A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick

Permanent WRAP URL:
http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/145284

Copyright and reuse:
This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.
Please scroll down to view the document itself.
Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it.
Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk
Freedom and Unfreedom in the Literature of
the Iranian and Arab Diaspora

by

Roxanne Ellen Bibizadeh

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literary Studies

The University of Warwick

Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies

October 2019
In loving memory of Marjorie Dudley and Margaret West
Declaration

This work has not previously been submitted for any other degree and is not concurrently submitted for candidature in any other degree. This thesis is my own work and does not contain any collaborative research.

Signed ________________________ (Candidate)

Date: 29 October 2019

Published Work

Chapter 6 was published in Iran and the West: Cultural Perceptions from the Sasanian Empire to the Islamic Republic, edited by David Bagot and Margaux Whiskin, I. B. Tauris, 2018.
# Table of Contents

**List of Figures**

**Acknowledgements**

**Abstract**

**Introduction**

- Literature of the Iranian and Arab Diaspora
- In Pursuit of Freedom
- Women’s Rights – *Huquq-i Zanan*
- Why Feminism?
- Veiled Resistance
- The Chapters

**Chapter 1: My Name is Salma – “Salma c’est moi”:**

The Exiled Muslim Woman of Fadia Faqir’s Novel

- Introduction
- A Language of Resistance and Plurality
- Silence and Sexual Servitude
- The Exiled Muslim Woman
- “Salma c’est moi”
- Conclusion

**Chapter 2: Free Enslavement: Muslim Woman’s Agency**

in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* and *The Translator*

- Introduction
- Feminism, Faith and Secularism
- Freely Unfree
- Muslim Pre-Feminist Novels
- Transformative Travel
- Conclusion
### Chapter 3: The Unfreedom of Poverty and War in Betool Khedairi’s *A Sky So Close*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Voice for the Voiceless</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A War So Close”: The Silenced Female Body</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 4: “For each Freedom we choose, we must give up another”: False Freedom in Yasmin Crowther’s *The Saffron Kitchen*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation Through Motherhood</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beloved Mother <em>Vatan</em> [Homeland]</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The False Freedom of <em>Tab’id</em> [Exile]</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 5: Unveiling Voices in the Diasporic Iranian Women’s Memoir Genre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Half Voices”: The Productive Paradox of Self-Censorship</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parody of Disguise</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting through Remembering</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Soft Weapons”</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 6: “Death to freedom, death to captivity”: Beyond Shahriar Mandanipour’s “Islamic” Love Story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bibliography

Page 254
List of Figures

Figure 1: Still from Dina Torkia’s vlog “The Bad, the Worse and the Ugly”

Figure 2: Image taken from JOOJOO AZAD a fashion blog written by a Muslim Iranian, Hoda Katebi

Figure 3: Shirin Neshat “Faceless” from the series Women of Allah 1993 – 1997

Figure 4: Shirin Neshat “Rebellious” from the series Women of Allah 1993 – 1997
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I wish to express my heart-felt gratitude to my supervisors Professor Pablo Mukherjee and Dr Rashmi Varma. I feel a great debt to you both for the countless times you have kindly listened and supported me through my difficulties. You have been pillars of strength and invaluable guidance – thank you.

I also want to add a special thank you to Rashmi for welcoming me into Feminist Dissent, I have had the privilege of meeting some inspirational people, whose work is integral to this thesis.

When I began this PhD I could not have anticipated how my life would change or the struggles I would face, including those still to come. My studies have given me a sense of normalcy and purpose through what has been the most trying of times.

I wish to thank my dear sister and brother Leila and Ashley Bibizadeh for your kind words of encouragement and all you have done to support me.

A very special thank you is owed to my beloved husband Dr Muin Boase. Thank you for always being there for me, through every court hearing, every time someone I loved was in hospital, including me; you were there by my side helping me to keep going and keep fighting.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my dear mother and father Janet and Heshmat Bibizadeh who over the years have faced great adversity and injustice. Your strength is inspiring. I want to thank you for your unwavering belief in me. Your love and kindness has sustained me – I could not have done it without you both – thank you.
Abstract

This thesis seeks to interrogate the concept of freedom, a vital issue in contemporary feminist scholarship surrounding women’s equality. The main contribution of this thesis is to identify the ways in which diasporic Iranian and Arab writers are challenging the binary construct of “Western” secular freedom versus the unfreedom of Islam, in order to offer alternative ways of pursuing and obtaining freedom. There is a pressing need to reconfigure the dynamic relationship between Islam, feminism and secularism, terms that are conventionally considered incompatible. I argue that the texts in this thesis explore the convergences and divergences between these terms through the writer’s or their protagonist’s quest for freedom. Each chapter will focus on how the writers resist or attempt to mobilise their identification with Islam, including whether they are successful at reimagining what it means to assert freedom, to redefine choice, and avoid their agency becoming a commodity. This thesis offers an original contribution to the conceptualisation of freedom within literature of the Iranian and Arab diaspora by drawing on three key theoretical frameworks: feminism, international human rights law and philosophies of freedom.
Introduction

“There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood 1996, 34).

The remedy for “a society dying […] of too much choice”, according to Aunt Lydia in Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is “freedom from” “anarchy” (Atwood 1996, 34-5). Aunt Lydia serves the totalitarian state of Gilead by indoctrinating the Handmaids to serve as breeding vessels for the hegemon. She rationalises that “[w]omen were not protected then”, and now women are free because “no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles” (Atwood 34). Rather than mourning the freedoms lost she advocates women should be grateful for the freedoms they have gained, as they are now protected and secure. According to Aunt Lydia an abundance of choice is responsible for the deterioration of humanity. Within the patriarchal society of Gilead where basic human rights are suspended one can be both “free” and enslaved.

Atwood’s novel begins with a dystopian deconstruction of freedom whereby the importance of autonomy and self-mastery is paradoxically juxtaposed to freedom. This thesis seeks to interrogate the concept of freedom, a vital issue in contemporary feminist scholarship surrounding women’s equality. The main contribution of this thesis is to identify the ways in which diasporic Iranian and Arab women writers are challenging the binary construct of “Western” secular freedom versus the unfreedom of Islam, to deconstruct such binaries and offer alternative ways of pursuing and obtaining freedom. The question of how we define choice and what it means to assert
freedom is widely contested in writing on Muslim women’s lives.¹ Simplistic ideas about freedom are challenged by scholars such as Wendy Brown, who asserts, “the idea that Western women choose while Islamic women are coerced ignores the extent to which all choice is conditioned by as well as imbricated with power, and the extent to which choice itself is an impoverished account of freedom, especially political freedom” (2012, 10).

This thesis approaches the conceptualisation of freedom within the literature of the Iranian and Arab diaspora by drawing on three key theoretical frameworks: feminism, international human rights, and philosophies of freedom. It primarily focuses on writing by women who self-identify as Muslim, or those who present fictional characters for whom Islam is at the heart of their sense of identity. I also include writers who have a Muslim cultural background, whose fictional characters are of a similar descent, but for both the author and their fictional characters religion and faith may not form part of their identity or affiliations in the world.² I wanted my thesis to represent the complexity of writing from Iranian and Arab writers to showcase an array of experiences embodied in writing from Muslim cultural backgrounds. The majority of the texts depict the experiences of women who are either first-generation or second-generation immigrants, the latter whilst never personally displaced absorb their parents’ emotional, cultural and historical experiences in the diaspora to form part of their identity. Furthermore, all the literature selected for inclusion in this thesis interrogates the concept of freedom, the specific forms of oppression and unfreedom experienced by Arab and Iranian immigrants, and the struggle for gender equality within the diaspora.

¹ For a few examples, see Sadia Abbas, At Freedom’s Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament (2014); Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving? (2013); and Mona Eltahawy, Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East needs a sexual revolution, (2015).
² I take inspiration from Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin’s definition of “Muslim writing” (2012).
In the first two chapters I examine the Anglophone Arab novels of Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* (2007) and Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005). Both Faqir and Aboulela write in English and have been translated into fourteen languages, including Arabic. The third chapter focuses on Betool Khedairi’s *A Sky So Close* (2001), which was written in Arabic and published in Lebanon in 1999 and translated into English two years later, as well as French, Italian and Dutch by 2006. Faqir, Aboulela and Khedairi are simultaneously situated within an Arab and a Euro-American milieu, the writers and their work all occupy a similar transnational position. In chapters four and five I focus on a range of memoirs and fiction written in English by diasporic Iranian women writers. In chapter four I explore Yasmin Crowther’s *The Saffron Kitchen* (2006), a work of fiction written in English and translated into French in 2007. Chapter five analyses two memoirs by Iranian women who emigrated to Britain Kamin Mohammadi and Rouhi Shafii, and five Iranian Americans Roya Hakakian, Nahid Rachlin, Firoozeh Dumas’, Gelareh Asayesh, and Afshinneh Latifi. All memoirs are written in English for a Euro-American audience. The final chapter examines the work of an Iranian American male writer, Shahrriar Mandanipour’s *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2011), which was written in Farsi, and translated into English and ten other languages. *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* is a work of autofiction that merges autobiographical writing with fiction.\(^3\) It is useful to read Mandanipour’s autofiction in conjunction with the diasporic Iranian women’s memoir genre discussed in chapter five.

This thesis predominantly focuses on British Iranian and Arab women writers who write in English. I have included two writers who I read in translation, and a collection of Iranian American writers as a useful point of contrast. There is a

\(^3\) The term autofiction was first used by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, he initially defined it as “fiction of strictly real events”, there is, however, no single agreed definition of autofiction (Dix 2018, 1-2).
tendency within mainstream literary publishing to prioritise writing in English, and writing that perpetuates the sensationalist image of oppressed Muslim women. For this reason, I incorporate writers in translation alongside the more significant well-known Anglophone writers to reflect the ever-growing breadth, diversity and complexity of the diasporic Iranian and Arab literary landscape. I argue that all the writers and their texts are not limited to a single nation or region. It is not only the text that travels through translation, the writers and their characters are continually moving across geographical borders, and occupying more than one place. They are connected to multiple communities and cultures, and migration forms part of the narrative of the text. Language is often a marker of identity and nationalism, migratory experiences and the inclusion of multilingual practises signal it is impossible to position the writer or their work within one definitive location. The inclusion of literature in translation and American authors also gestures towards a future research project I will outline in my conclusion.

Translation is of significance to diasporic fiction, as the writers and their texts are objects and agents of translation (Polezzi 2012, 347). Loredana Polezzi’s intervention into the link between translation and migration is useful for my reading of this literature; in particular, she argues the language a text is written in can be both productive and destructive. Literature written in a host language can be experienced as a form of loss or betrayal of their home and their first language. For others, it can offer creative freedom and the opportunity to reach a wider audience and receive recognition. Writers who self-translate or write in an adopted language create what Polezzi terms a form of “polylingual writing”, whereby other languages, codes and cultures are present in their writing (Polezzi 351). In this way, the language a text is
written in is crucial, as it can be an instrument of control or a means to exercise agency.

Translators play a crucial role in a text travelling outside of the boundaries of the context in which it was written. For some this process of translation is a source of concern. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues “[a]bsolute alterity or otherness is thus differed-deferred into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate” (2008, 202). Lawrence Venuti in a similar vein argues that every translated text goes through a process of “domestication”, in practise Venuti explains this works by erasing and “suppressing the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, assimilating it to dominant values in the target-language culture, making it recognizable” (1998, 31). He contends, “translation is not simple communication, but an appropriation of the foreign text to serve domestic purposes” (1998, 95). Rather than serving to smooth differences to make a text intelligible, Venuti advocates for a more “ethical” form of translation through what he terms a “foreignizing” approach. This approach is routed in drawing attention to the foreign origins of the text and highlighting the presence of the transnational voice through disruptive strategies to avoid the translation becoming a form of cultural imperialism. This theory of translation is problematic because he proposes that translation is always necessarily a violent process, he therefore assumes the author is marginalised through this process.

However, there has been a generational move in theorisations of translation towards “an image of the translator as an intellectual figure empowered with agency and sensibility who produces knowledge by curating cultural encounters” (Allen and Bernofsky 2013, xix). Chantal Wright encourages us to think of translation theory as a theory that reflects on the motivations for translation, including how these
motivations influence the process of translation, and the affiliation between literary translation, life writing and creative writing (Wright 2016, 4).

Furthermore, as Rebecca L. Walkowitz points out it is too simplistic to assume there are two types of text, the original and the translation. According to Walkowitz there is another type of text, which she terms “born-translated”, in which “translation functions as a thematic structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device. These works are written for translation, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often written as translations, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed. [...] They build translation into their form” (2015, 4-6). For Walkowitz the author has more agency, and “born-translated” texts do not originate in any one language, rather the texts are polylingual.

Ultimately the author and translator are part of an ideological system of production, circulation and consumption that informs any reading of a text. However, perhaps the most important role a translator plays is that of savior, “rescuing texts from the silence imposed by censorship, translation can also play a role in bringing forgotten or underappreciated texts to the attention of a wider audience, and can sometimes have a boomerang effect on a text’s status in the source culture.” (Wright 2016, 27). This is certainly true of the texts in this thesis.

The starting premise of this introduction outlines why this thesis focuses on literature of the Iranian and Arab diaspora and how I position these writers within the world literary space. The second section of the introduction will critically examine conceptions of freedom, in particular philosophical theories of freedom to and freedom from, to make the point that these theories of freedom neglect entire groups

---

4 The world literary space for Pascale Casanova is a conflicted space of struggles and inequalities, “literary relations of power are forms of political relations of power” (Casanova 2005a, 81).
of people, particularly those that are unfree. The third section will intervene in critical scholarship surrounding universal human rights, including the limitations and opportunities human rights discourses offer in the pursuit of freedom. In section four I chart three paradigmatic shifts in feminist scholarship, all of which are concerned with promoting the rights of those that are excluded. I also examine the convergences and divergences between Islam, feminism and secularism. The fifth section will explore the creative ways in which Muslim women in the diaspora are challenging what it means to be free. I conclude with a summary of the contribution each chapter makes towards the overall thesis, including outlining the significance of the texts chosen.

**Literature of the Iranian and Arab Diaspora**

Muslims in Britain\(^5\) have diverse origins, they are not ethnically or ideologically homogeneous (Ansari 2009, 2).\(^6\) However, discussions of Muslim identity in the diaspora\(^7\) have been inclined to rely heavily on the experience of South Asian Muslims who have particular socio-economic characteristics, political origins, religious beliefs and practises which differ greatly from Muslims from other parts of the world (Ansari 2009, 2). Histories of Arab immigration are less acknowledged in the public domain (Moore 2012, 69), and Iranian immigration is even more under-represented. For example, Arabs were only officially recognised as a separate ethnic

---

\(^5\) Politically, British Muslims emerged as a category of official recognition following the Rushdie affair of 1989 (Falkenhayner 2014, 3).

\(^6\) There are six different linguistic and geographical zones where Islam is embedded as a religion: Arab, African, Persian, Turkish, South Asian and Malay, most of which have contributed to the kaleidoscope of communities in Britain (Lewis 2007, 2).

\(^7\) “[D]iaspora” is a loaded, popular, and contested term, considered by some to affirm identity, whilst others argue it results in the loss of identity. However, the term is usually reserved for those of a marginalized or dispossessed status, often referring to immigration, exile, refugees, and minorities. (Weedon 2012, 20-23).
category in the 2011 Census (Awad 2011, 27). In light of events such as 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005 the category of the “Middle-Eastern Muslim” has become hyper-visible in the British public space and writing about this figure has become popular, reflecting the spurious desire to “know” the Muslim “Other” in light of such atrocities (Ahmed 2015, 17). Consequently the complexity of the British Muslim identity is in danger of being reduced to one “singular affiliation” defined through the lens of terrorist attacks, and the “culture of fear” inflicted by the “war on terror” (Gotanda 2011, 184-195).

Historically, gender has been at the forefront of Muslim identification in the West, with the “plight” of oppressed Muslim women becoming justification for “western intervention in non-western cultures on the grounds of gender equality” (Ahmed et al. 2012, 4). Of course, this intervention is not confined to non-Western cultures, but it also extends to states and societies. This identification involves variations of the same image of the Muslim woman - veiled, subjugated, indomitably spirited, and in need of rescue from an enlightened West (Ahmad 2009, 106). The image of the “oppressed Muslim woman” is a widely consumed narrative trope deployed globally across a variety of genres, and irrespective of the geographical

---

8 It is worth noting that it was not until December 1988 that the Commission for Racial equality (CRE) resolved that people of Asian origins should no longer be classified as a sub-division of Black. A month later the Office of Population Census and Surveys revealed that it would take inspiration from the CRE to use the same categories in the 1991 Census. Although the change was not openly publicized, this was a significant moment for race relations because it suggested that categories created to define ethnicity were no longer static, they were open to change. Although the introduction of the “Asian” category was a product of state intervention in terms of political and legal definitions of national identity and belonging, the new category acknowledged the complexity of British identity. This proved the term Britishness had more possibility for being open and inclusive in comparison to Englishness (Byrne 2007, 140-1). The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) succeeded the CRE in 2007. The CRE and EHRC have also been criticised for increasing “misunderstanding of key social trends in Britain and on this basis could easily contribute to a rise in fear and racial hatred […] [They have] set a bad example of how it is possible to argue your case by misquoting statistic evidence, deliberately misleading the public and policy makers on statistics as a result” (Finney and Simpson 2009, 164).

9 Of course Western intervention in non-Western cultures predate 2001, the same civilising rationale has been used for centuries to justify imperialism, for example Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands” in 1899, justifying imperial conquest as a civilising mission.
positioning, religious practises, class positioning, content, the texts become subsumed under the sign “Islam” (Ahmad 2009, 108).

This thesis will complicate the migrant, diasporic, and cosmopolitan experiences portrayed in contemporary literature by focusing primarily on diasporic British Iranian and Arab women writers. There is a burgeoning body of scholarship exploring the image of the post 9/11 British Muslim figure. Contributions to this field include Lindsey Moore’s *Arab, Muslim, Women* (2008), which seeks to redress the marginalisation of these works within the postcolonial canon. Anastasia Valassopoulos goes beyond “appreciative criticism” in order to engage in an “active negotiation with Arab women’s writing”, to enter a “new phase of criticism” in her book *Contemporary Arab Women Writers* (2008, 1). Peter Morey focuses on how contemporary literature responds to discourses of Islamophobia in his book *Islamophobia and the Novel* (2018). Rehana Ahmed’s *Writing British Muslims* (2015) is concerned with writers of South Asian Muslim heritage, their representation and relationship with British multiculturalism. Geoffrey Nash has explored images of Islam and Muslim’s in texts written in English in *Writing Muslim Identity* (2012). Claire Chambers has written prolifically around the subject, and her most recent contribution *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (2019) argues that novels by authors from Muslim backgrounds are richly sensual. This thesis is distinctive because it is primarily concerned with representations of Muslim women

10 I use the word complicate rather than diversify to avoid the “colonial and Orientalist problematic” identified by Aamir R. Mufti, by focusing on “the history of these relations of force and powers of assimilation” (2010, 493).

in Arab and Iranian diasporic literature, and the relationship Muslim women have with freedom.

Despite its importance, the British Muslim woman as a writer and subject remains surprisingly under-researched, at least as far as literary studies is concerned.12 This thesis will predominantly explore the experience documented by women writers who are attempting to challenge the racialization of Islam. Their fictional, auto-fictional, and autobiographical stories examine to different degrees their relationship with the diverse kinds of Islamic cultural heritage, including its place within the marginalised characters’ lives and identities. Particular emphasis will be placed on examining whether their writing is a form of resistance, challenging the homogenising rhetoric that seeks to reproduce a certain ideology and identity associated with Iranian and Arab women.

The position from which these women are writing, the language they use, the consumption and distribution of their work within the world literary space, informs whether their writing is perceived as an act of resistance or whether they are collaborating in their own oppression.13 The degree to which they challenge or become complicit in the hierarchy and inequality that characterises the world-literary space (Casanova 2005b, 82), determines whether they become a “speaking subject” redefining the stereotypes that construct their identity through writing their own narrative (Fotouhi 2015, 17). Diasporic Muslim women are often portrayed as either modern assimilated women who publicly critique Islam, or observant women with no agency, rights or loyalty to the host nation in which they live (Haque 2014, 805). This

12 As far as I am aware there are three academics who have researched Muslim women writers: Esra Mirza Santesso, Lindsey Moore, and Anastasia Valassopoulos. However, they have predominantly focus on writing by Arab Muslim women.

13 In Brown Skin, White Masks, Hamid Dabashi posits, “intellectuals who migrate to the Western side of their colonized imaginations are prone to employment by the imperial power to inform on their home countries in a manner that confirms conclusions already drawn.” (2011, 23)
thesis will investigate the ways in which writers of Iranian or Arab descent have sought to complicate this binary discourse and negotiate a diasporic identity.

The experience of searching for identities, the sense of placelessness and nostalgia, the quest for sexual, political and economic freedom dominates the work of diasporic writers from anywhere in the world and British Iranian and British Arab writers are no exception. The study of world literatures in English has expanded in the last few decades and has predominantly focused on work from postcolonial Indian, Caribbean, African and Asian writing, but the voices of Iranian and Arab women writers are often omitted. I am not intending to intervene in the discussions surrounding the problem of “world literature” as a re-vivified discipline of critical study. Instead I use some of the problems posed by theorists within this debate as a spring-board for reading work by diasporic Iranian and Arab writers.

There have been a number of notable contributors to this re-vivified field of “world-literary studies”. Pascale Casanova in “Literature as a World”, contends the position from which a writer writes, is a “double one”, a writer is defined twice according to where they are situated within a national space and again from the place they occupy within the world space (2005b, 81). However, she contends,

to speak of the centre’s literary forms and genres simply as a colonial inheritance imposed on writers within subordinated regions is to overlook the fact that literature itself, as a common value of the entire space, is also an instrument which, if re-appropriated, can enable writers – an[δ] especially those with the fewest resources to attain a type of freedom, recognition and existence within it […] [literature can] also aim to serve as a symbolic weapon in the struggles of those most deprived of literary resources, confronting obstacles which writers at the centre cannot even imagine (2005b, 90).
Casanova is careful in her use of language regarding “freedom” here. She talks only of a certain “type of freedom” which acknowledges the problems inherent in the universalised notion of “freedom” often deployed by writers from a peripheral position whose journey to the “centre” or “dominant” space becomes a liberatory experience. Literature, Casanova claims becomes a “symbolic weapon” for these marginalised writers, as it enables the writers to accumulate symbolic capital within the field of literature. However, I argue that once this literature is consumed within the world space, the writer surrenders control of their weapon.

In my first chapter I develop this argument where I discuss the politics of Fadia Faqir having no control over the covers and titles of her novels. She has described the marketing of the American addition of her novel My Name is Salma as “Totally Orientalist” (Bower 2012, 7). Faqir, like many writers in this thesis, has been forced to compromise on the marketing of her writing in order to be published. In chapter five I discuss Gillian Whitlock’s assertion that life writing by some diasporic Muslim women circulates as a “‘soft’ weapon because it is easily co-opted into propaganda” (2007, 3). This thesis will combine a discussion of the writers and their work in tandem with narrative analysis of the texts, to discern whether the authors successfully complicate the exoticising tendency within the marketing of recent Anglophone Arab and Iranian literature.

