

Guardianship, Silence, and Female Agency in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the intersection of culture, guardianship, and modesty in Fadia Faqir's novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, focusing on how patriarchal values and religious-cultural norms shape female subjectivity in Jordanian society. Through the lens of Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminist theory, the study analyzes how silence operates not merely as suppression but as a nuanced form of resistance and self-realization for the protagonist, Najwa. Her silence; shaped by the societal expectation of male guardianship, reflects both internalized oppression and the beginnings of personal agency. The symbolic resonance of Najwa's name and the recurring motif of the willow tree reveal deeper psychological and cultural conflicts within her quest for identity and belonging. The willow tree functions as a metaphor for resilience and silent endurance, positioning nature as an intimate companion to Najwa's inner transformation. Ultimately, the novel positions silence not as absence, but as a complex, resistant language shaped by cultural repression, emotional trauma, and spiritual awakening.

Keywords: Culture, Guardianship, Modesty, Silence, Thoughts, Voice.

Introduction

In many Arab societies, particularly in Jordan, the lives and identities of women are shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal norms and patrilineal structures that regulate female autonomy, voice, and social legitimacy. Within such frameworks, modesty and guardianship become central tools of control, where a woman's worth is often measured by her relationship to male authority figures. This paper examines these dynamics through *Willow Trees Don't Weep* by Fadia Faqir, a Jordanian-British novelist known for her engagement with human rights and Third World women's issues. The novel centers on Najwa, a young girl from Amman, whose father abandons the family for religious extremism and whose mother later dies, leaving Najwa to be raised by her conservative grandmother.

Najwa's journey unfolds within a complex cultural landscape where religious doctrine, nationalist ideologies, and familial expectations intersect to shape female identity. Her struggle with silence

and passivity reflects a process of internalized patriarchy, wherein modesty and submission are idealized feminine traits. Though raised in a secular home, Najwa is consistently reminded of the religious and cultural necessity of male guardianship by her grandmother. Her quest to locate her estranged father becomes a symbolic search for identity and belonging, entangling her further in the socio-religious constructs that limit her agency. This paper argues that Najwa's silence, often perceived as weakness, is in fact a nuanced response to systemic oppression, shaped by historical, cultural, and religious narratives. Drawing on Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminist theory, the study investigates how silence operates not only as a survival strategy but also as a form of introspection, negotiation, and subtle resistance. In doing so, it highlights how Faqir's narrative critiques dominant gender ideologies and reimagines female agency within restrictive cultural and theological frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a hybrid theoretical framework that draws from Islamic feminism, postcolonial feminism, and Saba Mahmood's notion of agency within piety movements. These perspectives are particularly effective in interpreting the cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions of Najwa's silence and her search for identity in *Willow Trees Don't Weep*.

Islamic feminism provides a critical foundation for understanding how patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrine often distort the original egalitarian principles of Islam. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi have argued that many restrictive practices attributed to Islam are, in fact, culturally constructed and politically enforced to maintain male dominance. As Leila Ahmed (1992) points out, the Qur'anic vision of gender is fundamentally egalitarian, but sociopolitical developments over time led to the institutionalization of hierarchical gender roles. In this context, Najwa's internalization of the need for male guardianship is not a reflection of religious truth, but of culturally sanctioned patriarchal norms disguised as divine law.

Postcolonial feminist theory further expands the scope of analysis by addressing how colonial and nationalist discourses have historically positioned women as symbols of cultural identity and moral purity. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Mounira Charrad highlight how women in postcolonial societies are often caught between competing expectations: to embody national honor while conforming to traditional gender norms. Najwa's silence and marginalization can thus be read as the outcome of intersecting forces; colonial legacy, state patriarchy, and religious nationalism, all of which shape her role as a silent bearer of cultural authenticity.

The framework also incorporates Saba Mahmood's (2005) intervention in feminist theory, particularly her challenge to liberal understandings of agency. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood argues that agency does not always manifest through overt resistance; instead, it may emerge through embodied practices like modesty, silence, or religious devotion, which are often misunderstood

by Western feminist paradigms as signs of submission. Najwa's silence, when examined through this lens, becomes an act of critical consciousness and introspection; a strategic, negotiated space of survival within a structure that offers her limited avenues for dissent.

