a psychological means of exploring the trauma. For example, in a flashback, Salma recalls her father's reaction to her pregnancy and the traumatic screams of those girls around her giving birth, directly before finding herself back in a cafe eating lunch (Faqir 110). This rapid switching between physical and temporal locations demonstrate a psychological link to her past, characterized by an inability to move beyond the pain. Salma's flashbacks thus provide a means of accessing a traumatic identity through narrative representations of the past, albeit highly subjective representations that are filtered through her conscious mind via her unconscious, repressed self. As has been extensively discussed in trauma theory, the complexity of memory in the discourse of trauma is problematic because memory may be both distorted and inaccurate (Whitehead 30); however, the accuracy or inaccuracy of memory neither detracts from Salma's pain nor does it belie her attempts to form an identity within her personal temporal and spatial context. Instead, it only renders the process more problematic.

THE TEXT AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Having established the importance of trauma in Arab literature, *My Name is Salma*, must also be considered within its social context. Faqir is a Jordanian-British author who has published several novels that explore the traumatic experiences of women and their experiences of subjugation in the Arab world, as well as their attempts to rebuild their lives after oppression. Her novels also fit within the body of literature that was published after 9/11, in which hybrid identities

and liminal self-invention are mediated to negotiate external difference, whilst assessing the impact of otherness on the individual psyche (Ancellin n. pag.). This focus positions Faqir's work within a very specific context that is necessarily situated as trauma that is viewed through a temporal and spatial context, wherein Arab women are denied a voice, while they nevertheless seek to challenge the dominant narratives. Through the representation of women's voices and their experiences, Faqir's novel enters that discourse, thus creating a space in which a traumatized Arab woman is able both to explore and mediate her identity.

Faqir's novel is therefore necessarily gendered, incorporating a female narratorial voice through which to project Salma's subjective realities, many of which mirror the author's. For instance, Moore discusses an interview in which Faqir speaks of her own traumatic experience where her son was taken away because her father pulled her out of a disastrous marriage ("Interview," 2). Faqir asserted that "I felt such a failure; I was riddled with guilt. I started writing because it was the only way out of this ... verging on the edge of madness" (2). This personal, internalized sense of failure is certainly visible within the character, Salma, particularly in her nuanced thoughts that are projected through her narration. Notably, her trauma manifests through her rejection of the projections of others, such as sympathy, concern, or care in any direct or indirect form. For instance, when the character, John, asks her whether she is okay after a confrontation with Jim, this causes Salma to run, feeling that human kindness would "melt" her defences (Faqir 236), which she finds problematic, as this would then project her internal torment. Similarly, her refusal to articulate her identity, as well as her dropping of her white veil, show her relinquishing her sense of self to survive, even if guilt causes her pain: "It felt as if my head was covered with raw sores, and I had taken off the bandages. I felt dirty as a whore... a sinner who would never see paradise and drink from its rivers of milk and honey" (Faqir 114). In this regard, Nayera Miniawi expresses that Salma's Muslim sensibility is pervasive throughout the novel; however, it is also the source of her trauma, thus rendering Salma's trauma far more complex than simply situating it within only an event ("Cross-Cultural," 62).

In her interview with Moore, Faqir also expresses Arab women are more oppressed when the Arab Muslim male feels under attack because of the imposition of external pressure on the Middle East, importantly noting that the gains made by Arab feminists in the late-twentieth century were lost following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (4; Ball 92). This perspective is, of course, positioned within the postcolonial context, serving as an explicit comment on the perception of external threat and its relationship with domestic control. This is further acknowledged by David Lloyd, who recognizes the need to avoid imposing blanket conceptions of trauma on disparate cultural frameworks: "In the case of colonialism, I argue, the relation to the past is strictly not a relation to one's own past but to a social history and its material and institutional effects and is in no simple way a matter of internal psychic dynamics" (212). He further asserts that a narrative of survival is more appropriate than a therapeutic relation to

the past (212–213), thus drawing attention to a need to work through trauma in a structured historical and social manner to be able to offer critical viewpoints on how the theoretical positions brought about by psychoanalysis may translate into both subjective realities and lived experience.

Such temporality and spatial context is seminal within Faqir's novel, serving to frame Salma's perception of events and the ongoing impact of trauma. She is thus culture bound within temporal and spatial limitations that link directly to the colonial, and therefore also the postcolonial, because her experience of trauma is importantly *not* defined within a Western context (Craps & Buelens 3). Indeed, the spatial constraints imposed upon her do not recognize her trauma and the way in which it is internalized as a result of the external persecution she faces both in her homeland and from those who mark her as Other within her adopted land. This is evidenced quite early in the text via her flippant recognition of persecution based on racism: "Apparently in England the police stop you in the street and check your papers and sense of belonging regularly. An immigration officer might decide to use my ability to digest first as a test for my loyalty to the Queen" (Faqir 9). The flippant nature of this comment belies the duality of discrimination and absurdity, both of which condition Salma's ongoing traumatic experience.