First-generation immigrants in particular are at times accused of cultural betrayal for adopting the language of their host nation to achieve a more lucrative wider audience. Many of the diasporic writers in this thesis describe exchanging their national language for an international one as both necessary and liberating. In chapter five I examine the sense of freedom many of the Iranian women writers feel when they abandon Farsi, they claim the English language enables them the space to discuss
forbidden aspects of their culture. Adopting the English language becomes a form of linguistic and stylistic resistance. For some of the writers in this thesis transliterations form part of their protest. Faqir explained she hopes by incorporating Arabic “[t]he English language [will be] hybridized […] the borders between languages will collapse” (Bower 2012, 8). The decision to interweave transliterations of Farsi and Arabic into the English language is a conscious act of resistance. Polezzi advocates we read translators and self-translators as “political actors” and “witnesses to the issues surrounding migration” (2012, 354). She explains:

[They] sustain the multiplicity of languages and of voices, striving to make the polylingual complexity of communication both visible and audible, while at the same time debunking the myth of monolingualism as norm, as well as that of language (singular) as the ultimate marker of a fixed identity – and therefore also as the absolute mark of the indelible alterity of “other-languaged” migrants (2012, 354).

The “polylingual practises” of the writers in this thesis demonstrates their stories cannot be contained within one language. Their voices represent the multiplicity of their identities.

Another strategy of linguistic resistance adopted by some of the writers in this thesis includes incorporating foreign words that have no equivalent in the English language. In doing so they emphasise it is not possible to translate their voice and story entirely for the easy consumption of the Euro-American audience. In contrast, Khedairi and Mandanipour’s texts point towards the emancipatory potential of rejecting the English language and refusing to cater to a Euro-American audience. In chapter six I discuss Mandanipour’s efforts to further complicate the translation of his
text by incorporating archaic words that have no meaning for both speakers of Farsi and those reading in translation.

The choice of language and translatability of a text are important factors in the uneven structure of “world-literature”, however they are not emphasised by Moretti or the Warwick Research Collective (WReC). WReC “resituate the problem of ‘world literature’ […] by pursuing the literary-cultural implications of the theory of combined and uneven development” (2015, 6). They suggest Casanova’s theoretical separation of the “everyday world” with the “literature world” as “parallel universes” results in her neglecting to engage in analysing the relationship between these two worlds and how they intersect (2015, 9). WReC ascribe more closely with Franco Moretti’s work, contending that “world-literature” should be perceived as a system “structured not on difference but on inequality” (2015, 7). They argue that there is a tendency in literary scholarship to de-materialize “the west” and disregard the connection between imperialism and capitalism, pointing towards Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* as one such example (WReC 2015, 31-33).

Language is an example of the inequality within the “world-literature” system; writing in English is privileged for global distribution. The choice of what language to write in is a recurring struggle for many of the writers in this thesis. Aamir Mufti points out literature will only be read if it is written or translated into English, therefore literature has to receive “metropolitan recognition” (Mufti 2010, 489) if it is to have a wider audience. Jonathan Arac explicates, “English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global” (2002, 40). The position of English in the global language of exchange, and the process of acknowledgement and absorption within the world
literary space is inherently unequal, as Moretti in “Conjectures on World Literature” explains:

international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously one, and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: one literature (Weltliteratur, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it’s profoundly unequal (2000, 55-6).

Fadia Faqir contends that it is not just the use of English language that drives the commission of certain texts. She is critical of the tendency to publish texts that perpetuate stereotypes of Muslim men and women, stating how “[s]election is an act of elimination” (Bower 2012, 8). For diasporic Iranian and Arab writers the struggles they describe are continually evolving, resisting simplistic categorisation. I intend to probe the “type” of “freedom” and “autonomy” they obtain, including how one might read their choice of language. Do they attempt to forge “a new vocabulary to contest Eurocentrism” as Timothy Brennan asks (2014, 68), or do they “make you lose something in translation in order to gain something in transformation” (Cooppan 2004, 30). Are they successful in challenging misrepresentations, and how might we interpret the multiple movements they make, travelling between the centre and periphery, and what is the commercial value ascribed to their story.
In Pursuit of Freedom

In order to interrogate the concept of freedom within literature of the Iranian and Arab diaspora, it is necessary to begin by attempting to define this term. Political philosophers and liberty theorists alike disagree over what the term freedom means (Hirschmann 2003, 3). This contested terrain is centred around whether a person has the capacity to choose, what barriers or restraints may impede a person from acting on their chosen desires, and whether a person’s desires are consciously chosen. Many formulations of freedom are divided along the lines presented by Isaiah Berlin. In his lecture entitled “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958) Berlin distinguished between two basic types of freedom: negative freedom (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to). The concept of negative freedom is, put simply, freedom from interference: “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity” (Berlin 2002, 169). Berlin argues a man’s economic and social conditions can be a form of interference with freedom, if those conditions are brought about as a result of the actions of others. “What is freedom to those who cannot make use of it? Without adequate conditions for the use of freedom, what is the value of freedom?” (Berlin 2002, 171). Positive freedom is the freedom to “be his own master” (Berlin 2002, 178). According to Berlin positive freedom (freedom to) can be used to justify interference in the lives of other people to enable them to reach a “‘higher’ level of freedom” (2002, 179). He explains:

it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant

14 Similarly most contemporary theorists I use the terms “freedom” and “liberty” interchangeably in this thesis (See Hirschmann 2003 or Welch 2012).
or corrupt. This renders it easy for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest. I am then claiming that I know what they truly need better than they know it themselves (2002, 179).

In other words, there are times when there is a need, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s words, to be “forced to be free” (2003, 30). Berlin suggests that positive freedom is consequently more open to misuse.

Gerald MacCallum has challenged Berlin’s contention that it is possible to make a meaningful distinction between positive and negative freedom. He argues that freedom exists in a “triadic relation”, “freedom is thus always of something […] from something, to do, not do, become, or not become something” (1967, 314). MacCallum’s “triadic” freedom embodies both the positive and negative concept of freedom. In contrast, John Christman asserts positive freedom is more fundamental to understanding a person’s state of freedom or unfreedom. He argues, “the presence of opportunities – the absence of restraints – is irrelevant to the true nature of her unfreedom […] negative liberty is simply incomplete as a full accounting of human freedom. The free person must be guided by values that are her own” (1991, 345). Christman attempts to respond to the “worries of tyranny” (1991, 359), which he perceives to be the question of “where to draw the line demarcating free (informed) action from unfree (less informed) actions” (1991, 356). In other words, Christman believes liberal objections to the idea of positive liberty ignore the importance of self-mastery. Christman contends the “content” (1991, 359) of a person’s desires are of no consequence; what matters is that those desires are freely chosen. In my second chapter I critique this conceptualisation of positive freedom, which Saba Mahmood has relied upon. I draw on a variation of this theory again in chapter four, where I discuss Charles Taylor’s emphasis on self-determinism for “true freedom”. I argue
that this theory draws on Epictetus’ theory of freedom. In both chapters I outline how the pursuit of freedom can be a justification for oppression. In chapter two I term this freedom a form of “free enslavement”, in chapter five I refer to a type of “false freedom”.

The philosophical debates surrounding freedom can be usefully applied to the writer’s un/freedom within the world-literary space. The choice of language and translatability of a text are connected to the writer’s quest for literary freedom. There are relations of power that operate in the construction of a text, and it is therefore difficult to separate the choices writers make from the social conditions and structures that might influence these choices. The decision to write in English may liberate a writer who may feel free to write about contentious issues in a foreign language, but such a choice is arguably a condition of their unfreedom because the decision to write in English increases their opportunity for publication and wider acclaim. Their choice is a product of economic and socio-political conditions. Their agency is dependent upon how they respond to the factors that may serve to restrain or interfere with their writing. One of the aims of this thesis is to examine forms of resistance against this literary unfreedom. A writer’s literary protest may include strategies such as transliterations, untranslatability, and a critical engagement with contentious issues or the publication process. It also considers how writers might become complicit by perpetuating lucrative stereotypes.

Feminist theorists such as Nancy Hirschmann (2003) and Shay Welch (2012) have begun to challenge conventional frameworks for freedom and unfreedom found in liberty theories such as the positive and negative debate. Hirschmann argues there is a need to expand our understanding of internal and external barriers to freedom. She explains: “choices are so deeply, fundamentally, and complexly constrained and
constructed for women – even more than they are for men – that the conventional understandings of liberty and of constraint found in the positive/negative debate are inadequate to address women’s experiences” (2003, 102). Welch goes further, suggesting that such theories exclude and abandon the unfree (2012, 1). Hirschmann outlines the ways in which forces and social structures such as patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism socially construct desires, preferences, agency and choice, which may result in a person choosing what they are restricted to (2003, 11-12). She is concerned not simply with the way these forces and social structures limit an individual, but how an individual is produced through them (2003, 12). It is this project that I intend to pick up and apply to my thesis. I will outline the specific forms of oppression and unfreedom that diasporic Arab and Iranian women describe and experience.

Hirschmann’s concern that women in particular are socially constructed to desire their own subordination draws on Catherine MacKinnon’s attempts to outlaw pornography. MacKinnon advocates for legal intervention because, she explains, “femininity as we know it is how we come to want male dominance, which most emphatically is not in our interest” (1987, 54). MacKinnon argues freedom for women cannot be achieved by merely giving women the ability to choose, because the choice they make may not be in their interests owing to their desires being socially constructed by patriarchy. This therefore validates a feminist legal intervention that protects women from men exploiting and dominating them.

Amartya Sen attempts to resolve this tension between a person having the freedom to choose, and whether those said choices are in their best interests, through his distinction between “well-being freedom” and “agency freedom”. Sen defines “well-being freedom” as a form of positive freedom, whereby a person has the
“opportunity to pursue his or her own well-being” (1985, 203). A person’s “agency freedom” is understood to mean what a “responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve” (1985, 204). Sen argues a person’s freedom is mutually constructed through both agency and well-being:

Perhaps the most immediate argument for focusing on women’s agency may be precisely the role that such an agency can play in removing iniquities that depress the well-being of women. Empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how the relative regard for women’s well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as […] women’s earning power, economic role outside the family, literacy and education, property rights […] [which] may at first sight appear to be rather diverse and disparate. But what they all have in common is their positive contribution in adding force to women’s voice and agency – through independence and empowerment (2000, 191).

Taking inspiration from Sen, I argue that in order to construct a feminist conceptualisation of freedom, we need to contextualise a person’s choice within the social conditions and structures that may influence their choice. There is also a need to ensure a person has the means to express agency and choice. With this in mind, I now turn to a human rights based approach to the concept of freedom and equality.

Women’s Rights - Huquq-i Zanan

The debates surrounding the politics of rights and rights-based approaches to social justice and gender justice in particular are important to my thesis, because in pursuit of alternative articulations of freedom some of the writers in this thesis confront international human rights understandings of freedom. In chapter two, I examine
Aboulela’s alternative articulation of freedom that turns away from what she terms a liberal-secular Western feminist paradigm. In chapter three I examine the limitations of a human rights approach. I argue Khedairi’s narrative critiques the gulf that separates the formal rights regimes from the real lived realities of the subaltern, where the language of rights may have little or no meaning or purpose.

A fundamental belief of human rights advocacy is that freedom rests in the accumulation of progressive and transformative rights (Kapur 2018, 5). The dominant assumption is that human rights are democratic and liberating, and essential in any experience of freedom. Within human rights scholarship there are four theoretical strands. The natural school of thought advocates human rights are a given by virtue of being human. Jack Donnelly’s *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* is a good example of this theoretical position as he encourages an optimistic outlook, and regards human rights as “literally the rights that one has because one is human” (Donelly 2013, 7). The deliberative school considers human rights are agreed upon. There are no human rights beyond the law. Instead they consider human rights are principles of deliberation. As Michael Ignatieff argues, “[a]t best, rights create a common framework, a common set of reference points that can assist parties in conflict to deliberate together [...] Human rights is nothing other than politics” (Ignatieff 2011, 20-21). Then there are the protest scholars who reject the idea that human rights are given entitlements, they believe human rights are fought for and rooted in the struggles against injustice, and consider human rights are a way of giving a voice to suffering. In chapter three I utilise Upendra Baxi’s theory of the “small voice of history” (2006, xxii), which belongs to this school of thought. Finally, the discourse school perceive of the law as an indeterminate language, they argue that the discourse of human rights is not the only language with which to talk about
justice. Makau Mutua, who I discuss later in this introduction, typifies this school of thought. In order to interrogate why “third-world” women in particular are defined by their purported lack of rights, it is essential to understand the gendering of contemporary notions of human rights themselves.

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) sought to incorporate a gendered perspective on human rights to address the omission of women’s rights from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Convention came into force on 3 September 1980, after the Copenhagen Conference on 17 July 1980, codifying international legal standards for women. However, whilst this served as an instrument for women’s rights, it separated women’s rights as distinct from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was not until 1993 during the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights that women’s rights were recognised as a part of human rights. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action that was subsequently adopted stressed the importance of incorporating a wider array of harms experienced by women in both the public and private sphere.¹⁵

Many feminist legal scholars celebrated this move, such as Charlotte Bunch who advocated in 1990:

> [t]he human rights community must move beyond its male defined norms in order to respond to the brutal and systematic violation of women globally […] it does require examining patriarchal biases and acknowledging the rights of women as human rights. Governments must seek to end the politically and

---

¹⁵ Article 18 of the Declaration and Programme of Action subsequently followed the Vienna conference, which led to the acknowledgement of “[t]he human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. […] The World Conference on Human Rights urges Governments, institutions, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to intensify their efforts for the protection and promotion of human rights of women and the girl-child” (1993).
culturally constructed war on women rather than continue to perpetuate it. Every state has the responsibility to intervene in the abuse of women’s rights within its borders and to end its collusion with the forces that perpetuate such violations in other countries (492).

However, scholars such as Inderpal Grewal and Ratna Kapur have been critical of international feminist legal scholars such as Charlotte Bunch and Catherine MacKinnon who promote a focus on the commonality of women’s experiences rather than the differences.

Ratna Kapur has expressed her concern that third-world women are being defined in discourses of rights as always already “victim subjects”.

[The] focus on the victim subject reinforces the depiction of women in the postcolonial world as perpetually marginalised and underprivileged, and has serious implications for the strategies subsequently adopted to remedy the harms that women experience. It encourages some feminists in the international arena to propose strategies which are reminiscent of imperial interventions in the lives of the native subject and which represent the ‘Eastern’ woman as a victim of a ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilised’ culture (Kapur 2005, 99).

Kapur contends that such an approach creates a “monolithic victim group” and disregards the multiple forms of subordination experienced by women. Focusing on sexual discrimination neglects minority and disadvantaged communities who may also experience oppression as a consequence of their ethnicity, religion, caste, physical ability, or sexual identity, and these various forms of subordination may be experienced simultaneously because they are inextricably connected (Kapur 2005,
Furthermore, the human rights discourses often assume the differences between women are cultural.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) decision in Leyla Şahin v. Turkey is a good example of how human rights advocacy engages with alterity, and in particular Muslim women who wear the veil. The applicant Leyla Şahin was a medical student who challenged Istanbul University’s implementation of its 1998 circular, which prohibited students wearing a headscarf or those with beards from being admitted to study at the university. Şahin argued this circular violated her rights, and in particular Article 9 the right to manifest her religion. The ECtHR conceded that this rule amounted to an interference with Article 9, however they considered this interference lawful in light of the limitations outlined in clause two (9.2): “in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of freedom of others” (ECHR 1953). Kapur considers implicit in this judgement is “the widely held assumption that women are always coerced into wearing headscarves, and that Muslim women lack agency, are invariably victims of their traditional culture and are awaiting rescue from subservience through liberal rights intervention” (2018, 123).

Karima Bennoune is equally critical of the paternalistic dimensions of the decision, she draws attention to the lack of diversity both in terms of the judiciary presiding over the case and the legal advocates. However, she considers a contextual approach to the case is necessary in light of the growing fundamentalist movements in the region. She advocates: “the point that some limits on religion may be necessary to safeguard basic human rights resonates in Turkish reality” (2007, 380). She explains: “[i]f more and more students veil, this calls into question the style of dress and religiosity of other women students, potentially placing great pressure on them”
To ban the veil or headscarf is arguably as repressive as those who legally and violently impose it. It is another example of the way in which women’s bodies are subordinated and controlled. I concur with Bennoune that a contextual reading is important in a case as complex as this. At the same time, if we are to assert that the choice to wear the headscarf cannot be separated from the social conditions and powers that may have influenced that very decision, arguably enforcing the removal of the headscarf eliminates any possibility of autonomy or self-mastery in unveiling.

The binary framings within scholarship surrounding Islam and the Middle East, (which will inform my discussion of feminist scholarship within the next section of this introduction), is similar to critiques surrounding human rights discourses that tend to be grouped into two schools of thought, those in support of universalism and those who advocate for cultural relativism. There is a range of criticisms of international human rights movements, in *The Dark Sides of Virtue* David Kennedy has outlined the “possible risks, costs and unanticipated consequences” (2004, 3). He identifies a range of limitations, including the humanitarian movement being accused of adopting “[a] one-size-fits-all emancipatory practice [that] underrecognizes particularity and reduces the possibility for variation. […] [H]uman rights limit human potential as the plurality of experience is poured into the mold of its terms. […] They worry about limiting our picture of emancipation to that provided by this particular vocabulary” (Kennedy 2004, 13). The usefulness of a rights framework is discredited on the basis that it lacks cultural specificity. Kennedy also draws attention to anti-imperial critiques:

The legal regime of “human rights,” taken as a whole, does more to produce and excuse violations than to prevent and remedy them […] Far from being a
defense of the individual against the state, human rights has become a standard part of the justification for the external use of force by the state against other states and individuals. The porousness of the human rights vocabulary means that the interventions and exercises of state authority it legitimates are more likely to track political interests than its own emancipatory agenda (Kennedy 2004, 24-6).

Such critiques are important and necessary to expose the appropriation of universal human rights to justify imperial intervention. However these critiques run the risk of serving anti-secular, anti-women, anti-minority agendas, and undermining the work of human rights groups advocating universal rights.

Makau Mutua has written one of the more controversial critiques of human rights where he considers the rights movement can be reduced to a “damning metaphor” that pits “savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviors, on the other” (2001, 201-2). He denounces the human rights corpus as “unidirectional and predictable, a black-and-white construction that pits good against evil” (2001, 201-2). It is not the language of rights or the intended outcomes, but the issue of power that he argues needs to be contested. “Human rights law continues this tradition of universalizing Eurocentric norms by intervening in Third World cultures and societies to save them from the traditions and beliefs that it frames as permitting or promoting despotism and disrespect for human rights itself” (Mutua 2001, 235). Mutua’s proposed solution is that we need to incorporate our different genders, cultures, religions, ethical, moral and political positions to create a “multicultural mosaic”, rather than a “Eurocentric prototype” (2001, 205). Instead of perceiving universal human rights as a collective shared humanity and justice that recognizes the needs and rights of all equally, Mutua is merely encouraging what he seeks to condemn, the
reduction of anyone non-Western to the status of “victim” or “savage”. Chetan Bhatt highlights the danger in adopting such a position:

the inert, innocent nature of the agency and subjectivity that left culturalism imparts to non-western subalterns and western diasporics, a kind of heroic, narcissistic, victimology that cannot name itself as such. In much multicultural theory, the diasporic subaltern is primarily a culturally-described, infra-ethical victim rather than a subject fully capable of ethical existence and judgement (2006, 98-115).

Furthermore, arguments such as those proposed by Mutua may result in international agencies avoiding addressing controversial or politically sensitive issues, such as the link between religious fundamentalism and grooming gangs, honour-based violence, or forced and early marriages, thereby allowing cultural relativism to influence the humanitarian assistance offered.

Much has been written critiquing universal human rights, many argue that human rights are not “neutral” or “universal”, but “ethnocentric” (Gilroy 2005, 59). Equally it is suggested that they are nothing more than a “palliative” response to “the permanence of recurrent evil without facing it more frontally” (Moyn 2018, 218). There are considerable responses to these said critiques, for example Sandra Fredman has pointed out that one way forward might be for the state to secure conditions that widen the spheres of choice for individuals without imposing any particular set of choices on them (2008, 15). Marie-Bénédicte Dembour is less enthusiastic, like many scholars she remains unconvinced by the language of human rights, however she concludes “there is nonetheless no point in shunning this language altogether” (2006, 252). I do not propose to offer a comprehensive overview of the complexity or multiplicity of scholarship surrounding human rights, however, whilst there is much
focus on condemning or defending human rights, there is relatively little scholarship exploring the use of the human rights discourse by “subalterns”. It is my contention that Khedairi’s text offers an insight into this very dilemma (see chapter three). Just as human rights discourses have been appropriated to serve imperialism, human rights can also be utilised to respond to local concerns of the marginalised. Claret Vargas outlines,

another tactic for subaltern self-actualization is to mobilize, adapt, and transform human rights discourses in order to both define and demand rights [...] it is also a discourse that is appropriated, circulated, and transformed by local populations who may see in the adherence to a set of international norms a way to interpellate history and to challenge a hostile state and unequal local and global economic relations (2012, 3).

Similarly Lynn Stephen demonstrates how human rights discourses can undergo a gendered modification within local contexts to respond to the needs of women. She termed this a “gendered local vernacular of rights talk that then became accessible to many other women and men […] who were previously silenced” (2011, 161). Vargas and Stephen contend a solution is to modify and mobilise the language of rights to confront local concerns and struggles.

The human rights agenda while malleable is often accused of not reflecting and at times even contradicting indigenous rights’ movements. At the same time, the terminology and language is also contested. Take for example, the United Nations Millennium Declaration which begins by outlining that “[w]e are determined to establish a just and lasting peace all over the world […] [and] respect for the equal rights of all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion” (2000, 1). Building on this, in 2015 a 17-point plan was introduced to put an end to poverty,
combat climate change and fight injustice and inequality. The fifth Sustainable Development Goal is to “[a]chieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. Empowerment within this context is about a shift in power not just between individuals but also the social groups they belong to. Women’s empowerment challenges not only patriarchy but structures such as class, race, ethnicity, and religion, which determine women’s position and living conditions within society. Empowerment according to Srilatha Batliwala has been converted “into not only a buzzword but a magic bullet for poverty alleviation and rapid economic development, rather than a multi-faceted process of social transformation, especially in the arena of gender equality” (Batliwala 2007, 561). Batliwala argues the term empowerment has been depoliticized and subverted “virtually robbed […] of its original meaning and strategic value” (2007, 557).

Cornwall and Rivas adopt a similar position, contending that the terms “gender equality” and “women’s empowerment” have been “eviscerated of conceptual and political bite [which] compromises their use as the primary frame through which to demand rights and justice” (2015, 396). Cornwall and Rivas go on to argue that

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are, we contend, frames that have led feminist activists into a cul-de-sac and away from a broader-based alliance of social change activists. Both have been reduced to buzzwords that garland policy discourses in which there is little or nothing of the clamour for equality or equity that was once so powerful a part of the gender agenda (2015, 397).

Batliwala offers a potential solution similar to that proposed by Vargas and Stephen. She suggests we need to build a new language by listening to marginalised women
who will be better placed to articulate their search for justice via their own concepts and strategies (Batliwala 2007, 564).