Additionally, the study considers negofeminism, as conceptualized by Obioma Nnaemeka, which emphasizes negotiation and compromise over confrontation. This perspective is particularly apt for interpreting Najwa's subtle forms of resistance, such as her respectful behavior in the face of injustice and her quiet search for truth. Rather than overt rebellion, Najwa embodies a form of strategic endurance that challenges dominant power structures from within. Together, these intersecting frameworks enable a nuanced reading of *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, positioning silence not as passivity, but as a dynamic and context-dependent mode of resistance. The analysis thus moves beyond simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation, instead exploring how women navigate and reshape the socio-religious systems that define their lives.

Understanding Guardianship and Modesty in the Jordanian Context

In the socio-religious landscape of Jordan, the concepts of guardianship (*wilaya*) and modesty are crucial to understanding female identity and autonomy. Guardianship refers to the legal and cultural system that grants male relatives; typically fathers or brothers, the authority to act on behalf of women in major life decisions. As Jabiri (n.d.) explains, *wilaya* is understood in classical Islamic jurisprudence as a form of legal authority exercised by a qualified individual over another who is deemed incapable of managing their own affairs. What makes this form of authority particularly problematic is that it is exercised without requiring the consent of the woman, thereby reinforcing a systemic imbalance in agency and autonomy (p. 3). This system is based on classical Islamic jurisprudence, but in practice, it has often been manipulated to limit women's rights.

Modesty, while a spiritual and ethical concept in Islam, is culturally reinterpreted in patriarchal

societies to promote female silence, submission, and invisibility. Rather than being an internal moral discipline, modesty becomes an external performance of deference and passivity. In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, these constructs frame Najwa's struggle with identity, voice, and agency.

Najwa's prolonged silence throughout the novel reflects her internalization of guardianship-based expectations. Abandoned by her father and raised by a grandmother who upholds traditional beliefs, Najwa is caught in a psychological and emotional limbo. Her muteness is not merely a personal trait but a conditioned response to the absence of a male guardian; an absence that renders her socially incomplete. Through the idea of *wilaya*, Najwa idealizes feminine silence. She yearns to speak, yet remains silent; not due to fear alone, but because her voice has been culturally devalued. As Mahmood (2005) writes, "what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view may actually be a form of agency, but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (pp. 21–22). Najwa's quietness thus becomes a culturally legible form of femininity, reinforcing the gendered social contract.

Najwa's silence is also shaped by broader historical and political forces. In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, the postcolonial state instrumentalizes women as bearers of national honor and cultural authenticity. As Mounira M. Charrad (2011) observes, "Middle Eastern states are heirs to several legacies, including colonialism, nationalism, independence... all of which have left their imprint on the relationship between state and gender... 'Our culture is different from yours' often translates into 'Our women are different from yours'" (p. 422). Within this framework, Najwa's responsibility is not just to find her father but to restore the social legitimacy of her family. Her personal identity is not seen as independent but as an extension of male authority. This paradox reveals how patriarchy displaces accountability; turning female identity into a lifelong pursuit of male validation.

Religious Doctrine Versus Cultural Patriarchy

Najwa's quest to locate her father is shaped by cultural mandates disguised as religious imperatives. From an Islamic feminist perspective, this illustrates how patriarchal structures manipulate religion to reinforce male dominance. Rather than a genuine religious necessity, Najwa's reliance on her father represents a social imposition of male supremacy. Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that "the ethical vision of Islam, as reflected in the Qur'an, consistently upholds the spiritual and moral equality of men and women... [and] affirms their shared responsibilities and equal capacity for virtue and reward" (pp. 63–64). However, later patriarchal interpretations codified unequal power structures, especially within marriage and family law. Najwa's silence and search for recognition thus become acts shaped by these distortions. Even her journey toward self-awareness takes a masculine trajectory; requiring the retrieval of a father figure to legitimize her identity. Her silence becomes both a symbolic protest and a survival mechanism. It is not merely a passive state but a conscious navigation through power structures that do not permit women to speak freely.