The text's social context is further firmly grounded within the concept of honour killing, a practice that is strongly associated with the Arab world and lends complexity to the moral and social fabric of Arab life, particularly where the production and reproduction of gender roles are concerned (Abu Odeh 911). This is indicative of the Islamification of culture and its transformative impact (911–912), but it also reveals the kind of growth inherent within the traumatic experience in a non-Western context. For example, Salma's recollection of the threat to her life posed by her father provides a vivid insight into the victimization of women who challenge patriarchal norms and ideals:

I held the railing of the bridge and looked up again in time to see a dark figure lurking among the trees, wounded, his honour compromised, his eyes emitting sparks of hatred. his rifle aimed at me ready to fire. I took a deep breath, put my bag on the ground between my legs, held the iron rails tight and opened up my chest, ready to be killed. (Faqir 205)

This sense of an always imminent victimization is embedded within her walk to work, thus pressing a flashback into her daily lived reality, while drawing attention to the impact that it has on her sense of self. It is no wonder that Salma is traumatised by this event; however, contextually, it also lends her an individual experience that is unique, while enabling her to construct another reality that does not idealise her identity, as she constructs a sense of self-pity that undermines her status as a survivor (Valassopoulos 74). This sense of Arab women *surviving, yet not being survivors*, is a common theme in Arab women's literature, and for this reason, it should also become an essential part of postcolonial feminist trauma theory.

The continued victimization Salma feels is repeated in another of Salma's flashbacks that returns her to the time

she spent with Minister Mahoney, noting that she was never made to feel “foreign”; however, her cultural naivety, which is bound up in her constant need to translate language and behaviours using reference books, is used by Faqir to amplify her predicament: “She should be given the right of political, social or religious asylum—whatever you want to call it. hundreds, nay thousands of women are killed every year. You must give her shelter because if you send her back, she will be shot on sight” (Faqir 161). The violent consequences for Salma becoming pregnant and having a baby outside of marriage, from the perspective of Arab patriarchy, remain a constant physical threat on her life; however, the fact that this is positioned within the mundane, or specifically, between the jobs that she worked to survive financially, draws attention to the threat’s presence at the very forefront of her consciousness. Salma survives despite this because this constant threat of being killed is an intrinsic part of her experience and her ongoing trauma. Trauma thus defines her and is further delineated by her conflicted sense of belonging in her adopted land that relies upon a disconnect with her homeland. The latter is inextricably bound to her trauma, which Faqir represents as fundamentally damaging to a coherent sense of self.

In terms of trauma, the concept of latency is also important here. Analysing the work performed by Freud on trauma, Berger argues that “[E]specially valuable in this work is his elaboration of the concept of ‘latency,’ of how memory of a traumatic event can be lost over time but then regained in a symptomatic form when triggered by some similar event” (570). Indeed, such latency is immediately visible in *My Name is Salma* through the non-linear nature of the narrative, or the constant interruption of the story by memories and the disorientation that Salma feels as a result, which is mirrored in the difficulty for readers when trying to follow her narration. Miniawi convincingly asserts that this is a key element of Salma’s cross-cultural journey and the reconciliation of her past and present accidental identities (“Crisis,” 38), which manifests within the absence of control she experiences over her body, herself, and her destiny:

The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist not in forgetting of a reality than can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of trauma is not just the experience repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another *place, and in another time.* (Caruth 8)

Here, Caruth’s trauma theory is vitally important because it outlines the process associated with latency as well as the factors that impinge upon it, drawing attention specifically to the temporal and spatial nature of experience, which belies trauma’s lasting impact on the psychological well-being of the individual. In effect, traumatic memory and identity are not bounded by place and time, but rather can be recalled

or prompted, thus bringing the latent experience to the fore, forcing Salma to relive it. This is evident within the flashback about the moment she saw her father aiming his rifle at her. This latent memory is quick to rise in her thoughts without any significant provocation, demonstrating how deeply ingrained the experience is. It is also ironic that the recollection of the memory is positioned directly before Salma’s visit to a library where she goes to explore feminist theory. The use of irony here is quite deliberate on Faqir’s part, of course, highlighting how closely bound by her traumatic past Salma is, whilst nevertheless trying to identify a means of empowering herself within a culture that she neither understands nor feels fully able to embrace.

REPRESENTATION, POSSESSION, AND IDENTITY

The concept of latency has been identified as important within Caruth’s theory of trauma. Such latency, I have argued, manifests within Faqir’s novel; however, it is notable that Salma’s traumatic behaviour can also be read through the concept of possession, which is based on the notion by Caruth that a traumatic event

is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted simply as a distortion of reality, nor as the leading of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once wished. (“Introduction,” 4–5)

The notion of possession is grounded in experience but held within an image or event, in contrast to the survival of the crisis or the history, neither of which may be possessed and are therefore not tangible. Therefore, possession manifests within trauma instead. Indeed, possession is grounded within colonialism; therefore, it also provokes a sense of loss within the postcolonial. In this sense, possession engages with the communal emotion of melancholia and structural inequalities it is necessarily bound to (Adam 3–4). Again, this taps into temporal and spatial parameters, thus necessitating the formation of a sense of belonging, of a history that is bound within the photographs that Salma continually finds when entering the spaces of other people. A photographic record is of vital importance in offering stability, with possession forming a way to understand trauma. However, in *My Name is Salma*, possession moves beyond material possessions, by also embracing events and language.