To return to an earlier point, the language of universal rights has been manipulated to justify Western imperial intervention. Cornwall and Rivas, and Batliwala’s arguments are similar to the sinister savior narrative discussed in Spivak’s essay “Can the subaltern speak?” Women are often the pawn in imperialist agendas; the remedy is not, however, to disregard the opportunity universal rights affords us to challenge inequality and injustice. As Spivak resolves “One cannot write off the righting of wrongs” (2004, 524). Arguably, perhaps we need not think of human rights in such binary terms. Ratna Kapur contends:

that a ‘turn away’ from human rights as an emancipatory project and a ‘turn towards’ a project that ostensibly holds out emancipatory possibilities is neither an act of false consciousness nor a move towards cultural relativism and rejection of a ‘western’ project. It marks a genuine search for freedom and meaningful happiness that transcends both positions (2014, 31).

I see the work of this thesis is similar to that proposed by Kapur, in that a genuine search for freedom cannot be framed within binary terms or debates, such as positive freedom versus negative freedom, or cultural relativism versus universal human rights. The search needs to transcend, and perhaps more importantly, challenge these positions.

Why Feminism?

The term “feminism” originated in France, but it is not an exclusively Western concept, nor is it, as Margot Badran points out, the “patrimonial home of feminisms
from which all feminisms derive and against which they must be measured” (2005, 12). To cite just one example, Qasim Amin is widely regarded as the first Egyptian feminist; he published *The Liberation of Women* in 1899. By the 1920’s feminism was in use in Egypt as *nisa’iyya* (Badran 2009, 242-3). There are, however, considerable differences between “Third World” and Euro-American “First World” women’s relationship with feminism (Mohanty et al. 1991, 8).¹⁶ The limitations of applying feminism emerging from white, middle-class, Western women for Third World women’s struggles is outlined by a number of feminist scholars. In 1983, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak delivered a ground-breaking lecture “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which she discusses the double subjugation of subaltern women. Her oft-quoted phrase “‘[w]hite men are saving brown women from brown men’”, highlights the way in which subaltern women are positioned as passive objects in need of rescue from “brown men” (1994, 92). Spivak concludes “[t]he subaltern cannot speak” (1994, 104), because they are always spoken for by people in positions of power, their voice cannot, therefore, be heard. In 1984 Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiqued “a latent ethnocentrism in particular feminist writings on women in the third world” (Mohanty 1984, 353). Mohanty’s juxtaposition of the “Third World” woman with women in the “West” emphasises the problematic complex power dynamics between countries labelled “third” and “first” world. She also identifies how this terminology implicitly reinforces existing ideological, economic, and cultural hierarchies.

The applicability and relevance of particular Western feminist writing was further questioned by Deniz Kandiyoti when she concluded: “I have found Western

¹⁶ “The term Third World is frequently applied in two ways: to refer to “underdeveloped”/overexploited geopolitical entities, i.e., countries, regions, and even continents; and to refer to oppressed nationalities from these world areas who are not resident in “developed” First World countries”. Like Cheryl Johnson-Odim I will be using this dual definition throughout this thesis (Johnson-Odim 1991, 314).
feminist theories either inadequate or incomplete” (1987, 335). In 1992 Antoinette Burton emphasised that the “historically imperial context of the middle-class British feminist movement” has for the most part been overlooked. She elaborated: “middle-class British feminists viewed the women of the East not as equals but as unfortunates in need of saving by their British feminist “sisters”. By imagining the women of India as helpless colonial subjects, British feminists constructed “the Indian woman” as foil against which to gauge their own progress” (1992, 137). For Burton, British Victorian and Edwardian feminists collaborated in the ideological work of British imperialism.

Today, the “unfortunates in need of saving” are Muslim women, who are constructed as dependent on their Western sisters for representing their plight and improving their degrading conditions. In November 2001 Cherie Blair lent her support to the invasion of Afghanistan, in a speech that echoed the sentiment expressed by Laura Bush two days earlier. She stated: “The women in Afghanistan are as entitled as the women in any country are to have the same hopes and aspirations for ourselves and for our daughters - a good education and career outside the home if they want one, the right to healthcare and, of course, most importantly, a right for their voices to be heard” (2001). Cherie Blair much like Laura Bush justified the need for the invasion on the premise that it would save the women of Afghanistan and introduce the “same” rights enjoyed by some women in the “West”. Blair’s use of social-evolutionary language portrays Afghan women’s suffering as archaic, and implies it is the duty of emancipated women to liberate those that are enslaved. Blair positions herself as the female saviour offering women a space “to be heard”, but in so doing she further subjugates these “victim subjects” into silence. As Spivak

---

17 Kandiyoti defines her reference to Western feminist theories as “[r]adical feminist theories of both the culturalist and materialist variety, insofar as they choose to stress the universal aspects of women’s oppression” (1987, 335)
explains, “the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved. The woman is doubly in shadow” (1994, 84). Similar to the “maternal imperialism” Burton describes (1992, 144), this narrative of leading the women of Afghanistan to freedom came to represent all Muslim women of the Middle East, and as Burton aptly concludes “feminism(s) are and always will be as much quests for power as they are battles for rights” (Burton 1992, 152).

Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) and Saba Mahmood (2005) exposed how “oppressed Muslim women” were politically appropriated as a category to justify imperial projects of violent intervention (Abu-Lughod 2013, 9-20). Abu-Lughod and Mahmood critically interrogated the promotion of a particular type of freedom based on Western liberal secular democracy, to suggest that there is a need to re-define the terms choice, agency, and freedom from within an Islamic framework. Abu-Lughod contends:

> it is rarely a case of being free or oppressed, choosing or being forced. Representations of the unfreedom of others that blame the chain of culture incite rescue missions by outsiders. Such representations mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation. They also deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live. […] [including the fact that] the most basic conditions of these women’s lives are set by political forces that are local in effect but national and even international in origin. (2013, 20-24)

The problem is not tradition or culture but militarization, as Deniz Kandiyoti has pointed out: “what to Western eyes looks like “tradition” is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible
by a commodified criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty” (2009, 10). Many of the writers in this thesis invite their readers to focus their gaze on the role played by European and American powers in perpetuating global inequalities which serve to exacerbate or cause the suffering of people elsewhere. In chapter six I discuss Mandanipour’s allusion to Western powers aiding the current totalitarian regime in Iran.

Mariz Tadros and Ayesha Khan contend scholarship critiquing “the politcised constructs of binary framings in relation to Arab and Muslim contexts in the Middle East […] led to a paradigmatic shift in the area of the study of women’s agency” (2018, 2). They point out that scholars such as Abu-Lughod (2013) and Mahmood (2005) “challenged ideas that religious agency and women’s rights necessarily exist in an oxymoronic relationship” (Tadros and Khan 2018, 2). Crucially, Tadros and Khan argue this body of work that sought to challenge the binary framings pitting “authentic Muslim women [against] the Westernised disconnected local feminist” created another set of binaries “that of the Western areligious elitist local feminist versus the local indigenous religious authentic non-feminist” (2018, 3-5). They propose there is a need for a further paradigmatic shift to create a new interpretative framework for feminist scholarship. This thesis seeks to intervene in these debates surrounding the relationship between Islam, feminism and secularism. In my second chapter I interrogate the relationship between these concepts in order to analyse Aboulela’s self-categorisation of her novels as “Muslim Feminist”. I suggest that Aboulela’s message seems to anticipate Saba Mahmood’s conceptualisation of agency. For Aboulela, freedom and secularism are Western constructs, her Muslim
“pre-feminism” ultimately justifies rather than challenges patriarchal Islamic customs and values.

It is my contention that the texts in this thesis all examine the possible convergences and divergences between Islam, feminism and secularism, through the writer’s or their protagonist’s quest for freedom. There is a pressing need to reconfigure the dynamic relationship between Islam, feminism and secularism, terms that are traditionally considered incompatible. My thesis takes inspiration from Afsaneh Najmabadi, who argues:

Thinking of Islam as the antithesis of modernity and secularism forecloses the possibilities of recognizing these emergences and working for these reconfigurations; it blocks off formation of alliances; it continues to reproduce Islam as exclusive of secularism, democracy, and feminism, as a pollutant of these projects; and it continues the work of constituting each as the edge at which meaning would collapse for the other (2000, 41).

I suggest we need to conceive of these terms as relational rather than fixed and constricted, in this way the concepts might flow in and out of one another allowing for the ongoing transformation of these terms.

At this point, it is useful to examine some of the ways in which Islam, feminism and secularism have intersected historically to challenge the idea that these terms are necessarily incompatible. In the earlier twentieth century, prior to the emergence of the term Islamic feminism, feminists from Muslim societies attempted to bring to the fore women’s rights found in the Qur’an and exposed the patriarchal practices masked as Islamic. However, Muslim feminists were unwilling to interject in patriarchal practices within the private sphere of the home, because they considered a patriarchal family structure to be Islamic. Second wave Muslim feminists in the
latter decades of the twentieth century questioned the patriarchal family through legal reform, and later joined forces with Islamic feminists in some places in an attempt to tackle the private injustices, which were harder to change (Badran 2008, 32-3). Islamic feminism became visible in the 1990s in various locations such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and South Africa (Badran 2009, 243-4). Islamic feminists sought to establish their own *tafsir* (Qur’anic interpretation) (Badran 2008, 28-30). They departed from Muslim feminism as they promoted full gender equality and challenged the idea of the patriarchal family as pre-ordained. Islamic feminists focused on finding freedom from within the scripture. They fought for justice and equality in the latter half of the twentieth century, as Muslim women struggled to counteract the patriarchal resurgence in Muslim countries in the name of Islam.

There is a multiplicity of definitions for Islamic feminism and considerable debates surrounding controversial questions such as: who is entitled to speak as and or name someone as an “Islamic feminist.” Additionally, not all scholars and activists agree with the term “Islamic feminism”, and in fact some also object to being labelled an “Islamic feminist”.

As I outlined earlier, Third World feminist scholars and activists have denounced certain feminisms as ethnocentric, “white”, and “Western”. Along these lines, some Muslim female scholars reject feminism altogether as unnecessary. They contend that the Qu’ran contains principles of gender equality, which can be used to challenge patriarchy. For one example see Asma Barlas’ “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an (2002). Barlas contends she felt silenced by the designation of “feminist” because she could not identify with those who homogenised Islam as a patriarchal religion. She prefers her writing to be known as “scholarship-activism”. She suggests it is not the Qur’an but the material
and ideological position from which it is read and practised that results in Islam being read as patriarchal (Kynsilehto 2008, 17). Barlas believes labels often silence alternative theories and critiques.\(^{18}\) I would argue that feminism as a concept can offer a space for dissent, and the evolution of different approaches and positions. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty has established, the practise of solidarity should not assume a commonality of oppression. Feminist solidarity departs from the concept of “sisterhood” to “cross borders – to decolonize knowledge and practise anticapitalist critique” (Mohanty 2003, 7).

On the other hand, Fatima Mernissi distances herself from Islamic feminists who rely on Qur’anic readings to promote gender equality. Instead she researches the socio-historical and political context surrounding the transmitters of the Hadith and the circumstances around the act of remembrance in search of truth and authenticity within the Hadith. Mernissi also focuses on historical examples of Muslim women who were critical, and resistant to Islam, such as Sukayna, one of the great-granddaughters of the Prophet who “revolt[ed] against political oppressive, despotic Islam and against everything that hinders the individual’s freedom – including the hijab” (1991a, 192). Mernissi recalls the hostility she has faced when presenting her findings, which she sums up as the “attempt to obliterate the memory of Sukayna by a modern Muslim man who only accepts his wife as veiled, crushed, and silent remains for me an incident that symbolizes the whole matter of the relationship of the Muslim man to time – of amnesia as memory, of the past warping the possibilities of the present” (1991a, 194). She rejects the “mediocrity and servility that is presented to us as tradition” (1991a, 194), in order to suggest that Muslim women have been wrongly

\(^{18}\) Barlas considers it impossible to position herself as a feminist without sharing the same reading of Islam, she contends solidarity amongst Muslim women needs more than a shared discourse of feminism (Kynsilehto 2008, 18-19). She questions what effect naming has, in particular why there is a need to label something feminist, particularly when for example Muslim women were reading liberation into and out of the Qur’an much before feminism (Kynsilehto 2008, 20).
transformed into “submissive, marginal creature[s]” (1991a, 194). Mernissi seeks to construct a more egalitarian understanding of Islam, to create a discourse of gender equality and expose patriarchal customs purported to be Islamic.

Among the many feminist paradigms in the Middle East there is perhaps none more polarised than “secular feminism” and “Islamic feminism”. Secular and religious are historically considered binary terms, with the term secular associated with modernity, the West, and worldliness, and religious attributed to “traditional” and “backward” (Badran 2005, 10). This tendency to conflate secularism, religion and fundamentalism is not peculiar to the Middle East. Sara R Farris responded to armed French police forcing a woman to remove her “burkini” on a beach in Nice on 23 August 2016. In “Secularism is the Fundamentalist Religion of France” Farris described “the Muslim women of France [as] victims of religious persecution carried out in the name of secularism” (2016). In response Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Stephen Cowden call for theoretical rigour, to avoid incorrectly conflating and collapsing the meaning of the terms we use:

Nationalism, Racism and Secularism are not the same thing: […] we do not accept the ‘burkini ban’ was intended to uphold respect for the morals and values of secularism. But we also do not believe that the ban reflects the meaning and purpose of laicite. Rather, the burkini affair is an expression of resurgent racist nationalism in France (and across Europe) where there has been an alarming rise in attacks on migrants and minorities of all faiths and apportioning of blame on migrants for austerity policies and a retracting welfare state (2016).

Dhaliwal and Cowden correctly assert there is a need to avoid over-simplifying, to focus on finding “in the words of Karima Bennoune ‘a space for opposition to
fundamentalism and racism, to sex discrimination and religious or ethnic
discrimination, to the Muslim far right and the French far right” (2016).

Margot Badran in her research into Islamic feminism in the Middle East
demonstrates how different strands of feminism flow in and out of each other,
“secular feminism is Islamic and Islamic feminism is secular” (Badran 2005, 12). It
may well be too utopic to take inspiration from Badran’s conclusion that the next step
is for there to be a collective solidarity that breaks down the binaries, such as that of
secular and Islamic feminism to enable “Islam’s gender revolution” (Badran 2005,
23). Instead I suggest a return to the opening quotation of this introduction, taken
from Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale “[t]here is more than one kind of freedom”. In
order to prioritise gender equality we need to avoid the conflation of concepts that
reaffirm binary oppositions. Secularism enables the freedom to believe, alongside the
freedom from belief, and the potential for an inclusive feminist politics of solidarity.

All of the texts in this thesis examine Muslim women’s struggle for freedom,
and part of that struggle is connected to their conceptualisation of the relationship
between Islam, feminism and secularism. This is particularly true of Aboulela’s
novels. From the outset, Aboulela positions her novels as “Muslim feminist”, thereby
aligning herself with earlier strands of Islamic feminism that consider patriarchal
family structures as pre-ordained. In contrast, Faqir identifies as a secular Muslim
woman. Her novel satiricises the idea that Islam and feminism are necessarily
incompatible, and that emancipation is only possible in the West. Similarly, Crowther
examines the possibilities for religious agency, as her protagonist Maryam is
empowered by her struggle for home. Ultimately, it is often in the exposition of their
various forms of unfreedom that the writers or their protagonists assert a form of
feminist agency.
Veiled Resistance

In neo-liberal popular culture, “freedom” is often set in opposition to the unfreedom of Islam. A cipher for this is often women’s clothing, or more specifically the headscarf, which has come to be representative of the success or purported failure of multiculturalism and assimilation, a sign of tolerance or intolerance as the case may well be, and freedom in Western nations. The veil\(^{19}\) has become “a facilitator of economic activity for women rather than [...] a cultural or religious sign” (Berger 1998, 94). This has resulted in a hypervisibility of the veiled ethnic subject, who is often reduced to an object of consumption. The modest Muslim fashion movement is one such example. Diasporic Iranian and Arab women writers are in a similar way highly marketable. Both the literary and fashion spheres offer the opportunity for self-expression, but are equally liable to “fall victim to what Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flakerud identify as the “Western tendency to view every issue of the Middle East through the lens of religion, Islam in particular.”” (Ahmad, 2009, 108) This section of the introduction will consider creative forms of resistance and attempts to re-imagine what it means to assert freedom, to redefine the concept of choice, and avoid agency becoming a fetishized commodity.

Veiling and unveiling is a crucial theme in many of the texts in this thesis. Faqir examines the experience of unveiling as an exiled Muslim woman in Britain, whilst Aboulela’s protagonist in Minaret turns to Islam and the veil as an antidote to the loneliness of exile. For Crowther’s protagonist Sara, the chador is a protective shield, for Sara’s mother unveiling is connected to the violation of her body. The

\(^{19}\) Throughout this thesis I use Ratna Kapur’s definition of the term “veil” - “a generic category that includes it various manifestations – the hijab, jilbab, abaya, niqab, burqa and chador – each version of the garment encoded with particular meaning for its adherents, proponents and opponents, and serving as both topos and target of national and regional socio-politics as well as global geo-politics” (Kapur 2018, 120).
complex history of veiling, unveiling and reveiling in Iran forms part of Crowther’s narrative, it also features in the memoirs examined in chapter five. At this point it is useful to briefly discuss the history of veiling in Iran. In 1936 when Reza Shah legally abolished the chador and veil in an effort to move towards a modern Iran, the forceful and at times violent imposition of unveiling marginalised women. Their bodies became mere symbols of the country, Islamic or modern. Compulsory unveiling came to an end in 1941 when Reza Shah was removed from power, and until 1978 women had relative freedom over the choice of attire in public, although this negotiation was subject to associations with tradition and modernity. In the 1970s an authenticity movement gathered momentum, brandishing unveiled women “Western dolls” (Zahedi 2008, 257). Religious critics employed women as a tool for promoting authentic Islamic culture and ideology, arguing that cultural imperialism had resulted in the corruption of Iranian women, turning them into sexual objects and slaves of consumerism. In 1979 the veil took on another meaning during the Iranian Revolution, signifying resistance to the Shah. In 1980 compulsory veiling became synonymous with “moral cleansing” (Zahedi 2008, 257).

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad has compared the use of the hijab in 1970s Iran to what she terms a re-appropriation of the veil in North America as an act of defiance, an “iconic symbol” of an “authentic” American Islamic identity (2007, 254). Haddad argues the hijab in North America has become a symbol of resistance against the image of Muslim women projected by Western media and war propaganda, which she contends is similar to the hijab being employed as a form of dissent against the Western imperialism Reza Shah Pahlavi imposed.

It is, however, problematic to conflate protests against mandatory unveiling with those who actively choose to wear the hijab as an affirmation of identity and
heritage, particularly when one considers the forced veiling that followed the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The veil has variable meanings, it can symbolize an affirmation of an ethno-religious identity and a challenge to sexism, but such meanings can only be ascribed to the veil when it is not mandatory, Leila Ahmed explains, “[c]learly these are meanings that the hijab can come to have only in societies that declare themselves committed to gender equality and equality for minorities. They are not meanings that the hijab could possibly have in Cairo or Karachi or Riyadh or Tehran” (2011, 213). It is reductive to conflate these struggles.

Rebecca Gould makes a useful comparison between European legislation banning the veil with Iranian and Saudi Arabian legislation where the veil is mandatory. She contends both policies participate in the capitalist world-system (2014, 223).20 She concludes: “the most substantial impediments to the achievement of freedom and autonomy for women are posed by the legal regulations currently in place in secular democracies and Islamic republics alike, whereby men are authorized to determine how women should dress and to punish those who have the courage to disobey” (2014, 236-7). Campaigns for veiling or unveiling converge in their violent imposition on women’s bodies. Gould finds the veil is being used in three ways:

1. To consolidate male authority. The responsibility to maintain mandatory veiling is enforced by male members of a woman’s family and acquaintance. Women’s bodies become homogenously visible in an appropriate “Islamic” fashion (Gould 228).

---

20 Rebecca Gould explains “the Islamic veil (hijab) fulfills the three basic criteria of the Marxian commodity: (1) it is traded on the market; (2) it fabricates and satisfies a human desire; (3) it stimulates a desire for the perpetuation of immaterial relations it engenders” (2014, 222). The European policy banning the veil and the Iranian and Saudi Arabian legislation that make the veil mandatory deploy the veil “as one of that system’s most richly signifying commodities. Veiling, unveiling, and misveiling (wearing the veil in a way that deliberately flouts state regulations) all propose different kinds of bargains with the state that regulates women’s dress codes” (2014, 223).
2. Veiling and unveiling is being commodified as the *hijab* has become a fashion statement. Acts of resistance against the *hijab* have been assimilated into the capitalist world-system. The fashionably dressed “misveiled” woman is as much a product of the patriarchal project as the modestly dressed woman. The female body has become a site of commodification (Gould 232).

3. Finally, the veil is being reclaimed as a site of women’s agency if it is freely chosen, it can also become a political act of solidarity (Gould 236). However, like Leila Ahmed, Gould acknowledges that this liberation through veiling is only possible within certain contexts; it cannot be emancipatory for a collective so long as women are forced to veil by the state.

Gould has examined the conflicted relationship between veiling and capitalist modernity, she contends “it violates women’s autonomy and consolidates male authority, compulsory veiling assimilates female modesty into capitalism’s political economy. When it takes the form of commodification, resistance to the veil within this system is as much a product of women’s subjugation as is submission to the hijab regime” (2014, 231). I depart from Haddad in her assertion that American Muslim women are re-appropriating the veil in a similar way to the women in 1970s Iran as a form of resistance, and extend Gould’s contention that the veil is commodified within countries that impose compulsory veiling. Capitalism has co-opted the struggle Muslim women experience in Western Europe and North America, turning the *hijab* into a fashionable form of commodified resistance.

Modest Muslim fashion has become an emblem for the concept and politics of freedom, “[f]ashion often presents itself as all about choice; a binary opposition to the presumed impositions of religious dress” (Lewis 2015, 165). *Hijabi* fashion is often
associated with the performance of a Muslim identity, an embracing of “otherness” and difference. Muslim identity is framed within a commodified space, which promotes conformity, “capitalist society enforces individuality. Therefore, mainstream culture becomes about maintaining a distinct cultural identity, through manifesting an appearance of rebellion for example. Markets capitalize on this desire to be distinct” (Willett 2008, 56). Dina Torkia, a British Egyptian Muslim woman, self-proclaimed “modest blogger”, has been at the forefront of hijabi fashion in the U.K. She currently has 811,076 subscribers to her YouTube channel and 1.3 million followers of her Instagram account. For Dina Torkia’s followers the hijab has become a fashion statement, and a demarcation of an Islamic identity. Torkia suggests that for her, the hijab has the potential to be emancipatory. In a vlog entitled “My Hijab Story” published on 29 December 2015, she describes the hijab as “no doubt a liberation for women especially in a world where unfortunately sex and misogyny is legitimised in almost everything in life” (np.). Here traditional meanings ascribed to the veil of modesty and protection are being subverted and juxtaposed with contemporary associations that render the veil a self-assertion, a protest and a symbol of autonomy. It has been appropriated to enhance visibility, rather than invisibility.

In “Why I wear Hijab (The Truth)” she responds to the question “do you like wearing the scarf?” by stating:

I don’t think I do like it, no, honestly it’s a pain in the backside, not going to lie […] I’ve been wearing it since I was twelve and I really don’t like wearing it but I know the only reason it’s still stuck on my head whatever style whatever way I do it is literally because I know that is what God wants […] I think this is why I’m into fashion and styling and designing because it keeps it

21 Subscribers and followers last checked on 7 January 2018: https://www.youtube.com/user/dinatokio/about
fresh for me, it keeps me wearing the *hijab* consistent. [...] If I was doing it just for fashion yeah, I’d be wearing it now during this modesty movement and hype and once that hype died down I’d be taking it off, yeah, there’d be no consistency that’s what fashion is (29 April 2017).