Najwa's psychological conflict is rooted in contradictory teachings from her secular mother and traditional grandmother. Her confusion begins in childhood, as seen when she fails to understand terms like "secular" or the phrase "Soar Solo" which her teacher uses to humiliate her. This intellectual and emotional gap mirrors her internal conflict between the desire for freedom and the culturally imposed expectation of dependence. When her mother dies, Najwa says, "I gasped, breathed in, but could not cry" (Faqir, 2000, p. 7). This emotional numbness is a result of enduring silence and confusion, trapped between two conflicting worldviews. Her mother, who rejects an Islamic funeral and questions religious dogma, represents a secular resistance to the misuse of faith. Meanwhile, the grandmother reinforces religious conservatism, emphasizing female obedience and male guardianship.

Religious Distortion and the Feminist Response

The novel critiques the way religious doctrine is distorted to justify male supremacy. Najwa's father leaves the family in pursuit of jihad, abandoning his wife and daughter under the guise of religious duty. Yet this act violates Qur'anic teachings on familial responsibility and compassion. As Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (2009) writes, "The relationship between husband and wife is based on mutual love, mercy, and kindness, and any act that breaks this bond goes against the spirit of Islam" (p. 45). The Qur'an similarly instructs men to live with their wives in kindness and justice: "Live with them in kindness" (Qur'an 4:19). Najwa's father's abandonment thus illustrates the misuse of Islam as a patriarchal tool, rather than its authentic ethical vision.

Fatima Mernissi (1991) critiques this cultural distortion, arguing that oppressive practices imposed on Muslim women are often the inventions of patriarchal elites, not mandates of Islamic theology. Najwa and her mother, both silenced by religious hypocrisy, embody the consequences of this manipulation. Mernissi's position aligns with Najwa's experience, emphasizing that Islamic feminism aims to "differentiate between the egalitarian message of the Qur'an and the cultural patriarchy embedded in its interpretations" (Mernissi, 1991).

Najwa's journey to find her father is fraught with emotional contradiction. She is warned that without a father, "she will belong to everyone" (Faqir, 2014), underlining how deeply women's identities are tied to male validation. Despite the pain of abandonment, she embarks on a path to reclaim her social legitimacy through him. When she finally locates her father, she experiences a profound sense of alienation. He is no longer a protector but a stranger molded by ideology and absence. Najwa articulates her grief, "I was gripped by anger with this father who was supposed to protect me, provide for me, make sure that I was warm and well fed, but brought me nothing but grief... His departure had eaten at my mother slowly until she developed cancer and died... It had deprived me of any chance of happiness" (Faqir, 2014). Yet, despite this suffering, Najwa displays respect and deference

toward her father and his new family, evidence of the deep internalization of patriarchal structures. Her identity remains tied to her relationship with a man who failed her, illustrating how cultural expectations shape even the most personal quests for selfhood.

The Willow Tree as a Feminine Metaphor of Resistance

The title *Willow Trees Don't Weep* provides a powerful metaphor for Najwa's resilience, emotional repression, and feminine endurance. The willow tree, with its drooping branches and silent posture, mirrors Najwa's state, submissive in appearance, but deeply rooted and quietly unyielding. One passage in the novel brings this imagery to life, "On the other shore stood a tree with light green leaves that looked like a woman with her hair down, rather than tied up... When hit by the breeze, its color got lighter... The book said that it was a weeping willow, but there was nothing sad about it. The white sap clung to the soil, and the leaves swayed happily" (Faqir, 2014).

Here, the willow symbolizes silent strength rather than sadness, suggesting that even in grief, Najwa finds a form of peace and persistence. The tree becomes a space for contemplation and reorientation—a mirror to her transformation from passivity to thoughtfulness. The willow motif also resonates intertextually with Shakespeare's *Othello*, where Desdemona sings the *Willow Song* as a lament before her death. Hamamra (2019) notes this cultural interplay; "Najwa's grandmother recapitulates the reception of Shakespeare in Arab literature and culture: 'Shakespeare had the passion of an Arab.' A Jordanian-British novelist, Fadia Faqir undermines the images of grief, unrequited and failed love, loss, and oppression embodied in the willow tree and song" (p. 1).

While Desdemona's willow symbolizes grief and fatal submission, Najwa's willow becomes a site of self-assertion and quiet contemplation. During her time in England, she asks her friend Elizabeth why the willow is called "weeping." Elizabeth responds: "Everything depends on your mood and perception. Some idiot believed it to be sinister and that it could uproot itself and stalk travelers."