In *My Name is Salma*, the language that Faqir uses is often bound up with mythology and legend; therefore, this characterizes Salma’s narration as a closed narrative that is intrinsically bound up with the individual thought process as much as the process of remembering and forgetting, as Caruth has argued (*Unclaimed* 37). Through language, Salma is able to take ownership of her story and her trauma, albeit gradually and over an extended period of time, thus reconciling her identity with an abject sense of disconnection without belonging. For instance, she comments on the nostalgia of an idealised past, in which women sit and watch

their men playing cricket, as the women rest with parasols under the blazing sun, with the beauty of her homeland manifesting in the grandness of the Sheikh Mountain and the majesty of the Saharan desert (Faqir 14). Such wistful recollections are evident from the very start of the novel and provide a tool through which to emphasise the starkness of the violence and trauma Salma experienced first-hand. This is, as Caruth argues, a manifestation of life and death, highlighting the difference between these through the process of knowing (*Unclaimed*, 37). Although this does not provide a good fit for Salma's traumatic experience and the resultant traumatic identity she forms and eventually embraces, it nevertheless demonstrates a sense of possession of events and memories that are unique to her.

Salma's traumatic experience is also represented in terms of the relationship that she has with her body, and especially how that develops over time. She manages to put away her identity by putting away her Arab garb, while nevertheless symbolically connecting with her homeland, drawing attention to the parallel between her past and material culture: "My black Bedouin *madraqa*, embroidered with threads so colourful they would make your eyes water, was tucked away, like my past, in the suitcase on top of the wardrobe" (Faqir 14). Of course, Salma's body ultimately links her to her daughter, again drawing Salma back to her homeland where she is shot and killed as a stop to her narrative, thus bringing the honour killing full circle. Since Salma is bodily linked to her daughter, she is also linked to her homeland, with the ending of her narrative providing a metaphor for the harsh impact of trauma and the experiences and identities formed from it.

The novel thus ends without any clear resolution for Salma's discontented self; however, it nevertheless importantly demonstrates a means of not only surviving, but also overcoming, a condition which current trauma theory does not yet provide for in conjunction with postcolonialism. This condition speaks to Norman Ninkro's reading of Caruth as claiming primacy for historical reference, which arises from "belated scenes in which trauma lingers, endures, persists as both a demand for narrative association and the impossibility of any adequate form of representation and historical closure" (3). As this essay has argued, Salma's trauma lingers, thus moulding her identity as a discontented self in conjunction with her experience. As such, there is evidence that Caruth's trauma theory may be extended from the colonial to the postcolonial as well as to feminist views that articulate the specific trauma of Arab women and its effects.

CONCLUSION

This essay has explored the relationship between trauma and identity formation through the representation of traumatic identity in Fadia Faqir's novel, *My Name is Salma*. In doing so, I have revealed how trauma theory can be applied to literature differently, in ways that offer a multifaceted means of re-assessing the construction of the discontented self within Arab literature written by women. Marking a point of convergence between postcolonialism and feminism, this approach further reveals Faqir's attempt to mediate the experiences and identities of women who experienced traumatic

past events. The experiences that Salma recounts are especially relevant because they are firmly grounded within the realities of life for many Arab woman and therefore must be further confronted within specific cultural contexts that reflect upon social and historical contexts. Significantly, Salma's trauma is represented by Faqir as a potent force in her character's life and construction of self, repeatedly inducing a sense of otherness and isolation as the past continues to impinge upon the present.

Caruth's theories of latency and possession are particularly important within the context of Arab literature because they reveal an understanding of Salma's traumatic behaviour as well as serve to form a connection between the character and readers. However, the broad exclusion of marginalised voices via the Eurocentric approach in Caruth's trauma theory speaks to the necessity of this essay extending her theories in ways that the temporal and spatial elements that are imposed on the character of Salma are shown to exacerbate the impact of trauma. This is to demonstrate why the trauma continually manifests within the juxtaposition of self and other as well as the novel's constant construction and reconstruction of Salma's identity. In doing so, Salma approaches her sense of inferiority, thoughts, and actions in a way that overtly expresses a nuanced traumatic identity and discontented self, thus showing her tracing her own trauma in an effort to shape her own identity. Indeed, such tracing and mediating trauma is a crucial way of shaping and reshaping an identity to facilitate an understanding of the way in which the experience of trauma impinges on the self and its associated identity, as well as a practice frequently evidenced in literature. In this manner, this essay's critical move of extending Caruth's trauma theories in new directions effectively revises postcolonial trauma theory in ways that both reveals its strengths and limitations, in terms of Arab women's writing, and that further captures the modern traumatic experiences of Arab women and their correspondent literary representations of the discontented self.

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