It is troubling that Torkia’s ability to be “consistent” and continue to wear the *hijab* is reliant upon consumer culture. She articulates her British Muslim identity through fashion. Like other social media stars Torkia has collaborated with various brands, and these collaborations have suffused her body with exchange value. Gould contends that “[w]ithin the capitalist system, the veil functions analogously to a sexy bathing suit: both articles of clothing render the woman’s body up for consumption” (2014, 232). Torkia is no exception to the conspicuous consumption that is a feature of social media, product reviews and “shopping hauls” that permeate the vlogsphere.

In September 2018 Torkia released a memoir entitled *Modestly*. Around the same time, in October 2018, she revealed she had removed her *hijab*. “I’ve only recently started showing my hair over the past few months, every now and then whenever I have felt comfortable to do so. Some days I’m more comfortable covering my hair and other days I’m more comfortable showing it”. The abuse she has received as a consequence was highlighted by a forty-seven minute vlog entitled “The Bad, the Worse and the Ugly”, in which she reads the abuse she has been subjected to since the removal of her *hijab*.

---

22 Such as Liberty of London, Monsoon, Neutrogena, H & M, and Revlon U.K.
The reaction to Torkia’s unveiling highlights the aggressive and violent policing of women’s bodies in contemporary British society. Torkia refers to the Muslim men who have attacked her online as the “haram police […] there will always be an underlying tone of misogyny and aggression or sense of power. It is not the attitude a genuine Muslim man should be carrying” (Jackson 2018). Torkia has challenged her Muslim male critics in the past. In a blog post on 17 October 2017 entitled “Muslim Men”, she defies the virulent image of a silent and oppressed Muslim woman in need of saving. “[W]e will be the ones to take control of our future without the subconscious manipulation that is constantly used by men of our religion, that comes from a sense of entitlement, power trips and religious abuse, that we as a community are constantly excusing and allowing. DON’T ALLOW IT ANYMORE.” Torkia exposes how the dressed body of the Muslim woman is a political, ideological and discursive battleground that is subjected to various male-inscribed meanings (Pereira-Ares 2018, 190). One might read this as a call rallying her followers to challenge Muslim men who criticise the way women dress, she thereby seeks to
foreground the voices of Muslim women to defy and subvert these male-inscribed meanings.

There is, however, a marketisation of religious practises in the vlogsphere. Lewis has framed this as a space “where community can include commerce as well as readers, the potentially negative impact of commodifying oneself as a blogger brand can be transformed into an agentive practice of Islamic self-actualization” (2015, 312-3). However, the liberation promoted through modest fashion remains a product of the capitalist culture inhabited.

Torkia’s decision to stop wearing the hijab full time is perhaps her most political move. She asserts her position has changed as she now “believes a woman in a hijab is no more religious than a woman without – and that in fact women who “parade” their piety are being the opposite of modest” (Jackson 2018). Her unveiling has revealed the multiple forms of subordination Muslim women experience in Britain. Alongside the abuse and violent threats she has received online from Muslim men, she emphasises the hijab leaves women vulnerable to racial abuse.

[I]t turns Muslim women into targets […] I maybe had a few boys on bikes shout at me, but it was much worse for my old friends in London. They all took off their scarves because they couldn’t handle the abuse on the Tube. […] It’s the women who bear the brunt of Islamophobia in our society, because we have made this commitment to wear the hijab and, however we wear it, we always get funny looks (Jackson 2018).

Torkia has said she started to style her headscarf like a turban because it was “easier on the eye for some people” (Jackson 2018). She exposes the obsessive focus on Muslim women’s veiled, unveiled and mis-veiled bodies, and the double
subordination experienced as a consequence of patriarchal practises, and racial abuse suffered.

For Muslim Iranian blogger Hoda Katebi fashion is inextricable from politics, as her Muslim identity is not exploited for commercially lucrative collaborations. For Katebi, the hijab serves as a political weapon: “more importantly, wearing provocative clothing – complete with my Hijab – allows me to reclaim my agency in an public transaction of non-verbal communication I would have otherwise been subjected to without consent” (2017). Katebi imposes her own meaning on the hijab, proving that “the veil’s meanings are not fixed or static across histories and societies” (Ahmed 2011, 212).

The hijab, for Katebi, is a tool to reclaim her body from all those that sought to superimpose an identity upon her. Katebi describes the hypervisibility of her veiled body, which emphasises what Wendy Brown describes as “the extent to which women everywhere are still made to bear the burden of culture” (2012, 1). Katebi
utilises the *hijab* as a device to simultaneously expose and challenge the intersectionality of gender, ethnic and religious discrimination.

Finding a voice and place in exile is a process of deconstructing and reconstructing an identity. The diasporic Iranian and Arab women writers in this thesis are not passive recipients of cultural dislocation. Rather, they describe themselves or their characters actively travelling back and forth transgressing boundaries to re-negotiate their place and find a space from which to speak. The pen becomes a tool of empowerment; they seek to challenge stereotypes, and to complicate Orientalist hegemonic narratives.

The art of Shirin Neshat, in particular her first body of work, a collection of black and white photographs produced between 1993-1997 entitled the “Women of Allah” series serves as a visual embodiment of the way in which diasporic women are challenging the labels and dichotomies associated with Muslim women. In this series, women wearing *chardors* and holding weapons stare defiantly at the viewer.

![Figure 3: Shirin Neshat “Faceless” from the series Women of Allah 1993-1997.](image)
Neshat explains:

In some images I use guns or bullets to suggest terrorism and how that idea can raise so much fear about Arab identity in the West. Those props shatter our stereotype of the typical Muslim woman as a passive and submissive victim. […] I use Farsi script […] I often use expressions or lines of poetry. I don’t think it matters that the writing can’t be understood in the West. So much of it is written within the context of Islamic religion, politics, and the history of feminism in Iran that it would not have the same meaning for someone who was not from Iran as it would for an Iranian (Stein 1997, 145).

Neshat does not attempt to dilute the threatening imagery so often associated with Islam. Instead she deconstructs the stereotypes, to suggest there are multiple meanings embedded within this imagery. In these images Muslim women are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The poetry of pioneering Iranian women writers covers the unveiled parts of women’s bodies in this series, the rebellious words written reclaim the body that has been consumed by the chador.

Figure 4: Shirin Neshat “Rebellious” from the series Women of Allah 1993-1997.
These photographs embody the familiar image of the veiled woman, but these women are not helpless or passive victims averting their gaze. The transliterations within the texts serve to disorient the Euro-American reader, just as the observers of Neshat’s art are unable to read the text scrawled across their body leaving the observer powerless. Neshat’s art showcases the disorienting experience of being an Iranian in exile in the United States who fled prior to the revolution. Neshat’s point of departure has further alienated her from her homeland.

Some of the texts written by diasporic Iranian writers in this thesis share Neshat’s experience. In chapter four and five the authors describe an inability to recognise Iran after the violent transformation of the Iranian revolution. Creativity therefore offers a space to challenge the personal and political oppressions they have suffered as a diasporic subject.

The transformative potential of transnational mobility is a recurring theme for the writers examined in this thesis. Whether through return, or an escape, the multiple migrations undertaken by the writers or their characters offer the opportunity for recreation, and re-invention. The diasporic experience has evolved, Abboud contends: “[n]o longer are immigrants expected to leave their homelands and begin the process of assimilation or forgetting; instead new definitions of nationality have emerged, encouraging individuals to embrace their heritage and to incorporate their ‘past’ lives with those of their current and future lives” (2009, 374). Accordingly, this potential for transnationality offers immigrants the opportunity to be simultaneously in more than one place, to represent more than one nation, culture and homeland (Abboud 2009, 374).

However, as Rashmi Varma reminds us, “[t]he very dispersion of Third World women through the globe is a consequence of colonialism and global capitalism, free
markets and unfair trade, and it is difficult to read as even a potentially emancipatory massing together of women” (2012, 173). In this vein, I have therefore sought to foreground the material conditions surrounding women’s experiences in the diaspora.

Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj have pointed out that in reception there is a tendency to conflate Third World Women’s texts with their lives, and their cultural and national identities (2000, 10-11). Not only are writers held to be representative of their culture, the reception they receive can at times assume they are their culture (Amireh and Majaj 9). Edward Said observes ideas are absorbed into the new environment through travel, “to some extent [they are] transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place” (1983, 227). In the same way an idea is transformed, a text has the potential to be absorbed by the reception it receives. Instead of being read as a piece of fiction the text is perceived to offer an “authentic” glimpse of the author’s culture. Discussions of this literature often centre around the presumption that the “Third World” experience is monolithic and singular, and that women are positioned as “victims” and emancipated through their exposure to the “West”. This thesis seeks to explore the complexity and plurality of women’s experiences in the diaspora. I will foreground women writers in order to focus on how migration and diaspora formations are gendered to juxtapose traditional and conventional discourses often associated with the marginalised experience. By exploring literature that complicates, challenges, subverts and reinforces gendered accounts of migration, ethnicity, and identity conflicts, I propose that voluntary and forced migrations can be both liberatory and oppressive.
The Chapters

Chapter one “My Name is Salma – “Salma c’est moi”: The Exiled Muslim Woman of Fadia Faqir’s Novel”, begins with an intervention into the debates surrounding Faqir’s decision to write in English instead of Arabic. These debates surrounding a writer’s choice of language inform my reading of the texts in every chapter. I argue that Faqir adopts a linguistic plurality to resist the simplistic ordering of literature according to language. I read her decision to write in English as an act of resistance against the patriarchal censorship in her homeland, and her use of Arabic idioms and transliterations throughout the novel as signaling a rejection of her life in exile. Faqir exemplifies Rosi Braidotti’s “nomadic consciousness” as she confronts contentious issues such as honour killings, arranged marriages, veiling and unveiling, demonstrating a “peripheral consciousness” through her ongoing critical engagement with these personal and universal issues.

Faqir’s novel questions what emancipation and repression means for a Muslim woman exiled in Britain. I analyse Faqir’s repeated references to the terms master and slave through Hegel’s Lordship and Bondage dialectic, and Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler’s engagement with Hegel. Faqir complicates traditional constructions of freedom by challenging the image of a liberated unveiled Muslim woman saved by the West. Ultimately, I conclude that Faqir’s protagonist is liberated through her return to Hima not her escape, as she risks her life to rescue her daughter and in so doing obtains freedom from all that served to subjugate her.

Chapter two “Free Enslavement: Muslim Women’s Agency in Leila Aboulela’s Minaret and The Translator”, interrogates a central concern of this thesis: the relationship between securalism, Islam and freedom. This chapter will confront
Aboulela’s conceptualisation of secularism as Islam’s antithesis, and intervene in debates surrounding post-secular scholarship. Aboulela, like Faqir, is a well-known author who challenges the popular trope of oppressed and then liberated Muslim women. She is widely celebrated for her promotion of religious agency. However, I identify few scholars are willing to challenge Aboulela’s faith-based empowerment. Aboulela seeks to redefine the concept of freedom in her novels by implying that Muslim women are content in their self-subjugation, and that they do not need to escape patriarchy because she suggests there is much to be gained from returning to traditional gendered roles. She promotes what I term free enslavement – submissiveness, docility and conservatism as a form of resistance and remedy to liberal-secular values, which ultimately is not emancipatory.

Chapter three, “The Unfreedom of Poverty and War in Betool Khedairi’s A Sky So Close”, marks a departure from the first two chapters in that the text examined is written in Arabic and read in translation. Khedairi writes in Arabic to present what is often absent, an Iraqi woman’s perspective of the war with Iran and the Gulf War. She is, therefore, what Nadje Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar refer to as an “exception” (2013, xxxiv), which is one of the reasons driving the inclusion of the text within this thesis. In this chapter I return to a point I outlined in this introduction, namely that there is a lack of scholarship examining the separation between human rights laws and the real lived reality of the “subaltern”. I utilise Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak?” and Upendra Baxi’s theory of the “small voice of history” (2006, xxii), to read A Sky So Close. This chapter focuses on barriers to freedom. I assert Khedairi gives a voice to the voiceless, exposing the everyday reality of poverty and war. She challenges the silence surrounding the female body and sexuality within Arabic literature, and
articulates the suffering female body and “taboo” sexuality, to challenge predominant discourses surrounding womanhood.

In chapter four, “‘For each freedom we choose, we must give up another’: False Freedom in Yasmin Crowther’s The Saffron Kitchen”, I turn my attention to Anglo-Iranian fiction. This chapter focuses on what I term false freedom, a state of unfreedom when freedom is not personally chosen but imposed. I examine what is lost in pursuit of freedom, drawing back to a theme explored in chapter one where I discuss how women are oppressed and empowered through migration. The topic of mother-daughter relationships is under-researched in contemporary analysis of diasporic Iranian literature. I read the significance of this relationship to women’s empowerment through Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1986). I extend Afsaneh Najmabadi’s critique of gendered nationalist discourse, analysing the connection that can be drawn between the protagonist’s violated body and the historical events of 1950s Iran. I challenge Karim Mattar’s reading of the novel, in which he suggests Crowther presents the “redemptive possibilities” (2012, 565) available to women in the Islamic Republic. I conclude that the novel universalises the problem of gendered unfreedom.

In chapter five “Unveiling Voices in the Diasporic Iranian Women’s Memoir Genre”, I argue that revealing self-censorship becomes a form of resistance within this genre. To a greater or lesser extent, each memoir in this chapter attempts to reject reductive discourses that label them “enlightened escapees” (Ahmed 2015, 189) or “native informers” (Dabashi 2011, 15). Instead of selling a narrative that homogenises Iran and Iranian women, their selective silence becomes their currency. Their self-censorship is a productive paradox enabling them to regulate their privacy and achieve self-determinism, whilst exposing the personal struggles and physical
restrictions that restrain their writing. To different degrees of success, they transform themselves from an exotic object for co-option, to achieve a subjectivity that is resistant to categorisation and consumption.

The final chapter ““Death to freedom, death to captivity”: Beyond Shahriar Mandanipour’s “Islamic” Love Story”, examines the quest for sexual and political freedom in Mandanipour’s *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2011). Mandanipour’s text is translated from Farsi, and complicates the meaning of freedom and oppression. He blurs the boundaries between what has been freely chosen and coercion and force, to suggest that proposals of freedom and unfreedom are an inherently global problem, and oppression is not exclusive to Islamic societies. Women are instruments of power in Mandanipour’s text, in the same way that a writer is expected to reinforce state ideologies. He compares gender relations with the politics of censorship to merge the struggles and demonstrate the limited social space available for dissent. Mandanipour’s text calls for a simultaneous deconstruction of censorship alongside a feminist critique of gender inequality.

To conclude, what ultimately binds this thesis and collection of diasporic Iranian and Arab writers is their shared quest to challenge unfreedom, and design a feminist conceptualisation of freedom.
Chapter 1

"My Name is Salma – “Salma c’est moi”":

The Exiled Muslim Woman of Fadia Faqir’s Novel

The “freedoms” gained and lost by a Muslim woman in the diaspora is the central problematic of Fadia Faqir’s novel My Name is Salma (2007). It is often assumed within neoliberal political rhetoric and popular culture that a woman who has emigrated from the “East” to settle in the “West” is emancipated through this journey. The dichotomous construction of the Western subject as empowered and the non-Western woman as a powerless victim characterises Western countries as free and liberated. This discourse can be cast as neocolonial because it revives an orientalist and colonial mentality of the “Other”. The “theme of women’s oppression in other parts of the world establishes a static model of two homogeneous entities, thereby failing to allow for differences and hierarchies both within the west and those countries designated as other” (Scharff 2011, 130). Faqir complicates the gendered diasporic experience by depicting her protagonist Salma’s exile in Britain as both liberating and further subjugating.

24 In an interview Faqir states: ““Salma c’est moi.” She is part of me, yet not me. We have two things in common: our sense of loneliness in an alien society and a deep sense of loss and yearning for our child. I lost custody of my son when he was thirteen months old” (13 September 2008). I intend to examine the link between Faqir and Salma in the final section of this chapter.

25 I place “freedom” in speech marks in order to suggest that within neoliberal political rhetoric it is often considered a Western construct. I propose that Faqir’s novel is questioning exactly what emancipation and repression means for an exiled Muslim woman in the diaspora.

26 I define neo-liberalism as a “mentality of government” (Rose 1990, 5). This thesis draws on Wendy Brown’s analysis of neo-liberalism which she states is often invoked in relation to the Third World “because it conjures economic policies which sustain or deepen local poverty and the subordination of peripheral to core nations, but also because it is compatible with, and sometimes even productive of, authoritarian, despotic, paramilitaristic, and/or corrupt state forms and agents within civil society” (Brown 2003, 2).

27 A long history of colonialism has of course helped secure this essential framing: colonialism rationalized itself on the basis of the “inferiority” of non-Western cultures, most manifest in their patriarchal customs and practises, from which indigenous women had to be rescued through the agency of colonial rule” (Mahmood 2005, 189-190).
As a writer and academic, Jordanian-born and Britain-based author Fadia Faqir exemplifies what Rosi Braidotti refers to as a “nomadic consciousness”, “a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self. The feminists – or other critical intellectuals as nomadic subjects – are those that have a peripheral consciousness and have forgotten to forget injustice” (2011a, 60). Faqir’s “peripheral consciousness” is overt, as she actively participates in debating and researching her own field of Arab women writers. She also contributes to academic scholarship on Arab women’s rights within an Islamic context. She is conscious of the marketing and reception of her novels, engaging with the critique she receives, to become part of the discussion rather than be defined by it. Thus Braidotti’s “nomadic consciousness” will serve as one of the theoretical frames that informs my reading of My Name is Salma.

Faqir confronts contentious issues in her fiction such as honour killings, the veil, and arranged marriages in an unidentified location in the Levant and in Exeter in Britain. In light of these topics and the diasporic location from which she writes, it is unsurprising that Faqir has roused considerable debate. Critics have typically contended: “Faqir perpetuates the image of native women as oppressed” (Suyoufie and Hammad 2009, 306); “Faqir echoes what the West wants to hear about the rigidity of Islam and fragility of the position of women there” (Karmi and Yasin 2017, 1); “Faqir depicts all women in Muslim, traditional societies as victims of patriarchy” (Majed 2015, 116). I argue that these interpretations overlook Faqir’s critical engagement with Salma’s experience of being an illegal immigrant in Britain. She exposes the problems in British society in relation to its treatment of immigrants, whilst also conveying the problems of Bedouin society in which Salma is victim to an androcentric patriarchy that places great value on a family honour maintained through
sexual purity. Additionally, Faqir addresses the Orientalist prejudices and stereotypes that may influence the marketing and reception of her novel, both within the text and in interviews and academic scholarship undertaken prior to and after publication.

Faqir’s first two novels are set in the Middle East. *Nisanit* (1987) concentrates on violations of human rights, and *Pillars of Salt* (1996) deals with gendered inequalities. Her third novel *My Name is Salma* focuses on the marginalised female migrant experience in Britain and honour crimes. Faqir narrates *My Name is Salma* from the perspective of an uneducated Arab shepherdess who flees the unspecified village of Hima because of her unmarried pregnancy. Salma spends eight years under protection in prison, and her daughter is forcibly taken to an orphanage after birth. Salma is then smuggled out of Hima to a convent in Lebanon where she is adopted by a British nun who arranges her journey to England. In a hostel in Exeter she meets Parvin, who is a second-generation Pakistani woman on the run from an arranged marriage. Parvin helps Salma to find work as a seamstress and a place to live. It is only after her marriage to John, a British university lecturer, and after the birth of their son Imran that she begins to assert control over her life. She returns to Hima to rescue her daughter, only to discover that she has been murdered for supposed familial honour. Salma is murdered at her daughter’s grave by her brother.

The novel is set in the late twentieth century. It begins in Britain and ends in Salma’s village Hima; however, the narrative is not linear. To convey her sense of alienation from both communities, Faqir jumps from describing Salma worrying about her landlady in Exeter, to describing the Levant with her lover Hamdan: “Liz would be home soon so I got up and with trembling fingers I began chasing biscuit crumbs and stray dark hairs. Hamdan and I had been playing hide and seek for weeks
now” (22). These constant interruptions to the plot serve to disorientate the reader, in order to replicate Salma’s sense of confusion.

There are four stands to my argument in this chapter. I begin by responding to the criticism Faqir has received for writing in the language of the coloniser. English enables Faqir the freedom to explore aspects of Arab cultural “tradition” which are sometimes used as a tool of oppression to confine women to the domestic sphere and prohibit women from participating in political, economic, sexual, or religious discourses typically dominated by men. I will analyse how the choice to write in English allows Faqir the freedom to explore female sexuality. In the second section, “Silence and Sexual Servitude”, I examine the connection that can be drawn between Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and gendered relationships. I contextualise the significance of Salma’s relationship with her body and sexuality within the novel, to suggest Faqir is seeking to redefine what it means to resist patriarchal structures. The third section “The Exiled Muslim Woman” responds to various critiques of Faqir’s novel. I contend Faqir is challenging what it means to be a “liberated” Muslim woman in exile. In the final section “Salma c’est moi” I outline how the connection that can be drawn between Faqir and her protagonist Salma emphasises the problematic relationship between the female body and familial honour.

A Language of Resistance and Plurality

It is difficult to separate the novel from the author, the position from which Faqir writes, the language she has chosen gives meaning to the text. As a minority

---

28 All references to My Name is Salma will be displayed accordingly: (page number). Quotes from any other text by Faqir will be differentiated using the year of publication. I will follow the same referencing style for all subsequent chapters.

29 This is not to suggest that tradition is a homogeneous, misogynistic entity.
immigrant writer, one might consider Faqir to embody the role Waïl S. Hassan refers to as a “cultural translator” (2011, 4). Hassan draws on French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who label immigrant writing “minor literature” when it is written in a “major language”, suggesting by extension that this literature has revolutionary potential to “deterritorialize” the language of the majority (Hassan 2011, 4-5). Hassan explains:

[A] major language in the hands of a minority writer is defamiliarized through its infusion with words, expressions, rhetorical figures, speech patterns, ideological intentions, and the worldview of the author’s minority group, which differentiate the writer’s language from that of the mainstream culture, producing all sorts of estranging effects (Hassan 4-5).

The limitation of this theory is that it cannot be applied to every immigrant writer of “minor literature”, particularly because the theory generalises and fails to take into consideration the differences, for example, between first generation and second or later generation immigrants (Hassan 6). However, Deleuze and Guattari’s exploration of “minor literature” is useful for reading Faqir, particularly because her novel bears all the characteristics of this literature, including “connect[ing] immediately to politics” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 17). The individual concerns of the novel become political, notions of female honour become conflated with national honour and allegiance, and criticism of cultural practices in a foreign language is automatically designated as a “foreign” attack on the nation.