To which Najwa reflects, "Its roots must be tough, clinging to the edge like that." This exchange reveals a pivotal shift in Najwa's consciousness. The willow's strength and persistence, hidden beneath its weeping form, mirrors her own gradual empowerment.

Najwa's story aligns with the structure of a bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age narrative, in which the protagonist undergoes psychological and emotional growth. Her transformation is not linear, nor triumphant in the Western feminist sense, but deeply embedded in her personal reflections and cultural negotiations. Her silence becomes more than compliance—it is a medium of meaning, contemplation, and indirect resistance. The willow tree, in this context, is not only a symbol of endurance but also a guide in her journey toward inner clarity.

Religious Hypocrisy and Patriarchal Abandonment

Najwa's father leaves the family under the guise of religious duty, a decision that contradicts the compassionate and just principles of Islam. Fatima Mernissi (1991) critiques how patriarchal elites have appropriated religious discourse to control women, asserting that many oppressive practices are cultural constructs rather than divine commandments. Najwa's father, who abandons his wife and daughter in the name of jihad, exemplifies this hypocrisy. His religious justification serves to veil the injustice of his actions, resulting in trauma and confusion for Najwa and her mother. Najwa's silence evolves into a form of subtle resistance. Her muteness, though externally conformist, enables inner reflection and emotional clarity. As her understanding matures, silence becomes her medium of self-definition. This reflects the concept of nego-feminism, which, as Obioma Nnaemeka suggests, emphasizes negotiation and compromise rather than open rebellion.

Jabiri (2016) further questions: "In such a model of femininity contested, negotiated, or challenged by women... how would this internalization and contestation impact women's lived realities?... can women escape these techniques of control by developing their own ways of operating?" Najwa's

negotiated silence provides one such answer. Through inner resistance, she gradually reclaims emotional agency—even if her voice is never fully articulated in conventional terms.

Conclusion

Najwa's journey offers a profound and layered exploration of silence; not as absence, but as a culturally inscribed language shaped by intersecting forces of religion, patriarchy, and nationalism. Her muteness, cultivated through familial trauma and institutionalized gender expectations, reflects the systemic silencing of women in patriarchal Arab societies where modesty and guardianship operate as tools of social control. Despite her exposure to secular ideals and personal longing for autonomy, Najwa's voice remains stifled, caught between competing cultural imperatives; her mother's secular disillusionment and her grandmother's strict religious traditionalism. Silence is both a survival strategy and a form of resistance. Najwa's emotional restraint and internal reflection challenge dominant perceptions of voice as the only means of empowerment. Agency can be expressed even within modalities of modesty and submission; provided these are understood contextually. Najwa's silence is a response to the historical conditioning of women to equate value with obedience, and to view self-expression as transgression. Her internal struggle captures the long-term psychic consequences of being raised in a society where a woman's identity is derivative of male authority.

Culturally, the novel illustrates how women's bodies and behaviors are politicized to serve larger state and communal goals. Najwa becomes a symbolic battleground for these ideological forces, reflecting the burdens placed on women to uphold both religious fidelity and cultural identity, even at the cost of their individual agency. The long-term effects of this internalized guardianship are evident in Najwa's continued yearning for male recognition, despite the emotional damage inflicted by her father's abandonment. Her respect for him, and for the extended family he built in her absence, reveals the depth of her social conditioning. Even her journey of self-discovery follows a patriarchal trajectory, wherein reclaiming

a sense of self requires tracing the path of the absent male figure. This illustrates a troubling cultural cycle: women are trained to derive self-worth from male association, even when such associations are harmful or absent. The psychological residue of this system lingers, making liberation a slow, generational process. Najwa's silence, then, is both imposed and internalized, but also contemplative and strategically protective. It calls attention to the varied and nuanced ways that Muslim women resist, endure, and negotiate power under repressive structures. Ultimately, the novel urges readers to re-evaluate silence not as passivity but as a complex mode of female expression forged in the crucible of cultural, religious, and historical constraints. By centering a protagonist whose journey of selfhood is defined as much by what she does not say as by what she feels, Fadia Faqir critiques the systems that inhibit women's voices and identities while also highlighting the emotional intelligence and resilience that such silence can foster. The novel invites scholars and readers to listen more attentively to these silences; not as voids, but as deeply encoded narratives of survival, resistance, and enduring cultural entanglement.

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[112](#)

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