Faqir’s protagonist remains in a state of transition, in between spaces and languages, this mobile form of subjectivity is indicative of the “nomadic consciousness” Braidotti refers to. The relationship between the nomadic subject and language is useful
for reading Faqir. Braidotti has taken inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari, whose questions seem pertinent to this feminist nomadic subjectivity. They ask:

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? […] This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language? (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 19)

To acquire “nomadic consciousness” in regard to language is to speak from a position of being in between languages. Braidotti terms this “[t]he Nomad as Polyglot […] a linguistic nomad” (2011a, 29). It is from this lingual nomadism that Braidotti contends it is possible to deconstruct identity. Faqir merges Arabic within the English language “Min il-bab lil shibak rayn jay warayy: from the door to the window he follows me. […] Min il-bab lil shibak. Stop fucking watching!” (232) When Faqir weaves the languages together she embraces the complexity of subjectivity, namely that it is not singular or split, but formulated through a process of interweaving multiple cultural identities. The process of defamiliarising the language of the majority to explore the plight of the minority is therefore empowering for Faqir.

Faqir’s use of transliterations resists the simplistic ordering of literary works into national literatures according to their language, and averts a monolithic approach to analysing the text. However, some critics regard Faqir’s decision to write in English rather than Arabic as a form of cultural betrayal, because of the history of imperialism in the Middle East the English language is associated with colonialism (Abdo 2009, 240). It is useful at this point to draw on the work of Ngũgĩ Thiong’o,
who argues that language is both a means of communicating and a carrier of culture (1993, 439). Thiong’o has written about the politics of writing in the English language in colonial and postcolonial societies. He states “language is the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Thiong’o 437). The rejection of the English language is, for Thiong’o, an important part of ant-imperialist struggles.

It is not my intention to conflate the history of imperialism in Africa with that of the Middle East. Instead I suggest it is necessary to point out the relations of power that operate through language. Faqir’s decision to write in English is not evidence of an abandonment of Arabic and thereby culture. She challenges the idea that she might serve as an authentic spokesperson for an entire nation or culture. Faqir adopts English as an act of resistance to the “burden of representation”.30 She proposes an alternative form of resistance from within the English language, by adopting a language of plurality.

Faqir is not alone in her lingual nomadism. Other Arab female writers like Leila Ahmed and Assia Djebar write in English and French rather than Arabic, as they contend that Arabic grammar and syntax has a masculinist normative infrastructure (Abdo 2009, 240-1). The Arabic language has been associated with misogyny because whenever the gender is not clear the masculine overpowers the feminine (Faqir 1998, 18). By extension, it is asserted that Faqir has merely exchanged one misogynistic linguistic system for another (Abdo 2009, 240-1). English is not misogynistic for the same reasons as Arabic, having no grammatical gender, it does nonetheless bear the traces of patriarchy because it has been traditionally dominated and forged by male

---

30 Kobena Mercer referred to the “Burden of Representation” in 1990 in his article “Black Art and the Burden of Representation”, whereby Black artists were considered spokespersons for an entire culture.
speakers or writers – as is also the case for Arabic. Faqir foregrounds the difficulty in defining the “self” and finding a voice from within masculinist languages by drawing attention to the patriarchal constructions of the Arabic and English languages. Faqir scatters transliterations of Arabic within English to disturb and dismantle these manmade languages.

In *My Name is Salma*, language acquisition is also aligned with self-definition, Salma’s ability to master English is indicative of the successful construction of her identities in exile. Faqir implies Salma will be unsuccessful in her search for self-definition, if she attempts to construct her identities from within languages which are antagonistic to her search for autonomy. She contends manmade language has a memory and “[t]hat memory traces the history of male victories and achievement within which the feminine is repressed” (Faqir 1998, 20). She subverts this masculinist language memory, by taking inspiration from Marguerite Duras to create a “new way of communicating” through “feminine literature” (Faqir 1998, 21). “Women have been in darkness for centuries. And when women write, they translate this darkness” (Faqir 1998, 21). Faqir translates Salma’s dislocation when she writes: “I stopped locating myself. I became neither Salma, nor Sal nor Sally, neither Arab nor English” (167). This point of disjunction is also a point of illumination for Salma. By discarding the identities imposed upon her body she can shed light on the “darkness” that has dominated her life. This moment also signals a refusal to become the bearer of any one language, culture, or identity. She attempts to deconstruct her identities in hope of rebuilding them anew outside of the constraints that have defined her. Her murder implies this is not yet a possibility, as she cannot break free of all that has constructed her.
Geoffrey Nash argues Faqir’s decision to write in English constitutes a “dual alienation” where she is opposed to both “the repressive country of origin and the imperialistic country of reception” (2007, 114). The English language of Salma’s narrative in *My Name is Salma* is used to reject the patriarchal censorship in her homeland. The infusion of Arabic idioms within the English language deliberately punctuates the language with foreign references, such as “*Yala tukhni w khalisni. It will be my deliverance*” (97). Consequently, neither the Arab nor English reader is left feeling entirely comfortable. This recognised strategy in Anglo-Arab fiction is analogous to the Arabic literary technique of *mu-arada*, which sets two narrative voices in opposition to one another and allows the author to tell two contrasting stories. By setting these narrative languages in opposition to one another, she transports her readers between Hima and Exeter. The ambiguity surrounding the exact location of the village called Hima serves to prevent Salma from being aligned with any particular nation. Salma remains an outsider in every space she inhabits, which reinforces her sense of homelessness.

Faqir describes Salma transgressing borders and boundaries, crossing, or continually moving, locally and globally, physically and metaphorically throughout the novel. In this way she resists one of the roles Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias assert are often ascribed to women “as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups” (1989, 7). Faqir’s choice of language and Salma’s mobility highlight the complex relationship women have with nationalism. Women are “typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation”, responsible for preserving national homogeneity (McClintock 1995, 354-65). In contrast, Faqir positions *My Name is Salma* as a critique against Arab women being defined through the patriarchal configurations of the coloniser and national society.
Faqir’s text possesses what Hilary Kilpatrick terms “dual literary nationality”, and as such to ensure the complexity of a text is not lost, Kilpatrick urges the reader to consider the English and Arabic narrative tradition and cultural heritage (1992, 46-55). Faqir has explained that women writers in most Arab countries tend to avoid making overt references to religion, sex, and politics (Faqir 1998, 11). Writing in English present an opportunity for self-liberation from the constraints placed on Arab female writers. Faqir has clarified that in order to complicate this decision, she writes Arabic into the English language to negotiate a linguistic space. She explains further, we write back in English; in other words, we carve a space for ourselves within it. But of course that creates problems, because sometimes I want to include Arabic words […] I would love to be able to include Arabic, rather than transliterations. I see fiction thirty years down the line as a mosaic made up of different languages, truly transnational, translingual and transcultural (Moore 2011, 10).

These transliterations may be a compromise for Faqir but they still form a language of resistance, through “an injection of Arab sensibility” (Moore 7). Faqir seeks to “Arabize it… to create […] a hybrid English” (Moore 7). Like many of the writers in this thesis, she occupies a transnational space as a “linguistic nomad” (Braidotti 2011a, 29).

Language, thus, is central to Faqir’s resistance, but she acknowledges that her writing cannot be separated from the conditions of reception which align it with her identity as an Arab immigrant. Since the late nineteenth century, Arab immigrant writers have been influenced by Orientalising prejudices and stereotypes. In 1978 Edward Said explained:
I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity “the Orient” is in question (2003, 3).

As an Arab Muslim female writer, her novel could be misinterpreted to provide a sociological insight, or as Marilyn Booth terms it “Orientalist ethnographicism” (2010, 149), whereby the author is taken to be an authority on the Muslim female experience in the diaspora.

Faqir’s position is further complicated by the fact that arguably she is subjected to negotiating the expectations of two different audiences with varying cultural codes that might influence the “conditions of reception”. Waïl S. Hassan elaborates further:

within each context of reception, an Anglophone Arab writer is seen as a representative of the Arab world. He or she is, therefore, a minor writer in relation to two literary traditions and has no choice but to embrace fully the limitations of her or his minority status (the representational burden of knowing that everything personal or private is always political and collective), as well as the opportunities it affords to transform language and genre, to forge a new discourse, and to expand the cultural worldview of society (2011, 164-5).
This “representational burden” is problematic, not just in its homogenisation of a community, but also in the Eurocentric assumption that Arabic or Third World writers are able to present an unmediated reflection of their social reality. This burden is particularly challenging for female authors, because readers often conflate them with their female fictional protagonists (Booth 2010, 154).

Ultimately, this representation is at its core a work of fiction, and it would be erroneous to suggest that human beings can be understood on the basis of an author’s subjective representation of reality (Said 2008, 368). However, a correlation can be drawn between Faqir’s choice to write in English, her protagonist Salma’s decision to study English Literature at university, and Salma’s attempt to obtain a qualification under her Arab name—“no, but I want Arab name” (161). Faqir compounds these two choices of a name and language as symbolic of the transformative nature of identity, which can never be fixed or representative. Both decisions are an attempt to gain command of – or assert a position within – English language and literature.

Faqir does not propose to serve as a representative. Instead she confronts this burden in hope she might create an opportunity for solidarity, she self-identifies as a secular Muslim woman. Faqir explained: “post-9/11, I feel increasingly that I belong to an ethnic community called “Muslim” rather than “Arab.” Discrimination brings Muslims closer together, turns them into a “nation” of Islam. […] I would classify myself as a secular Muslim” (Moore 2011, 9). Faqir appropriates the ethnic from the religious, and draws attention to the complicated relationship between nationalism, ethnicity, and religion. She implies an Islamic identity can become a collective consciousness, and create a sense of solidarity and community for those who have experienced some form of exclusion and alienation. Her self-identification as a British secular Muslim woman is similarly a political assertion that she is mobilising to
reclaim a sense of power and authority over her identity and the marketing of her writing.

Her novel aims to complicate representations of minority Muslim women in Britain. Islam becomes part of Faqir and her protagonist’s identification, but it is also a point of conflict. The hostility Salma faces in Britain affects her perception of her identity as a Muslim woman. Similarities can be drawn between Faqir and Leila Aboulela, (whose work I will focus on in the following chapter). As Hassan argues:

[Aboulela’s work] seeks to displace the Orientalist dichotomy between East and West […] by way of clearing a space for Islam in the “West” (or “North”), this ideology maintains an investment in that dichotomy insofar as it necessarily defines itself against another “West” […] Aboulela’s “West” is ideological and attitudinal: it is defined by hostility to Islam and Muslims (2011, 182).

Faqir’s “West” is defined in similar oppositional terms of hostility. However, unlike Aboulela, Faqir’s protagonist is less successful in creating a space for Islam in Britain. Faqir’s “West” defines her protagonist’s relationship with Islam, and ultimately results in her unveiling in order to assimilate (I will examine this in more detail later in this chapter).

Faqir is often accused of reinforcing sensationalist stereotypes about Arab people and the Islamic religion in order to comply with the demands of Anglophone literary marketplace and receive significant exposure. For example, Sally Karmi and Ayman Yasin argue Faqir is “selling […] preconceived notions about the representations of Arab Muslim female subjects to the West” (2017, 1). This reading is complicated by Faqir’s admission in interviews and articles that she often diverges from her publishers in the marketing of her novels. For example: “I rarely approve the
covers of my novels before they get published and I first encounter them on the Internet. If I express reservations on the title, the packaging or promotion of my books some publishers threaten me with breaking the deal” (Faqir 2011). Faqir has acknowledged: “Arab women’s writing sells more – that’s a fact”, but she denies publishing for “commercial reasons” (Moore 2011, 5). She qualifies, “it [In the House of Silence] is an attempt to redress the balance by exposing Anglophone readers to quality literary texts by Arab women. I wanted to showcase their diverse voices” (Moore 2011, 5). The content of My Name is Salma demonstrates her personal resistance to the idea that her novel could serve as a representative of indigenous values and culture. Her novel while fictional is rooted in personal and academic experiences which I will examine in greater detail later in this chapter. The process of writing is therefore not driven by commercial calculations, but a desire to make sense of these experiences. Faqir demonstrates feminist nomadic subjectivity by being “self-critical”, and “driven by a desire for change” (Bower 2012, 9). She holds both British and Arab societies accountable for their mistreatment and oppression of women.

The conflicted relationship with the global publishing market is not confined to the packaging of her novel. In an interview with Claire Chambers Faqir admitted to writing an alternative conclusion to the novel which was rejected by publishers.

Perhaps my novel could have two endings: a happy ending – end number one – and then end number two. Not a single publishing house would accept that, because it was too experimental for them. What a shame! I wanted to show that there are two possibilities for Salma: a happy one, and, perhaps, a tragic one (Chambers 2011, 66).

The dilemma facing Anglophone Arab novelists is neatly conceptualised by Samia Serageldin, who has written about her experiences in the publishing industry. In her
essay “Perils and Pitfalls of Marketing the Arab Novel in English”, she poses two questions: “In accommodating the publisher’s desire to insert the “Western reader’s” mandatory vantage point, is the author acquiescing to subliminal residues of cultural imperialism? In submitting to editorial changes, whether insertions or omissions, is authorial integrity compromised?” (2015, 426) Faqir has written about this struggle, asserting that:

[s]he joins the camp of Chinua Achebe where to “throw out the English language in order to restore linguistic justice and self-respect to ourselves is a historical fantasy… we needed [the English] language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time.” The reconciliation with the English language takes place despite her ambiguous feeling towards it […] She should write her colours back into the predominantly white tapestry […] celebrating differences and similarities, rejecting absolute truths about herself and others, welcoming disruptions of linear narratives, embracing debate, uncertainty and dissent (1998, 60).

Revealing the compromises made to publish her work is an act of resistance, and emphasises her “peripheral consciousness” (Braidotti 2011a, 60). She exposes the subjugation of the author in this process, thereby challenging the industry, and writing her voice back into her story.

**Silence and Sexual Servitude**

Faqir challenges the autocensorship surrounding the feminine body and female sexual identity, and conceptualises sexual politics at the heart of this tension for “freedom”. Evelyn Accad asserted in 1991 that within most discussions concerning Third World
feminism, sexuality, male domination, and the oppression of women within the private sphere are often relegated to a secondary concern, while prominence is given to issues such as class inequality and poverty, which are considered more important in national liberation struggles (1991, 238). She argued a political revolution is dependent on a sexual revolution that transforms traditional sexual relations, which rely on the domination and subordination of women.

By political revolution, I mean one primarily motivated by nationalism. I would argue that if all the various political parties who are trying to dominate a small piece of territory […] were to unite and believe in their country as an entity not to be possessed and used, but to be loved and respected, much of the internal violence, destruction, and conflicts would begin to cease, and we could work more positively towards resolution (1991, 238).

Faqir novel recalls Accad’s argument as she positions female sexuality and male domination as central issues to the question of what it means to be both emancipated and repressed.

Patriarchal traditional gender roles define Salma’s relationship with her body. Nawal El Saadawi argues that Arab literature often relies on two contrasting categories for women: the female is characterised as seductive and sexual, or as a mother – pure virtuous and virginal, devoid of sex or passion (1980, 165-7). This dichotomy was also prolific in Western literature until around the early mid-twentieth century, and indeed often persists today. Saadawi suggests Arab literature often depicts a conservative man who adheres to the institutionalised patriarchal system respecting the mother figure as sacred and hating bold and emancipated women (Saadawi 165-7). Salma symbolically undermines patriarchal authority when she has sexual relations with Hamdan outside of marriage. The threat to her life and her
daughter’s is foreshadowed throughout the novel. “Whenever I closed my eyes […] Layla was swinging from the fig tree naked. Her hands and legs tied together in an obscene way and shacked to the trunk, her neck slashed, face cut up and her private parts rotting” (270). Accordingly, Salma and her daughter Layla’s murdered bodies represent unrelenting injustice and inequality.

The conflicted relationship Salma has with her body and sexuality is a central dilemma of the novel. Salma feels both liberated and confined by and through her sexuality. “[H]e ran his fingers through my hair, tightened his fist and walked away to come back later and claim what was his already, releasing me and imprisoning me for the rest of my life” (23). As a teenage shepherdess peasant girl, Salma’s sexuality is characterised as in harmony with nature, emphasised by floral imagery to metaphorically represent her virginity: “in darkness or at dawn keep your petals tight shut and legs closed! But like a reckless flower opening up to the sun I received Hamdan” (33). This decision for Salma to actively receive him and relish in her sexuality subverts the image of a silent, sexually docile Arab woman. Codes of familial honour construct traditional gender roles wherein femininity is associated with passivity and purity. A violation or deviation from these accepted sexual norms results in the supposed devaluation of a woman and in turn her family.

After Salma loses her virginity to Hamdan, she naively believes that “[he] would propose, I thought, but he left me in the valley and took to the mountains” (276). Instead, Hamdan perceives her as a disposable possession: “you are mine, my slave girl” (33). Faqir’s choice of the word “slave” lends itself to Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic” (Hegel 1977, 522), the practise of slavery and slave-taking among nomadic and sedentary communities of Mediterranean Africa, and its translation into gender relationships. As with Hegel’s slave consciousness, external forces serve to
situate, define and maintain a woman as inessential, dependent, and inferior within society (Simons 2006, 276). Faqir conflates these codes of honour with the sexual servitude of the master-slave dialectic. This historical oppression of women is just as damaging and difficult to overcome as Hegel’s own master-slave discourses (Simons 290).

Salma fulfils many of the roles associated with the slave in her relationship with Hamdan, but she is not entirely passive or inert. When Salma decides to run away from her husband John and return to Hima, she subverts the traditional stereotype of Muslim women as a “submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and only goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils” (Mernissi 1991b, 194). Salma refuses to become a victim of patriarchal familial structures, whether they are in England or the Levant.

The master-slave dialectic is further complicated by Faqir intertwining Elizabeth’s narrative with Salma’s sexual experiences. Salma’s landlady Elizabeth spends her time drunk and depressed, reflecting on her family’s colonial legacy in India, eventually drinking herself to death. The reader is invited to compare Salma’s sexual experiences with Hamdan and John, an English man, with Liz’s account of her illicit affair with Hita, one of her father’s housekeepers in India. Faqir uses italics to signal the change in perspective from Salma to Liz, and to represent a shift in power. “He became the master and I the slave girl attending to his every need. He whispered orders and I, the English lady, obeyed” (261). Faqir emphasises Liz’s colonial heritage to accentuate her coloniser-as-slave position in her relationship with Hita. This paralleling of the master-slave trope reverses the colonial binary, with Liz becoming subordinate to Hita. Ultimately, neither Salma nor Liz find freedom through sexuality. Salma is forced into motherhood, her life defined by the children
that are born from these sexual relationships, while Liz becomes dependent on alcohol. However, the women do differ in that Salma continually tries to better her life, first through employment and then education. Liz similarly attempts to regain a sense of control and authority through her relationship with Salma, wondering if it was one of “a lodger, a confidante or a servant” (16). She is portrayed as a deluded old drunken woman, who is regarded with pity and only humoured out of kindness. Both Salma and Liz’s conceptions of self-identities are produced through the master-slave dialectic. By the end of the novel only Salma is able to break free of this self-identification. Faqir thereby implies Liz’s colonial values and ideologies are outdated and archaic.

If Salma cannot be perceived as sexually servile, she does fulfill the role of slave in other ways. She connects man with nature, and self-consciously fulfils the role of an “object being” in order to enable Hamdan’s self-definition as her master (Mussett 2006, 282). Salma’s sexuality is associated with nature and animalistic, aggressive qualities. This is reflected in Salma’s recollection that “there were no tissues, rubber or spermicide, just the smell of freshly ploughed land. [...] From then on I lay under the fig tree waiting for him most nights” (33). Salma willingly engages with Hamdan, but is, in Hegel’s terms, “conscious in the form of thinghood” (Hegel 1977, 283). She seems to take pleasure from being possessed sexually by Hamdan. This relationship with Hamdan is set in contrast to that with her husband John.

I wanted to be overpowered, killed, but John treated every part of my body equally. He explored, stroked, examined, fondled. I bit, scratched, squeezed, screamed until he said, “You’re hurting us.” Hamdan would have said “ Tighter, harder, closer” (260).
The enjoyment Salma experiences with Hamdan, leads to the association of her sexuality with torrid, illicit affairs, compounded with suffering.

Faqir avoids perpetuating the stereotypes associated with neocolonial media, which often imply that the sexual exploitation of the native woman is an allegory for Europe’s colonial rape of the East (Salhi 2006, 27). Salma’s relationship with her husband John is portrayed with warmth and kindness. This contrasts with her wild and brutal relationship with Hamdan, who embodies the familiar trope of the primitive, uncivilised colonial native, typically associated with aggressive sexuality. Salma’s relationship with Hamdan allows Faqir to draw attention to the close relationship between sexuality, power and racial profiling. She seeks to resist the silence surrounding the subject of the female body and sexuality in order to foreground the centrality of sexual relations in culture and society. As the novel progresses, Salma becomes subject to more subtle forms of patriarchal oppression in her relationship with John. He tries to prevent her leaving - “I won’t let you Salma” (271), and he attempts to confine her to the traditional roles of wife and mother.

The quest to become “free” dominates the text as arguably Salma is in a state of “becoming” for the majority of the novel. Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler examine the problem of the body in “You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit”. They pose the question: “Must the self detach from itself to shape itself, and how are we to understand the resulting “plasticity” (Malabou’s term) as a figure for absolute knowledge, but also, clearly, in relation to the body: to be this being here and to be that being elsewhere, partially both and fully neither, as the essential condition of becoming?” (2011, 612). When we are first introduced to Salma and Hamdan (as I explain above), Faqrir’s use of the terms master and slave translate neatly to Hegel’s Lordship and Bondage dialectic.
To be free rather than enslaved to another is “showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life” (Hegel 1977, 113). According to Malabou and Butler: “Attachment to life means first of all attachment to one’s body. [...] The master is the one who is capable of such detachment; the bondsman, on the contrary, is enslaved by his irretrievable attachment to life and consequently to his body.” (2011, 612) Faqir’s repeated references to the master-slave trope could imply we are meant to read Salma as bonded first to Hamdan and then to Layla. Hamdan is able to detach himself from Salma, while Salma is forever defined by that relationship through her supposed “illegitimate” daughter Layla. This is further emphasised in Faqir’s descriptions of Salma’s body being continually shaped by her daughter. “My nipples were erect so I rubbed them with the palms of my hands gently. She must be crying for me” (167). Salma cannot detach her body from Layla: “I had been trying to let go of her since she was born. I kept trying and failing then trying better to fail better” (258). Faqir implies Salma needs to free her daughter in order to free herself. “I had to go to find her. I had to go to find me” (281). This aligns with Hegel’s theory, wherein he states “it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won” (Hegel 1977, 114), and only the “master” is capable of this. Arguably, when Salma returns to Hima, thereby risking her life, she wins her freedom.

Malabou and Butler contend: “The direct consequence of this contradiction in the trial by death is that consciousness must remain attached to life if it is to enjoy the recognition it seeks. In this sense, absolute detachment is impossible” (2011, 616). I disagree, because if one has to live to be recognised as free, this negates the very act of resistance. It is my contention that it is at the point of risking your life that liberation is obtained. The loss of life does not negate the act of resistance. Whether
one gets to live out that freedom and maintain it is an entirely different struggle. Furthermore, perhaps the question of survival after the act of resistance is more indicative of the external forces that have enforced enslavement. In other words, death or survival tell us more about the conditions from which one resists than the individual.

The Exiled Muslim Woman

Faqir sets out to explore what it means to be a “free” Muslim woman exiled in Britain. From the outset of the novel she complicates traditional constructions of freedom: “I stuck a liner to my pants, pulled them up my shaved and oiled legs and realized that I was free at last […] tossed my no longer braided and veiled hair on my shoulders […] despite my dark deeds and my shameful past. I was free, walking on the pavement like an innocent person” (7-8). The satirical image of a liberated unveiled Muslim woman saved by the West is quickly dismantled, as Faqir outlines the various ways in which Salma is defined by “an imagined free white liberal democracy” (Mohanty et al. 1991, 7). It becomes clear she has exchanged one form of subordination for another, as now her value is no longer defined by her virginity, but her physical appearance, or rather, her ability to “whiten” her appearance.

Salma describes in third person the adoption of a pseudonym: “Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt. […] Adapt: fit, adjust, change” (9). This process of assimilation hinges upon the whitening of her appearance, as she positions her “blackness” in opposition to “whiteness”.

I dreamt of whiteness. […] I dreamt of happiness. […] What if I woke up one morning a nippleless blonde bombshell, like the ones that splayed their legs in
the Sunday Sport [...] What if I turned white like milk, like seagulls, like rushing clouds. Puff, my sinful past would disappear, a surgeon would slice away part of my mind and my ugly nipples! I would turn white [...] No more unwanted black hair; no more ‘What did you say your name is?’ (95-6)

The whitening of Salma’s body is conflated with the purification of her supposed sinful past. Salma’s obsession with her perceived excessively protruding nipples recalls Sander L. Gilman’s argument that the black body became an icon for overt, primitive, deviant sexuality that was continually placed in opposition to the white figure (1986, 223-8).

By Salma associating her “black” body with sexual degeneracy, Faqir accentuates constructions of race and class in the ideologies of femininity. Gilman highlighted the “perceived difference in sexual physiology” (1986, 231), and conflation of the black female body with prostitution and disease. Similarly, Salma repeatedly assumes she is perceived as a foreign diseased prostitute. “I knew what Liz was thinking: a lower-class immigrant slut, hustling down on the quay, must have been stabbed by her pimp. […] His mother might warn him against foreign women carrying disease” (193-253). Salma’s new found “freedom” in the West results in her becoming invisible as an exiled Muslim woman and simultaneously hypervisible as a sexualised “black” female body.

Salma’s successful assimilation into British society is dependent on her ability to commodify her body. Parvin instructs Salma to “‘Lighten up! Groom yourself! Sell yourself!’ […] ‘You are now in a capitalist society that is not your own’” (46). Faqir emphasises that Salma’s body is subject to multiple forms of exploitation and subjugation as a marginalised woman on the periphery. The commodification of her body is associated with her unveiling. Parvin encourages Salma to remove her veil in
order to enhance her employability. Salma’s unveiling is depicted as a painful violation that she succumbs to, rather than a form of liberation.

It felt as if my head was covered with raw sores and I had taken off the bandages. […] When a man walked by and looked at my hair my scalp twitched. I sat down on the pavement, held my head and cried and cried for hours (114).

Her unveiled body becomes what Rebecca Gould refers to as a “product of patriarchy” (2014, 232). In the introduction to this thesis I draw on Gould’s analysis of the capitalist commodification of the veiled and unveiled female body. Gould’s contention that “state mandated veiling and capitalist commodification of the female body belong to the same patriarchal project of co-opting women’s agency, […] and reinforcing male authority” (2014, 233), can be extended to My Name is Salma. Faqir does not portray Salma’s unveiling as freely chosen as she perceives her ability to financially sustain herself in England as dependent on the unveiling of her body. The novel thereby positions the female body as an object of trade in the process of assimilation and immigration.

When Salma transforms herself into a European lookalike with “hair cut, straightened, dyed blond […] crimson-red lipstick” (273) upon her return to Hima, she seeks to disguise her identity. Shohat and Stam have argued that, “the Third World […] masquerades as the West, not as an act of self-effacing mimicry but as a way of sabotaging the colonial regime of assimilation” (1994, 168). Similarly, Norma Moruzzi has explored the relationship between Algerian women’s political agency and their self-representation as gendered subjects during the Algerian Revolution (1993, 255). Moruzzi argues Algerian women used “their traditional veils or modern Western clothing interchangeably as a form of feminine masquerade”, and that this
disguise enabled women to achieve political agency (Moruzzi 255-6). It is possible to therefore read Salma’s “European” masquerade as an act of political agency. She only “whitens” her appearance on her return to Hima, emphasising the temporality of this disguise as a Europeanised Muslim woman. Ultimately, in the failure of this disguise and in Salma’s murder, Faqir can be seen to reject the argument that individual freedom and subjectivity are only enabled through a Europeanising process (Grewal 2012, 586). The symbolism of her appearance in death draws attention to the absurdity of clothing or physical appearance serving as an indicator of a woman’s “freedom” or “unfreedom”.

The novel satirises the sinister saviour narrative, as missionaries “rescue” Salma from Hima, and enable her journey to “freedom” in the West. Miss Asher helps Salma escape, and then goes “back to the region to try to save more innocent lives” (35). “Minister Mahoney, the Irish Quaker” who Salma lives with for a short time upon arrival in England is referred to as “her saviour” (34). These characters recall the inherent imperialism in British feminism during the late Victorian period. Antoinette M. Burton refers to this as the “white woman’s burden”. She argues that “British feminists of the period positioned “woman” the world over as one class, one race, one nation – a static type that, in “less civilized” societies than Britain, was corrupted by heathen cultures and religions” (1992, 148). It is not in fact Minister Mahoney or Miss Asher who “save” Salma, but her friend Parvin who gives her the tools to survive. Parvin educates Salma on how to live independently in England. When Salma decides to return to Hima against the advice of all those around her (including Parvin), it is the first journey Salma makes of her own accord, to the destination of her choosing. Faqir therefore implies that “freedom” is not something that can be
given by another, it has to be struggled for. It is Salma’s return to Hima that frees her, not her escape.

Faqir has faced significant disapproval from critics suspicious of her motives in representing indigenous Muslim cultures. Hasan Majed in his book *Islamic Postcolonialism* makes the case for incorporating Islamic perspectives within postcolonial theory to critique contemporary Western colonialism. Islam in this context is referred to as a “colonised religion” (2015, 49). Focusing on writers who explore the difficulties Muslims experience after migrating to the West, he accuses Faqir of perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes of Islam and reviving binary oppositions.

T]he British, or the Western in general, [in *My Name is Salma*] is always associated with positive characteristics such as being civilised, active, hard-working, and ambitious and the like. The Muslim Arab, or the Eastern in general, is expected to be the opposite. […] The novel is full of stereotypical images about Islam and Muslims in the Arab and Muslim world. […] Whenever opposition occurs between Islam and the West, whether the Christian or the liberal, the West is always superior (Majed 2015, 123-130).

Majed overlooks Faqir’s representations of the racism Salma is subjected to in exile. “[L]iving here in England as an ‘alien’ […] Every morning I was reminded of my alienness […] ‘Hey, alien! You, freak! Why don’t you go back to the jungle? Go climb some coconut trees! Fuck off! Go home!’” (34) England is certainly not idealised as Salma’s saviour, as she struggles to find work and a place to live, is subjected to frequent racial abuse, and is objectified whether veiled or unveiled. Perhaps most tellingly, Majed asserts: “[i]t is notable in Salma’s life that she is always regretting her sins, but without trying to stop committing them” (Majed 2015, 116). One might discern from this statement that the writer considers Salma should not be
engaging in sexual relationships outside of marriage. Faqir critiques the “freedom” available to her protagonist in both societies. She does not offer her reader any solutions.

Faqir does not shy away from the topic of the oppression of women in the Middle East or in exile in Britain, as Salma is a victim of patriarchy in both locations. “When I turned my head I felt a cold pain pierce through my forehead, there between my eyes, and then like blood in water it spread out” (285). Karmi and Yasin consider Faqir guilty of “selling a global generalization about Arab Muslim women and codes of honour in their countries to increase the marketability of the novel. [They believe] she also distorts the images of Arab women by grouping them into one category of being weak and worthless subjects” (2017, 3-4). Faqir anticipated this criticism when she explained Salma’s murder in an interview:

Women who are victims of honour killings simply die. It is rare for women who are accused of tarnishing the honour of their community to leave their countries. Most Western countries, for example, still do not give asylum to victims. […] I created Salma and sent her back to show how entrenched concepts of honour are in some societies (Faqir 2008).

Faqir has discussed the constraints placed on Arab women writers who often feel prohibited from discussing certain subjects like honour killings or sex. She has described these constraints as a form of “bondage” (1998, 52) that is further complicated in exile, as a woman in a conservative Muslim society must practise self-censorship when discussing certain subjects both within and outside of their country of origin.

This “bondage” extends beyond taboo subjects to include concerns that by representing their country of origin critically they are committing an act of betrayal.
Karmi and Yasin argue that “Faqir and her literary peers need to be fair in their representations. They should refrain from taking only a single, one-dimensional approach to the representations of Arab Muslim women and Islam that reinforce Western stereotypes and prejudices” (2017, 7-8). This reading seeks to silence creative criticality for fear it might perpetuate existing misrepresentations. Karmi and Yasin fail to acknowledge what Faqir refers to as her “double vision”, whereby “[y]ou begin looking forward at the country of adoption while always looking back at the country of origin” (1998, 53). Faqir exposes the patriarchy and prejudice that exists in both the home and host society of her novel. By examining controversial topics often avoided she demonstrates creative freedom, and her commitment to fighting injustices.

“Salma c’est moi”

Faqir has spoken openly about her novel being inspired by her personal experiences. In an interview Faqir states: “Salma c’est moi.” She is part of me, yet not me. We have two things in common: our sense of loneliness in an alien society and a deep sense of loss and yearning for our child. I lost custody of my son when he was thirteen months old” (Faqir 2008). The similarities also extend to Faqir’s decision to remove the veil. In an article written for The Guardian, Faqir discusses remaining veiled in order to secure her father’s financial support for her education. She describes her personal moment of unveiling: “as soon as the fresh air touched my hair I began to cry. I felt as if I had taken off my skin, my identity, my whole family and clan” (Faqir 2007). In the novel Faqir emphasises Salma’s sense of shame: “I felt as dirty as a whore, with no name or family, a sinner” (114). Faqir highlights the relationship
between the female body and familial honour, and how this influences women’s sense of identity and the value ascribed to their bodies. The personal resonance of the struggle for autonomy emphasises the universality of this experience.

The politics of space in Faqir’s novel has personal significance. Most of the migrations Salma makes over the course of the novel are not liberatory, because they are imposed upon her, and she is simultaneously confined and ostracised within the spaces she comes to inhabit. Whether a prison, convent, port detention centre, hostel or shared house, all spaces appear indistinguishable and predominantly inhospitable, serving to restrict her to both the space and a monolithic identity as an exiled immigrant. In an interview Faqir explained her use of space:

For much of my childhood, I felt I was living in a prison, and likewise when I got married. And my father’s political views and his desire for change landed him in prison in 1969. You see imprisonment, metaphorical and literal, everywhere in my work. […] My mother never allowed us to visit our father because she didn’t want to expose us to that kind of experience. But I imagined that space; it became part of my mental landscape. (Moore 2011, 8)

Salma is literally and metaphorically an imprisoned outsider as an asylum seeker in Britain. She is excluded and marginalised within the spaces she is forced to occupy. Her sense of homelessness and transience is juxtaposed with her sense of imprisonment. Faqir thereby challenges the associations often made with immigration and emancipation.

Salma suffers a dual alienation; she remains anonymous in Britain as an outcast immigrant whose identity comes to be forged around her roles as a wife to John and mother to Imran. She is outcast from her home and family because she falls pregnant outside of marriage, but Faqir does not isolate Salma as a victim of just
Bedouin society. This is particularly the case concerning the theme of imprisonment. Salma is incarcerated in a prison in the Levant for protection, and she also remains in a port detention centre in Britain: “[t]here was a huge difference between the port prison and the prison room I had left behind […] I was in solitary” (130). Salma is just as isolated in exile as she is in the Levant. It is, however, important to note that in the prison in the Levant Salma is surrounded by a community of women who support one another, in the port prison she remains in “solitary”, her isolated confinement only heightens her sense of vulnerability and desolation.

In “Space, Embodiment, Identity and Resistance in the Novels of Fadia Faqir”, Lindsey Moore concludes: “[Faqir’s] female protagonists certainly decode and re-code “female space” […] [but their] tactics of resistance prove futile, at least in relation to plot endings. These women do not, in fact, survive […] Different “homes” […] prove not only dangerous, but ultimately uninhabitable” (2015, 262). The one journey Salma decides to make culminates in her murder. Salma is not, however, the only victim in the novel; Elizabeth, Salma’s landlady, was not allowed to get married to Hita, and as a result of hierarchy she too remains a victim of her past. Both Salma and Elizabeth remain marginalised within the spaces they occupy throughout the text. Faqir presents women from two different cultures that are confined and oppressed by power structures of gender, history, geography, and cultural idioms. The novel emphasises how gendered unfreedom is a global problem.

In response to a criticism that her novel is “anti-British” Faqir explained that she “wanted to be even-handed” (Chambers 2011, 65). She conveys the problems in British society in relation to its treatment of immigrants, whilst also portraying the problems of Bedouin society in which Salma is victim to an androcentric patriarchy, which places great value on family honour maintained through sexual purity. In the
Bedouin village men are at the centre, dictating the world from a normative male perspective. Faqir explained Salma’s murder in an interview: “I initially had a happy ending but then it hit me that I was writing a book about honour crimes, partly. […] Because honour crimes persist, it would not be politically accurate for Salma to walk free into the sunset” (Moore 2011, 8). Faqir does not suggest that Salma’s salvation lies in forsaking her life in Hima for exile in Exeter. She articulates that violence against women and girls is not isolated to the rural Hima, for instance Parvin is British-born and also hiding from her family after refusing a forced arranged marriage.

Gender based violence is not exclusive to one community, as Aisha Gill confirms:

Tackling so-called ‘honour’ killings and ‘honour’-based violence more generally requires a shift in political thinking. Instead of simplistically conceptualising these crimes as arising from cultural traditions common to a range of ‘backward’ (and, thus, ‘othered’) societies, the issue needs to be (re-) considered in the context of VAW (i.e. gender-based violence) and the patriarchal value system found, in varying degrees, in all societies (2014, 19). The novel is not exaggerating the problem of intrafamily femicide in defence of honour. She argues: “[a] man’s honour is closely related to the behaviour of his female relatives, not only in Muslim or Arab societies, but in Western societies such as Spain and Portugal” (Faqir 2001, 69). Implicit in Faqir’s novel is the message that there is a need for comprehensive socio-legal and political reform in order to address this universal problem of honour killings.
Conclusion

Geoffrey Nash quotes an email Faqir wrote explaining the decision for Salma to be subjected to an honour killing, and defending herself against any charge of Orientalising Arab society:

> Whenever there is violation of human rights in one place in the world it is a matter of time for it to spread to other parts. It is extremely important to point out that the novel is even-handed and does not spare British society for its treatment of immigrants. It suffers from post-empire depression and delusions of grandeur and as a result perceives foreigners as servants or second class citizens. This is not an Orientalist piece of work. Both countries of origin and adoption are criticised evenly (Nash 2007, 134).

This argument is compounded in the character Elizabeth, and her relationship with Salma: “She would speak to me as if I were her servant in India, where she used to live, but not her tenant” (43-4). It is ironic that the only kindness she receives is from Salma, the woman she regards with great disdain. Upon Elizabeth’s death, Salma finds herself in possession of the letters documenting Liz’s affair with Hita: “it was not meant to be, but it happened. I inherited all Elizabeth’s letters and diary. I forgot to give them to her niece so I became the holder of her Indian secrets” (68). When Salma inherits the hidden narrative of Elizabeth’s past there is a reversal of power: Salma is no longer “trespassing into forbidden territory” (117). The acquisition of the intricate bed reminiscent of imperial India suggests a reclaiming of British imperial goods by the native colonised immigrant: “footboards had large medallions, cast in the shape of the letters V, R and I, ‘Viceroy to India’” (117). As Salma is now a metropolitan citizen, the inheritance of imperial possessions serves as a reminder of
the double bind in which she finds herself, as a victim of patriarchy in both Bedouin and British society.

If the novel had concluded with Salma remaining in Britain, we might have read it as confirming a supposed triumph of assimilation. However, whilst Salma succeeds in climbing up the proverbial ladder in her host society, she also remains a slave to her past and is perpetually running from the “masked man” (29). Faqir might also have been charged with relying on oriental tropes, as Britain could be construed as a saviour from the brutal violence of the “East”. Salma’s return is emblematic of a rejection and abandonment of her privileged position within her host society in favour of engaging in her struggle for home. It is in this moment of struggle that Salma obtains freedom. Faqir creates a discourse for women marginalised in both home and host societies; she constructs a diasporic modernity which is flawed but authentic. Salma achieves liberation from patriarchy and male-enforced passivity when she returns to Hima irrespective of her death, because this decision marks a refusal to allow another to dictate her life, whether in British or Bedouin society. Salma is willing to risk her life in an effort to obtain freedom on her terms for herself and her daughter. In this way, her return to Hima is symbolic of her resistance because she continually refuses to conform or be oppressed. Salma boldly challenges the marginal status allocated to her, and her death then becomes symbolic of her rebellion and commitment to remaining free and insubordinate.
Chapter 2

Free Enslavement: Muslim Women’s Agency in

Leila Abouela’s Minaret and The Translator

Leila Abouela categorises her writing as “Muslim Feminist novel[s]” and her protagonists as “prefeminist” (Chambers 2011, 112). She rejects traditional conceptualisations of freedom and agency, which she considers “a negative thing” that only breeds “confusion” (Chambers 2011, 114). She proposes that there are three types of Muslims in literature, the “‘Islamic terrorist’”, the “‘oppressed Muslim woman’” or the “‘liberal Muslims’”, but she contends we are missing the pious Muslim women who pray regularly, go on Haj, and wear a hijab (Rashid 2012, 622). Abouela sets out to diversify the representations of Muslim women’s religious identities to demonstrate a different kind of freedom and agency that departs from Western feminist definitions.

However, this chapter will argue that Abouela’s Islamic feminism or pre-feminism is flawed. Her writing advocates that if a woman chooses to be unfree, then she is free because she has freely chosen this status, and that perhaps the problem is not the state of purported unfreedom, but the definition of freedom. Abouela’s articulation of agency promotes what I term free enslavement - submissiveness, docility, and conservativism as a form of resistance and remedy to liberal-secular values, this, I argue, is not emancipatory.

Much has been written about the Muslim female protagonists of The Translator and Minaret who, according to Abouela, are liberated from the burden of adhering to “Western” constructions of freedom and emancipatory politics, as they
find their agency within the diaspora by maintaining a pious and virtuous existence (Nash 2007; Nash 2012; Cooper 2006; Cooper 2008; Awad 2011; Steiner 2008; Hasan 2015; Smyth 2013). However, not enough is made of the consequences of such narratives that promote non-emancipation. Wail S. Hassan (2011), Sadia Abbas (2014), and Esra Mirze Santesso (2013) have drawn attention to the regressive non-emancipatory politics of Aboulela’s novels, but broadly speaking they are the exception. There seems to be a reluctance to critique Aboulela’s promotion of passive religious agency and subversion of feminist agency. Building upon the work of Hassan, Abbas, and Santesso, this chapter will intervene in debates surrounding the relationship between Islam, feminism and secularism, and challenge Aboulela’s conceptualisation of empowerment, agency and freedom.

In the first instance it is useful to return briefly to my previous chapter, in which Salma, the exiled Muslim woman of Faqir’s novel, risks her life to save her daughter, and it is in this act of resistance that she finally obtains freedom. Salma is liberated through her journey home rather than her departure. Faqir, much like Aboulela, presents a nuanced alternative to “the stereotype privileged by many in the publishing industry of the Arab and/or Muslim woman who escapes from the oppressive patriarchy of her native culture to freedom and independence in Europe or the U.S.” (Hassan 2011, 191). In The Translator (1999) and Minaret (2005), Aboulela’s protagonists are also exiled Muslim women, either by choice or imposition. Unlike Faqir, Aboulela presents Islam as the remedy for “fragmented selves, languages and loyalties” (Faqir 2004, 170). In the previous chapter, I argue that Faqir adopts a linguistic plurality by “Arabizing” English literature as a form of resistance. Faqir considers Aboulela has a similar intent, namely to write an “‘Arab book’ in the language of the other” (Faqir 2004, 168). However, Aboulela has
discussed feeling like an impostor when writing in English: “[w]as I allowed to comment on the West, in their language, in their territory?” (Aboulela 2002, 206). For Aboulela, it is more a task of “writing back to that Anglocentric tradition […] [by] putting Islam in the English novel” (Rashid 2012, 619). This is not the reactive “writing back” that characterises postcolonial literature in which the author attempts to reverse, rewrite or answer back to a colonial discourse. Instead, Aboulela is seeking a complete epistemological break from the “Anglocentric tradition” (Hassan 2011, 182). Her writing is committed to presenting a distinctly feminine Islamic worldview that rejects personal freedom and liberty as incompatible with her narrowly defined notion of Muslim women’s agency in the diaspora.

Much of Aboulela’s writing has been influenced by her background. Born in Cairo in 1964 to a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother, she completed her secondary education in Khartoum before studying for a degree in London. She writes from the position of a Muslim woman, and Islamic subjectivity is privileged over any other form of identification in her novels. Her writing deals with distinctly religious dilemmas. As the title of her first novel suggests, acts of translation are important to The Translator, none more so than Sammar translating her beliefs for Rae, a lecturer in Middle Eastern studies. When Aboulela introduces the protagonist Sammar, the character has lost her husband in a car accident. Sammar leaves her son with her mother-in-law in order to isolate herself within her own grief. The monotony of her existence is only broken by her growing emotions for her colleague Rae, whom she invites to convert to Islam so that they might marry. When Rae shows some uncertainty, Sammar leaves for Khartoum and resigns from her job as his translator. A few months later she receives a letter from Rae informing her he has converted to Islam and is now “clean enough” for a “pure wom[a]n” (196). Both Sammar and Rae
transform and reconstruct themselves through religion in order to begin a new life together. Faith, migration, and acts of translation serve as regenerative tools for both characters throughout the novel. Aboulela depicts Sammar successfully navigating her past trauma, a new romantic relationship, and multiple migrations as a result of her loyalty to Islam. Faith is portrayed as voluntary and redemptive.

In *Minaret*, Islam enables the protagonist Najwa to reclaim control and remodel herself in a foreign landscape. After discovering Islam, she finds the strength to end destructive relationships with men, and to forge a place for herself in exile amongst a community of Muslim women. *Minaret* is divided into six sections, which are not in chronological order and persistently move between time and place. The structure replicates Najwa’s sense of displacement in exile, and emphasises the differences between her secular life in Khartoum and her religious life as a Muslim woman in London.

The novel opens in Khartoum in 1984-5, where Najwa is part of a wealthy upper-class family. She shares her opulent lifestyle with her twin brother Omar. In contrast to Sammar, Najwa initially rejects Islam and her life centres around material concerns. However, Najwa’s life is quickly torn apart when her father is accused of embezzling money and is subsequently hanged. She is sent to London in exile with her mother and brother, but she finds herself alone when her mother dies of leukaemia and her brother is imprisoned for dealing drugs. “My whole life had changed. There was just me now. No Mama, no Baba, no Omar – just me, fumbling about in London” (150). She initially finds solace in a relationship with Anwar, an atheist Marxist, but this leaves her feeling empty.

She turns to religion to locate her identity and place in exile. She finds employment with a wealthy family as their maid and nanny. Her employer Lamya has
a brother called Tamer who falls in love with Najwa’s religious zeal. Just as Sammar
is a token prize for Rae’s conversion to Islam, Najwa’s religiosity is erotically
charged for Tamer, which compels him to propose marriage in order to sanctify their
union. ‘‘It’s not very Islamic for a man and woman to be friends.’ […] ‘I heard a
sheik once say it’s like putting gunpowder and fire next to each other.’ […] ‘We
should get married” (211). Najwa is not as sincere about their future prospects,
believing Tamer’s admiration is only fleeting. Tamer’s family refuse to accept their
relationship due to differences in age and class. Not wanting to alienate Tamer from
his family, Najwa accepts payment to disappear. This money replaces what she gave
to Anwar during their relationship. With the restoration of her finances she plans to go
on a pilgrimage to Mecca and return to university as a mature student.

This chapter is divided into four parts and begins with “Feminism, Faith and
Secularism”. The purpose of this first section is to challenge the fraught relationship
between religion, secularism and women’s agency. In order to do this, I will
interrogate Aboulela’s conceptualisation of secularism in her novels, and intervene in
the debates within current post-secular scholarship. Aboulela’s presentation of free
will, autonomy, and agency for her Muslim protagonists will form the focus of the
second section “Freely Unfree”. In section three “Muslim Pre-Feminist Novels” I
confront Aboulela’s self-definition of her novels as “pre-feminist” and “Muslim
feminist” to analyse the “Islamic feminism” she is articulating through her writing.
The final section “Transformative Travel” examines the vague notions of
empowerment associated with Aboulela’s protagonists’ travel and mobility
throughout the novels.
Feminism, Faith and Secularism

This chapter begins with a question at the heart of Aboulela’s work, a question feminist theorists often turn away from - “what constitutes secularism and what specifically this means for gender norms and relations, sexuality, the ability to secure women’s rights and girls’ rights, for the feminist subject, and for developments in feminist theory” (Varma et al. 2016, 17). Aboulela positions secularism in binary opposition to Islamic theocracy. Secularism within *The Translator* and *Minaret* is depicted as Western, modern, materialistic, signifying a shallow existence that is dominated by satisfying one’s carnal desires: “Western men worship money and women. Some of them see the world through dollar bills, some of them see the world through the thighs of a woman” (*The Translator* 156). In contrast, religion is portrayed as “meaningful” (*Minaret* 98); “restrained” (*Minaret* 245); and “comfort[ing]” (*Minaret* 259). According to these texts the dominant Western model of secularism does not accommodate an Islamic way of life, in which Muslims willingly submit to live a disciplined life that is restricted by rules, renunciation of desires, and where obedience is valued above freedom. Her novels appear to advocate that secularism does not respect the rights of religious minorities, and therefore she concludes that secularism is incompatible with Islam.

Aboulela is not alone. Secularism is often under attack from a variety of political and academic positions that span the right and left. Joan Wallach Scott, for example, in her book *Sex and Secularism* (2017), contests the assertion that secularism is synonymous with gender equality. In the Introduction to this thesis I outline that it is often assumed that it is impossible to be religious, secular, and a
feminist. Contrary to these assumptions, I propose that secularism offers a potential space to reconcile concepts and values that are presumed to be incompatible.

Typically, secularism takes a formulation such as that reiterated by Charles Taylor who argues that it involves “some kind of separation of church and state”. He suggests that the “pluralism of society” needs “some kind of neutrality” (2011, 34). Wendy Brown has highlighted that secularism is often relentlessly connected to Western modernity, and argues that Taylor omits the “imperial face of Western secularism” (2007). I would suggest that we also need to acknowledge the complexities of people’s relationships with their faith, for example, a religious-political identity can be used as a form of anti-imperial resistance or to challenge racism. Furthermore, there is a need to challenge the hegemonic idea that secularism is derived from Judeo-Christianity, that the modernization and emancipation of women in the West is complete, and that there is only one model of modernity (Braidotti 2011b, 196). Rosi Braidotti contends there is a plurality of other models for secularism and women’s emancipation. She asserts “a post-secular approach makes manifest the notion that agency or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality” (2011b, 183-204). A key question that arises from the post-secular condition Braidotti describes, is how do we ensure a gender just and equal society is considered as important as religious freedom.

For Afkhami and Eisenberg, secularism is connected to a universal framework of governance. “A secular state makes and enforces laws that protect all of its citizens equally, without regard to their religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, a

---

31 Postsecularism was originally coined by Jurgen Habermas to refer to a change in consciousness within affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where the relevance of religion to people’s lives has diminished. In such cases, post-secularism refers to a return towards religion within the public sphere.
secular state is tasked with protecting its citizens’ rights to practice their religion(s) and live by the rules of their beliefs” (2015, 76). This focuses on defining secularism as a political doctrine. I suggest that it is also useful to consider secularism as a value-based doctrine that promotes the principles of freedom and equality. The Indian political scientist Rajeev Bhargava suggests that secularism can be based on a policy of “principled distance”, whereby:

[A] flexible approach on the inclusion/exclusion of religion and engagement/disengagement of the state, which at the level of law and policy should depend on the context, nature or current state of relevant religions. This engagement must be governed by principles undergirding a secular state, […] Religion may intervene in the affairs of the state if such intervention promotes freedom, equality or any other value integral to secularism (2006, 371).

The problem with such a “flexible approach” is how and who gets to define whether an inclusion or exclusion of religion promotes freedom and equality. This is further complicated by the fact that within different cultural and religious contexts there may be different conceptualisations of freedom, equality, and agency, and the value placed on these principles may differ.

Consider for example, calls to pluralise the legal system in the UK by Islamic Shari’á councils and Muslim arbitration tribunals. Such faith-based proposals advocate that Muslims should not be expected to assimilate, and that there should be an institutionalisation of inter-faith dialogues that accommodates and integrates religiosity into public services rather than forcing minorities to become a part of Western multiculturalism.³² Of course religious courts are not a new phenomena,

³²The ideologies that have driven social policy and practise in the sphere of race and ethnicity in Britain have changed significantly over time. The phase of assimilation (1950s-1965) “rested on the belief that a harmonious nation could only be created by minimizing difference, and the best way of achieving this was by instilling both the English language and culture […] The integration phase (1965
neither are they confined to Islam. Britain’s Jewish community has London’s Beth Din, which has been running for four centuries.

Both Shari’a and Talmudic Law are criticised by feminists for the rationalisation of patriarchal politics. Elham Manea in her book *Women and Shari’a Law: The Impact of Legal Pluralism in the UK* (2016) critiques Western academic postcolonial and postmodernist discourses that propagate an ideology of Islamism. Manea refers to this as an “Essentialist Paradigm”, whereby Western academics call for “special laws” for “specific groups” in order to protect minority communities. She argues that this only serves to essentialise cultures and religions and results in violations of human rights (2016, 2). It is, she concludes, women and children within migrant and religious minority communities who become more isolated and vulnerable to abuse within parallel legal systems. She points out that within a policy of legal pluralism “people are not defined as individual members of a larger society or a nation that applies the same rules and laws to all its members. Instead they are defined primarily as members of a cultural or religious group” (2016, 12). This discourse plays into the hands of the European far-right and Islamists that dismiss international standards of human rights as a Western liberal value and imposition that are not applicable to certain groups and societies (2016, 9). A “flexible approach” therefore will only serve to further segregate minority communities who would as a result be treated like a homogeneous group and this will only produce greater inequality and injustice. At the same time, whilst Manea’s research focuses on the dangers of a policy of legal pluralism it is also important to acknowledge the

---

- early 1970s] saw the government shifting from an ideology of assimilation to one that saw integration “not as a flattening process of assimilation, but equal opportunity, coupled with cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance”’ (Macey 2009, 9-10).
- Manea cites Christian Giordano’s article “Legal Pluralism: An Instrument for Multiculturalism?” and Charles Taylor’s edited volume *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* as examples of this academic discourse.
limitations and failures of the current legal system. It is widely accepted that cuts to legal aid have exasperated inequalities, as the former Lord Chief Justice Thomas of Cwmgiedd confirmed: “[o]ur system of justice has become unaffordable to most” (2016, 5). Access to justice for litigants in person within the current legal system is unattainable.

Aboulela describes her own personal experience of moving from a religious Muslim culture to a secular society as “most disturbing” (Chambers 2011, 98). She wrestles with the experience of secularism as an immigrant Muslim woman in both *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Within her novels secularism is conflated with Western freedom as if to suggest they are inherently interconnected, and as such she posits within this environment happiness and fulfilment are impossible. According to the narrators there is too much freedom, and such worldly desires and loose morals should be exchanged for spiritual discipline, purpose and propriety. In *Minaret*, Najwa advocates for punishment according to Shari’a: “I wish that he had been punished the very first time he took drugs. Punished according to Shariah – one hundred lashes” (193). Najwa considers the English prison system “contains, [and] habilitates”, whereas Shari’a would “purify”, “restore” and “protect him from himself” (193). The novel appears to be petitioning a right-wing Islamist position through the protagonist Najwa, who promotes Shari’a as remedial and dismisses a custodial sentence as too permissive. The promotion of such controversial beliefs is problematic, because substantial evidence collected by women’s rights groups shows religious mediation and arbitration within minority communities enables the perpetuation of patriarchy. Women’s human rights organisations and campaigners argue that Shari’a often results in the violation of women’s rights in relation to marriage, divorce, children, property and inheritance (“Open Letter to the Home
Secretary” 27). Perhaps unwittingly, her novels set Islam in opposition to human rights. This approach sets up a process whereby one is forced to choose between one’s religion and one’s rights as if to suggest one cannot have both, thereby bypassing the need to re-examine religious epistemology in relation to universal human rights. Arguably this positionality is contained within her earlier work; in *Lyrics Alley* (2012) Aboulela disavows societal and patriarchal violence purporting to be in the name of Islam, as she excoriates the Sudanese habit of female genital mutilation as “backward […] barbarity only found among peasants and the uneducated” (*Lyrics Alley* 188). Aboulela draws attention to the life-threatening long-term serious health consequences of female genital mutilation in the novel, and how it alienates women from pleasure and limits potential suitors for marriage.

However, the relationship between the religious discourse within Aboulela’s earlier novels and concepts such as individual freedom, human agency, and equal rights is problematic. In *The Translator* a liberal secular existence in the West translates into freedom: “the difference between Western liberalism and Islam was that the centre of one was freedom and the other justice” (184). Assuming the novel is suggesting that a religious subjectivity is antithetical to modern notions of individual freedom, liberty is exchanged for a religious language of rights and justice. The narrator invites the readers to reimagine what constitutes freedom, suggesting that secular freedom only begets misery, and that empowerment can be derived from a position of restraint. Aboulela’s message seems to mirror that of Saba Mahmood who, writing in the context of her study of religious women in Egypt, in the *Politics of Piety* challenges traditional conceptions of agency:

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. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms (2005, 14).

Aboulela seeks to complicate simple polarisations of freedom and captivity, liberation and subordination. She articulates what Afiya S. Zia terms “docile agency” (2018, 58). Similarly, like Mahmood, Aboulela challenges the approach that promotes Muslim women’s empowerment from within the framework of their faith as a solution; instead her narratives suggest Muslim women do not want or therefore need to be emancipated, because they are content within their own docility (Zia 58)

Aboulela presents Islam as a solution for Muslim women in the diaspora, creating a sense of purpose during difficult times: “the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were the only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night” (The Translator 15-6). She offers up Islam as a remedy to the diasporic experience as it creates a community and enables women to construct a sense of place. During a prayer reading at Regent’s Park mosque, Najwa asserts: “I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant” (Minaret 184). Aboulela positions her characters within a distinctly post-secular predicament, but alongside her efforts to reframe the role of religion within the public sphere, she continually returns to simple polarisations of secularism and faith. As Stathis Gourgouris in Lessons in Secular Criticism outlines: “[t]he problem lies in presuming that the secular is the hidden core identity of the enemy” (2013, 33). Gourgouris goes on to explain that “the ultimate point is not merely to disrupt the antinomic complicity between the religious and the secular but to take away from the religious the agency
of determining what is secular” (2013, 62). The problem with The Translator and Minaret is that Aboulela is not just defining an Islamic worldview or Islamic female subjectivity, rather within these novels secularism is delineated as Islam’s antithesis.

The relationship between religion, secularism and feminism need not be fraught, as Braidotti explains:

[T]he postsecular turn consists in the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, is not mutually exclusive with spiritual values and that civic engagement as well as militant activism may involve significant amounts of spirituality. For as long as I believe in civic values such as justice, freedom, equality, and democratic criticism, I can be said to be a believer, albeit of the non-theistic kind. This provocative statement has an important corollary – namely that political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and it need not rely on a dialectical scheme of production of counter-subjectivities (2014, 251).

The word “oppositional” is key here, but we need to extend “political agency” to also recognise the oppositional counter subjectivities created by religio-political forms of agency that reject secularism. For example, some scholars dismiss global secular alliances and campaigns as a form of interventionist imperialist gender politics (Zia 2018, 25).

I began this section by pointing out that secularism is often under attack, but perhaps not too dissimilarly, the universal doctrine of human rights is also a point of contention amongst legal scholars. While some advocate for universalism, others adopt a more cultural relativist position in their understanding and application of human rights. One of the key criticisms of UDHR is the notion of human rights as a form of Western imperialism (Mutua 2001; Cornwall and Molyneux 2006; Gilroy
2005). Human rights discourses are seen to prevent “other kinds of political projects, including other international justice projects, [which] may offer a more appropriate and far reaching remedy for injustice” (Brown 2004, 461-2). The promotion of individual rights may perpetuate or even aggravate systemic (particularly gendered) inequalities caused by political-economic structures like capitalism and neoliberalism, which produce structural obstacles to the exercise of such rights (Hodgson 2011, 156). I intervene in these debates in the introduction to this thesis, and I will draw on them again in the following chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, I would suggest that human rights just like secularism are often associated with Western hegemony, and these arguments are abused by the religious-right to justify constricting women’s rights.

Gourgouris suggests the task now is “to understand how the secular can work against empire and even against the history of secularism’s complicity with nationalist, colonialist, and imperialist practices” (2013, 31). In order to achieve this, I argue we need to consider the relationship between secularism, freedom and equality. It is assumed that secularism offers a particular type of freedom and equality and that these are all Western constructions. However, as Amartya Sen points out:

the so-called “Western values of freedom and liberty,” sometimes seen as an ancient Western inheritance, are not particularly ancient, nor exclusively Western in their antecedence. Many of these values have taken their full form only over the last few centuries. While we do find some anticipatory components in parts of the ancient Western traditions, there are other such anticipatory components in parts of non-Western ancient traditions as well (1998, 43).
Rights are mistakenly held to be a part of European history, and gender is central to the fraught relationship between secularism, freedom and women’s rights. As Afkhami et al. explain: “The most important feature of contemporary Muslim women’s struggle for rights is that they reject the proposition that they cannot be both free and equal with men and good Muslims at the same time. This they deny. On the contrary, they insist that a woman becomes an authentic Muslim only when she has achieved freedom and equality as an individual and citizen” (1998, 7).

In Minaret, Aboulela writes “I also thought no one could see me in London, I was free. But you can’t be free of yourself” (212). The point being made here is that whilst you may be free from restraint there are limits to what you are free to become. Najwa loses her family and wealth, and does not have the financial freedom she experienced in Sudan. The loss of her family means she is free to make her own choices without fear of judgement or reprisal. However, Najwa finds she cannot escape the culture, values, desires, and attitudes that are subconsciously self-imposed. “I had given in to him but he had been wrong, the guilt never went away. Now I wanted a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence. I yearned to go back to being safe with God” (242). In the passage above a woman’s sexual freedom equates to a loss of self. When Najwa chooses to self-impose Islamic values and attitudes, she has chosen to protect herself from her own sexuality in order to restore her piety. Implicitly the novel reaffirms patriarchal and conservative attitudes towards female sexuality as shameful and immoral outside of marriage.

To return to the question from which I began, what constitutes secularism? A definition of freedom according to Gerald C MacCallum Jr. is useful: “freedom is always both freedom from something and freedom to do or become something” (1967, 319). Secularism by the same token is always both freedom from religion and
freedom to practise religion. Secularity is therefore dependent upon a state of purported freedom from, and to, being granted, given or fought for. In order to protect the rights of women, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups, there is a need to prioritise secular freedom, and public institutions need to remain free from religious intervention.

Freedom for Aboulela means conformity to Islamic values. The question then becomes - how important is the “content” of the desires and values to our understanding of freedom? MacCallum Jr. suggests that freedom does not need to be redefined. “It would be far better to insist that the same concept of freedom is operating throughout, and that the differences, rather than being about what freedom is, are, for example, about what persons are, and about what can count as an obstacle to or interference with the freedom of persons so conceived” (1967, 320). Taking inspiration from Stathis Gourgouris’ argument regarding definitions of secularism referenced earlier in this chapter, we also need to take away from the religious the power to determine what freedom means.

**Freely Unfree**

In *Minaret*, Najwa wants to be free to be enslaved. “I would like to be his family’s concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights*, with life-long security and a sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom in this modern time” (215). Najwa desires her own subordination, as she considers a life of a slave will be more rewarding than one in which she is free. In order to understand this statement, we need to consider exactly what “freedom” looks like for Najwa. Unable to finish her education in Sudan, she is exiled from her home without a family to support or sustain
her. At this time she has little hope of her situation changing. In an article published in the *Washington Post* Aboulela explains: “Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one” (2007). In *Minaret*, Aboulela emphasises that the purported “freedom” Najwa has gained in political asylum has left her with fewer choices and opportunities than when she lived in Sudan. As such, she desires to return to the comforts of a family that might support her financially, and this appears more attractive than life as a poorly paid maid.

Within *Minaret* individual freedom is positioned as a modern Western value that is at odds with an Islamic tradition. Najwa recalls fondly the patriarchal protection she has lost:

Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? Aunty Eva, Anwar’s flatmates. Omar would never know unless I wrote to him. Uncle Saleh was across the world. A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack, dealt a blow to my mother’s marriage, and mild, modern Omar, instead of beating me, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom (*Minaret* 175).

Personal freedom is therefore juxtaposed with protection, security and a sense of belonging. The financial vulnerability of Aboulela’s protagonist is crucial to understanding the dichotomy she sets up that juxtaposes the protection of patriarchal Islamic values with the emptiness of Western freedom. Najwa considers sexual slavery a more liberating and promising occupation, than a financially modest existence as a maid.
Aboulela affiliates freedom with indulgent materialism, which she considers is synonymous with Western values, and a materialist culture that transcends geographical location. Whilst living in Sudan her wealthy background enables her to go to university, dress in “too short skirts and too tight blouses” (*Minaret* 14), frequent an “American club” to go dancing “just like in Saturday Night Fever” (*Minaret* 23), eat “kebab and French fries” (*Minaret* 24), and go on “holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London” (*Minaret* 15). Freedom for Najwa is purchased, and Islam is understood to erase social class and ethnic differences. “Allah will give me back that happiness again, will replace the past with something grander, more potent and enhanced” (*Minaret* 189). Najwa is ultimately financially rewarded for her pious refusal of Tamar, reinstating some financial freedom and opportunity. The novel appears to suggest that if you place your faith in God, then God will provide you with all you need, in this case, education and financial freedom.

Najwa’s fleeting declaration that she would prefer to be a “concubine” than a maid goes to the heart of what Aboulela seeks to challenge and explore in her novels - exactly what free will and autonomy looks like if you are a Muslim woman. Najwa associates her freedom in the West with isolation; she considers an Islamic way of life is the antithesis of this and therefore her remedy. Najwa’s desire for her own enslavement is similar to Saba Mahmood argument that “even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who is acting of their own accord” (2005, 11). Mahmood draws on Christman’s exploration of a slave who chooses to be a slave, Christman contends:

if the desires and values that a person develops are generated in accordance with the procedural conditions of autonomous preference formation that are constitutive of freedom, then no matter what the “content” of those desires, the
actions which they stimulate will be (positively) free [...] some extremely constrained individuals will count as positively free because they (autonomously) choose to be under those constraints. (1991, 359)

However, in order to determine whether a person is free, one would need to analyse a person’s desires and the conditions under which he/she lives that may have influenced those desires. The question then becomes - is it possible to freely choose to be unfree? Richard Arneson argues that “one should not equate freedom with freedom to do what one wants, regardless of the causal origins of those wants” (1985, 433). Perhaps the task is rather to separate a person’s desires and values from freedom. One can desire to be unfree, but autonomously choosing to be unfree does not equate to freedom, a desire or value does not necessitate the need to redefine “freedom”.

Traditional gendered roles are rewarded in The Translator. When we first meet Sammar, she has left her son in Sudan with her mother-in-law, to live a life of a recluse in Scotland, punishing herself for her husband’s demise, wishing it were her son rather than her partner that had perished. Upon meeting Rae, she desires to return to the role of a wife, and mother to her son and Rae’s daughter. Her reward for returning to the traditional feminine role of wife and mother is Rae’s conversion, and in turn their marriage. In a not too dissimilar conclusion to Minaret, order is thus restored if one has faith.

We also see the disruption of feminine roles in Minaret. Najwa works for a young Egyptian PhD student named Lamya, who prioritises her studies and rejects domesticity. As Waïl S. Hassan points out “[t]here are several instances in Aboulela’s writing where feminism is rejected in favour of patriarchal gender roles [...] Aboulela’s Islamism and the fiction that embodies it ultimately remain reactive and in many ways regressive” (2011, 196-8). Broadly speaking, the atheists or non-
practicing Muslims of *Minaret* are portrayed as selfish, cruel, criminals, or vindictive. It is only the practicing Muslims who embrace Islam that find resolution and move towards achieving happiness.

It is possible to point towards verses in the Qur’an that subordinate women: “If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them [of the teachings of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them” (Qur’an 4:34, 54). It is equally possible to argue that the Qur’an advocates gender equality. “People be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide” (Qur’an 4:1, 50). Keen to dispel common misconceptions regarding Islam, Fatima Mernissi has conducted extensive research in order to prove that patriarchy and sexual discrimination are not a result of Islam but a gender biased misreading of the Qur’an which is historically and nationally rooted. She argues: “if women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of the male elite” (1991b, ix). She goes on to clarify, “Islam affirmed the idea of the individual as a subject, a free will always present in the world, a sovereign consciousness that cannot disappear as long as the person lives” (1991b, 121). Instead of adopting a similar approach, Aboulela seems intent on “preserv[ing] gender roles that, in the West as, indeed, in much of the Muslim world, are considered outdated” (Phillips 2012, 68). For example, in an interview Aboulela validated the practise of polygamy, “I saw *The Translator* as being a Muslim Jane Eyre. The problem in *Jane Eyre* is that Mr Rochester can’t marry both Bertha and Jane at the same time. As a Muslim I was reading it, and from an Islamic point of view there is no problem, because he can be married to both
women at the same time” (Chambers 2011, 111). Aboulela is referring to the verse in the Qur’an that instructs men to “marry whichever women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one […] that is more likely to make you avoid bias” (4:3, 50); it is impossible to treat multiple wives equally, it is, therefore, widely accepted that the verse should not be interpreted literally, but satirically. Instead of speaking out against patriarchal distortions of Islamic values, Aboulela advocates that Muslim women are happy in their self-subjugation. As Abbas asserts: “[w]hat Aboulela offers up are reasonably deft visions of Muslim women who desire their own subordination, thus making resistance to imperial dreams of female rescue simpler, more clean” (2014, 84-5).

Although Aboulela seems guilty of adopting an apologetic stance towards right-wing conservative interpretations of the Qur’an, she is nevertheless successful at portraying a more complex, heterogeneous and diverse representation of British Muslim women. She portrays a variety of perspectives and experiences of Islam and her characters are unconventional. For example, Najwa rejects a marriage proposal, choosing independence, pilgrimage and education. Sammar and Rae merge children from past relationships to form a new family. Aboulela also includes characters who reject Islam, such as Lamya and her friends who parody Muslim dress in jest. Omar remains secular and unconvinced in prison, and Anwar believes Islam takes advantage of the weak and vulnerable. Aboulela separates Islam from patriarchal male religious authority to suggest it is individualistic. Her female protagonists’ faith is not mediated - it remains between them and God. The male characters actually challenge the female protagonists’ faith and devotion rather than imposing a code of morality. In Minaret, when Najwa ends her relationship with Anwar he believes it is because “these people brainwash[ed] you” (244). Aboulela is able to rewrite the
homogenised figure of the Islamic immigrant woman in Britain. Najwa’s life is divorced from the traditional Islamic roots of Sudanese culture; therefore, her adoption of Islam in London cannot be explained with any essentialist notions of Sudanese Islam. The minaret of Regent’s Park mosque, on which the novel’s title is based, translates London into a religious space for Najwa where she finds a multi-ethnic community that will serve as her home. With that said, the female protagonists of both *Minaret* and *The Translator* do not need to be led to piety, guarded or protected from sin, they all happily uphold gendered hierarchy, and are complicit in their own subordination. They freely choose to be unfree.

**Muslim Pre-Feminist Novels**

Aboulela identifies that her writing is “kind of Muslim feminist”, and that she departs from “secular feminist novel[s]”, because instead of women turning to their career or friends during difficult times, her female protagonists rely on their faith (Chambers 2011, 113). At the same time, she considers her protagonists are also “prefeminist […] where the heroine is quite dependent on men, to some extent helpless” (Chambers 2011, 112). The contradictory allegiances of Aboulela’s Muslim feminism is at odds with scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, who advocate that Islam promotes “equality for all”, and that “[a]ny man who believes that a Muslim woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship excludes herself necessarily from the *umma* and is a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda is a man who misunderstands his own religious heritage, his own cultural identity” (1991b, vii-viii). Aboulela denounces secular freedom as inherently Western, and promotes a self-sacrificial lifestyle in which the female protagonists are either dependent on their male
counterpart or on God. For Aboulela there are limitations to freedom: “I have this feeling that, especially for young people in the West [...] they have a lot of choices but it doesn’t necessarily mean that they are making the right choices” (Chambers 2011, 114). According to Aboulela there is only one “right” way of being free.

This section of the chapter will unpick the gendered discourse of Aboulela’s novels. In the introduction to this thesis I outlined that there are many contested definitions of Islamic feminism. Afiya S. Zia conceptualises two positions that are particularly useful in understanding the limitations of Aboulela’s Muslim pre-feminism.

Islamic feminism can be described as essentially a postmodernist, diasporic scholarly project that does not recognize any single (male) interpretation or dominant narratives of Islam [...] [they] endeavor to locate women’s rights within an Islamic discourse. [...] [The other perspective of Islamic feminism] recalls how “a group of feminists, mostly secular academics living in the West, has in recent years used the term ‘Islamic feminism’ to refer to Islamic alternatives to Western feminisms [who] treat Islam as the only authentic indigenous road to gender equality and justice (2018, 20).

Aboulela’s Islamic feminism is more aligned with the latter definition, and it is this particular strand of Islamic feminism that is most vulnerable to subversion and depoliticisation. As Zia goes on to explain, “Islamic feminism at an international level seems to be attempting to redefine both [...] in the process, the feminist agenda is getting diluted while the Islamic factor in this hybridized identity is increasingly accommodating patriarchal possibilities” (2018, 22). Aboulela goes a step further in her narrative as she dismisses secularism as a form of interventionist imperialism and
promotes a conservative anti-feminist agenda which she attempts to disguise as “pre-feminism”.

Aboulela’s novels aim to give pious British Muslim women a voice. Her female protagonists’ relationship with modest Muslim dress is of particular significance. In order to dispute the notion of the hijab as oppressive, Aboulela makes a point of emphasising the hijab can be freely chosen, and therefore has the potential to be empowering. In her novels Muslim modest dress is never imposed on any of her female protagonists, but is always adopted by choice without any interference by the men in their lives, and sometimes in spite of them. Sammar and Najwa, the protagonists of Aboulela’s novels are similar in that their migrations serve to strengthen their faith. However, they initially have different perceptions of religiously modest dress. For example, in Khartoum, Najwa experiences a secular upbringing; she is free to dress as she pleases and regularly socialises with male and female friends. Unlike Sammar who admires the hijab “because it is secretive” (Minaret 107), Najwa initially feels uncomfortable in the presence of women who cover themselves. “[T]hese provincial girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobes34 that covered their slimness” (Minaret 14). Najwa’s uncomfortable admiration foreshadows her eventual adoption of the hijab in exile. It is only in exile that Najwa feels free to conceal. When Najwa begins wearing a tobe, it serves a dual purpose. It brings her closer to her faith and her mother: “I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasising, to restrain rather than to offer” (Minaret 246). In attempting to subvert the idea of the veil as

34 A tobe is a traditional form of dress worn by Sudanese women. The tobe is wound around the body, and is considered a national dress.
oppressive, her description of the traditional Sudanese tobe at times exoticises the female body as a mystical object of desire.

Aboulela’s own adoption of the hijab is similar to that of her protagonist Najwa, in that she only began covering her hair after moving to London:

Twenty years ago, when I was recently married and a graduate student at the London School of Economics, I, too, started to wear the hijab. I took this step with no pressure from my parents or my husband. It came after years of hesitation, years during which I held back out of fear that I would look ugly in a head scarf and that my progressive friends would make fun of me. […] The mark of perceived female submissiveness is also an accessory that can be purchased in any department store in the West; it comes in gorgeous silks and beautiful hues” (Aboulela 2007).

Aboulela describes her decision to wear the hijab as one that is facilitated by her time in London. This reverses the narrative of Muslim women being liberated upon travelling to the West, because she becomes more overtly religious upon travelling to England. However, what is particularly notable with both Aboulela and her protagonist Najwa’s description of this decision is that their concerns or reassurances appear quite shallow and superficial. Aboulela fears looking “ugly”, but she is seemingly seduced by the “gorgeous silks”. Najwa admits that if Anwar had “proposed marriage there and then, I would have accepted and gone back to him” (Minaret 244). Furthermore, Najwa’s decision to wear the hijab appears at times to be quite frivolous, when she dons her headscarf to meet with Anwar for the last time “[t]here was laughter in me, the desire to tease him one last time” (Minaret 248).

Whilst the decision to wear the hijab is assuredly more complex than the examples
presented here, rather insincere reasoning is foregrounded in Aboulela’s novel and her interview.

The process of Najwa beginning to wear the hijab is portrayed as a bonding exercise. When her female religious mentor takes her shopping for headscarves, it demonstrates the sense of companionship and community Najwa gains from her faith. The hijab becomes a metaphor for the protection Islam provides, creating a barrier between her body and society. Najwa observes: “[a]round me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from the scaffolding couldn’t see me any more. I was invisible and they were quiet” [my emphasis] (Minaret 247). Aboulela’s use of the word “invisible” here is problematic. By suggesting that in covering up women will avoid unwanted sexual advances, the hijab is shown to remove the responsibility of sexual violence from the perpetrator to the victim. Aboulela has defended her choice of the word “invisible”, explaining her intentions in an interview: “I think people read it as being invisible in a very negative way. However, I meant it in an entirely positive way, that she was no longer having to put up with the way men were looking at her” (Chambers 2011, 106-7). However, the use of the word “invisible” is misplaced, choosing to cover the body in order to avert unwanted sexual attention only serves to excuse the sexualisation of the female body. Furthermore, if we accept that we are only said to be free if we are free from the interference of others, then because the decision to wear the veil is a response to the actions of another we cannot read this decision as freely chosen. In this context the veil is problematically connected to a form of responsibilisation, whereby a woman is held to be responsible for thwarting unwanted advances which only serves to subordinate women.
This theme of invisibility persists in Aboulela’s later work *Bird Summons* (2019) in which the protagonist Salma finds that covering her hair offers her a shield from sexual harassment: “[s]he sometimes felt that her *hijab* protected her, made her hazy and distant, further out of reach. The signals she sent out were muffled by clothes, obscured by layers, buried out of the way” (*Bird Summons* 149). However, this is later complicated by another protagonist’s realisation; Iman finds her voice and agency when she decides to remove her *hijab*. This decision marks a turning point in the novel as she rationalises that for her the *hijab* is connected to “uniforms and costumes, roles and camouflage” (*Bird Summons* 183), and that her identity is therefore a mere performance. Iman explains her decision to her female friends: “The *hijab* wasn’t forced on me against my will, but I wasn’t given a choice to wear it or not, either. It was what the other older girls in my family were wearing. It felt natural that at a certain age I would wear it too. But if I were free to choose, I might have chosen something else. […] We think we are the ones wearing an outfit, but it’s imprinting itself on us” (*Bird Summons* 183). This image of the *hijab* “imprinting” on Iman conveys how this item of clothing had become a uniform that dictated her role in life. The removal therefore signifies a reclaiming of her identity and an assertion of her right to choose. The novel concludes with a pertinent note from the author in which she states that “women must make their own choices. Away from the city – with its restrictions, formality and rituals, both religious and secular – the spiritual freedom that the women encounter is vast and beyond control” (*Bird Summons* 287). This note is a significant departure from the world views conveyed in her earlier work, here Aboulela concludes that for women to find agency they need to be removed from all forms of potential constraints including both the religious and secular, and that this will enable women to find a higher form of spirituality.
Minaret offers a different perspective on the hijab to that portrayed in Bird Summons, Najwa’s purported invisibility to male desire appears to make her more visible and therefore vulnerable to prejudice against her faith. Whilst travelling on a bus Najwa is racially abused by a group of men who call her “Muslim scum” (Minaret 81). Through the character Anwar, Aboulela explains how diverse ethnic groups are homogenised as the “other”: “here no one knows our back-ground, no one knows whose daughter you are, no one knows my politics. We are both niggers, equals” (Minaret 157). Aboulela presents the hijab as a symbol of Najwa’s resistance, and her effort to reclaim an identity and place in exile. Najwa forges a collective community through Islam, she explains: “[w]e have little in common […] ‘But we both want to become better Muslims” (Minaret 105). This community disregards ethnic, language and social class differences.

The hijab is rejected by the upper-class characters in Minaret, who dismiss it as oppressive, “‘[t]otally retarded,’ […] ‘We’re supposed to go forward, not go back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything?’” (Minaret 29) For Najwa’s employer Lamya and her friends it is demonstrative of working-class status and a lack of education, “the hijab [for them] is a fancy dress!” (Minaret 223) The range of different perspectives emphasises the need to consider the economic, socio-historical, political, religious and gendered reasons behind women’s relationships with the hijab. Aboulela’s characters are not meant to represent all Sudanese girls and women of their generation, as she showcases an array of opinions on the hijab; similarly, she also shows that these opinions can change through Najwa’s appearance transforming over the course of the novel. Najwa’s eventual adoption of the hijab can be read as a rejection of Western materialism and consumerist values. However, as both her female protagonists are
rewarded for their piety, implicitly Aboulela promotes the hijab as the only viable route to empowerment as a Muslim woman in the diaspora.

Unlike Sammar whose happiness is dependent on her marital status, Aboulela depicts Najwa’s relationships with men as detrimental to her development as a woman. These relationships serve as a catalyst for her adoption of Islam because she is continually let down by the men in her life. Her father is consumed with obtaining wealth and power, “‘I’m going to have my own private jet” (Minaret 52). Her twin brother Omar offers little support, as he steals from their dying mother, and is eventually imprisoned. Najwa’s romances fail as Anwar exploits their relationship to fund his education, and Tamar is too young and dependent on his family. Instead of relying on the men who inevitably disappoint her, she realises she can only ever “[r]ely on Allah […] He is looking after you” (Minaret 114). Sammar’s faith is rewarded with romance, whilst Najwa’s obtains a pilgrimage, university education and a potential career change. Both Muslim women are or will be educated, and thus have the potential to sustain themselves economically. The protagonists privilege their Muslim identity above all other forms of identification including their relationship status, Aboulela intimates that Islam can offer a feminine space that is uncontaminated by men.

It is useful to return to an earlier point, in the introduction I contend Aboulela presents a distinctly feminine Islamic worldview that departs from the traditional model of “writing back”. In Writing Muslim Identity, Geoffrey Nash argues that Aboulela “Islamize[s] the process of ‘writing back’” by “absorbing the secular, postcolonial environment into an Islamic schema inflected by postcolonial mappings” (2012, 46). As part of this process, Nash suggests that Aboulela “appropriate[s] the emptiness of the western metropolis exposed by writers like Selvon, Naipaul and
Salih” (46). In fact, Aboulela uses epigraphs at the start of the two parts of *The Translator* to position herself within the Arabic and postcolonial literary traditions. The first epigraph references the eighth-century medieval Arab poet Abu Nuwas who wrote about issues such as male sexual desire:

> But I say what comes to me
> From my inner thoughts
> Denying my eyes (2).

Like Abu Nuwas whose poetry often tested the boundaries by addressing forbidden issues such as homoerotic desire, Aboulela portrays the love between Rae and Sammar as forbidden unless Rae converts.

An epigraph from Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1989) begins the second part of *The Translator*, which aligns her work with narratives of postcolonial and post-imperial migration: “I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots…” (133). However, Aboulela offers a counter-narrative to Salih’s depiction of his protagonist’s (Mustafa Sa’eed’s) relentless pursuit of knowledge and erotic adventure in the West which ends in tragedy. Mustafa uses myths associated with a black man’s sexuality and the exotic allure to seduce English women. In doing so he inscribes Orientalist stereotypes onto his body. Waïl S. Hassan writes, “[m]any forms of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle have reinscribed patriarchy; Salih’s novel demonstrates the futility of resisting one form of hegemony by consolidating another” (2011, 91-9). However, within this space uncovered by male postcolonial predecessors, Nash observes that it is Aboulela’s female characters in particular who are “enabled” to “rediscover faith, better understand their faith commitment, and even engage in da’wa (mission work) among westerners” (2012, 47). At the same time, the struggles Aboulela’s
protagonists undergo also result in patriarchy being re-inscribed. Aboulela is not suggesting it is impossible to escape patriarchy, she advocates there is much to be gained from returning to more traditional forms of gendered roles.

In the novel, Sammar’s mission is to convert Rae to Islam and her reward is marriage, and a return to domestic bliss as a wife and mother. Sammar challenges the construct of the Third World woman as a “homogeneous ‘powerless’ group located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems” (Mohanty 1984, 338). Sammar is never a “victim”, either in her personal relationships or as a result of her location in “underdeveloped” Sudan. Her migrations are voluntary, and she is financially independent and educated. In this way, Aboulela is successful at creating a counter-discourse to the male Arabic literary tradition and she gives a voice to Muslim women within English literary traditions. However, the empowerment of Aboulela’s Islamic femininity is limited and dependent upon Rae’s weakness. Rae’s reliance on Sammar is not just a result of illness, he relies on Sammar’s translations in his research. Brendan Smyth argues: “Rae’s illness then, is emblematic of a specific hegemonic notion of masculinity in crisis” (2015, 392). This struggle can be seen in Rae’s dream of his union with Sammar, “I carried a sword in my hand and there was blood on it, my enemies’ blood, but I myself, my clothes and my hands were clean and I was proud of that… the handle of my sword broke… I walked the other rooms of the house searching…” (The Translator 95-6). The phallic imagery of Rae’s sword breaking represents the regeneration of his masculinity rather than a crisis. His conversion makes him “stronger” (The Translator 89), and it helps to cure him of his ailments. “‘When I started praying my knees hurt, and I also thought “old age”, but they don’t hurt so much now…”” (The Translator 202).
In *Minaret*, Najwa’s religious mentor Shahinaz shares her thoughts on what makes a marriage successful in an effort to dissuade Najwa’s romantic feelings for Tamer. Shahinaz explains: “you can’t marry a man you don’t look up to. Otherwise how can you listen to him or let him guide you?” (215) Similarly, in *The Translator*, traditional gendered identities and roles are maintained in romantic relationships. In order for Rae and Sammar’s union to be successful, Rae has to become a strong Muslim man who can guide Sammar. Smyth goes on to conclude: “the novel reverses the conventional rescue narrative and privileges a story in which a brown woman saves a white man from white men (and by white men I mean notions of white masculinity). […] Sammar does not need a white man to save her. Instead, she saves Rae, both physically and spiritually” (397). I agree Aboulela is successful in preventing her protagonist from becoming an “object of protection from her own kind” (Spivak 1994, 94). However, reversing this binary to suggest that Rae needs to be saved by Islam is problematic, as are the implications that a marriage can only succeed if traditional gendered roles are maintained, and Muslim women are much happier in a state of purported subordination to their male superior. These implications are not dissimilar to the Indian nativist argument in defense of widow burning or sati “The women actually wanted to die” (Spivak 1994, 93). Such a narrative can never, therefore, be considered emancipatory or feminist.

To conclude this section, it is useful to draw on Haideh Moghissi who validly points out that it is difficult to analyse Muslim feminist discourses and she questions the viability of an Islamic feminism. “Are they truly Muslim women turned feminists or feminists using Islamic language against ‘Islamic’ state’s repression? Or are they, instead Muslim women whose ‘feminism’ is constructed as for the purpose of softening or sanitizing fundamentalist rule, providing a striking example of ‘Islamic
intolerance” (1999, 75) In the case of Aboulela, her Islamic pre-feminism serves to justify rather than challenge patriarchal “Islamic” customs and values.

**Transformative Travel**

In introducing this chapter I drew a connection between Fadia Faqir’s novel *My Name is Salma* and Leila Aboulela’s fiction. Much like the other disaporic authors of this thesis, Aboulela successfully challenges the popular sensationalist narratives of the Muslim woman escaping from the East to freedom in the West. Aboulela implies her protagonists find agency from religion, and through travel they find themselves and their faith. Sammar is portrayed as actively choosing to make multiple migrations throughout *The Translator*. These journeys serve to reinforce her independence and self-sufficiency. In the beginning of *Minaret*, Najwa is forced into exile in London, but by the end of the novel she has regained control of her physical mobility and the economic ability to make her own decisions. Aboulela writes, “loving one’s homeland, like travel, is part of faith” (2000, 42). It is the connection Aboulela draws between faith and travel to which I now turn.

Aboulela’s protagonists are initially described as travelling for employment or leisure. It then becomes a way of escaping the past either by choice or force, as Sammar travels to evade grief, whilst Najwa becomes a political asylum seeker. Aboulela’s fiction begins from a point of “disintegration”. She explained in an interview that she wanted to capture this feeling, “nowadays, and especially in Africa and the Arab world, we’ve fallen apart” (Rashid 2012, 621). It is only through travel that her protagonists find themselves, and to do this it is implied they need to become or remain devoted to their faith. In my introduction I argued that Aboulela advocates
that Islam can serve as a remedy for people with “fragmented selves” (Faqir 2004, 170). She posits Islam is boundless, allowing people to belong to multiple places. In *The Translator* she writes, “‘[o]urs isn’t a religion of suffering,’ […] ‘nor is it tied to a particular place’” (198). In *Minaret*, there is no need for geographical allegiance, because an Islamic identity surpasses, but does not deny, all other forms of identification. Tamer, Najwa’s love interest, identifies himself as a Muslim: “‘My mother is Egyptian. I’ve lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don’t feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity” (*Minaret* 110). Najwa also affirms her identity as a Muslim has overtaken her Sudanese heritage: “‘I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum […] like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim” (*Minaret* 110). For Aboulela’s protagonists Islam becomes their form of identification and provides a sense of home wherever they are located, particularly within hostile environments or during times of personal crisis.

Ultimately, Aboulela’s protagonists are travelling towards their faith, theirs is not a journey of self-discovery or even a journey towards emancipation it is a spiritual confirmation or awakening of their beliefs. The key elements of modern globalisation – travel, migration, and immigration – are re-aligned with faith and religion in Aboulela’s novels. In “Voyages Out and In: Two (British) Arab Muslim Women’s Bildungsromane” Lindsey Moore refers to Aboulela’s *Minaret* as “a spiritual Bildungsroman” that “works through the remembered past towards the narrative present: the focus is on what Najwa has become. […] This (migrant, linear) ‘voyage out’ is really a (spiritual, circular) ‘voyage in’” (2012, 76). For Najwa the moment of personal growth, or in this novel, spiritual awakening, comes after becoming sexually
active with Anwar “[i]n my own way, in my own style, I was sliding. First my brother, and now it was my turn to come down in the world” (Minaret 179). Aboulela compares the loss of virginity outside of marriage to the criminal offences Najwa’s twin brother Omar commits. It is implied that Najwa feels her body has been somehow spoiled now that she is no longer a virgin. Najwa cannot escape the patriarchal customs that dictate her response to her action, she is thus disempowered by her act of defiance, rather than liberated.

By the end of The Translator and Minaret both protagonists have freedom of movement, however, they are not liberated through their mobility. Najwa’s exile in London is filled with illicit excess: “[i]n Khartoum I would never wear such a short skirt in public. […] My stomach was too full. I burped garlic” (Minaret 129). This contrasts with Sammar who “lived in a room with nothing personal on the wall, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room […] mouldy bread, cheese with fur and green […] [f]or years, Sammar had eaten such food, hacking away at the good bits” (The Translator 15-67). Both Sammar and Najwa’s migrations leave them feeling empty and lost. Eventually the choices both characters make are made within the constraints of what they regard as morally and religiously permissible, it is therefore impossible to separate the choices they have made from the powers that have limited them. Aboulela’s protagonists have the opportunity to decide how they live their lives - they are isolated through their immigration but they choose to be bound by religion. They do not dictate the terms of their lives, their faith does.
Conclusion

By the end of *The Translator* Sammar has chosen to resume the role of a wife and mother. In *Minaret*, Najwa has replaced her desire to be a concubine with plans for a pilgrimage and postgraduate education. The choices Aboulela’s protagonists make over the course of her novels are meant to be representative of their freedom - they have freely chosen to live a pious passive life, despite, in principle, being free to make other choices. This then is proof of the complex ways in which Muslim women express their religious agency. Aboulela’s faith-based empowerment is unthreatening to religious patriarchal male order, and if only implicitly, Aboulela advocates that this religious agency can be a substitute for women’s rights in a Muslim context.

There is an interest in Muslim women’s religious identities, and as such Aboulela’s writing has garnered much attention. However, there is a lack of scholarship that is willing to critically interrogate the “free enslavement” that is pronounced in her earlier novels. This is hardly surprising, as scholars who critically interrogate religious patriarchy in a Muslim context are often accused of being apologists, Islamophobic, “native informants”, or serving imperialist agendas. Aboulela’s protagonists freely choose their unfreedom, and if we are to diversify our understanding of Muslim women’s freedom, we need to interrogate the construction of the desires and conditions that inform these “free” choices. The solution is not to force women to be free - that would be paradoxical and counterintuitive. We need to reframe our focus to analyse the context of oppression that informs the choices women make.
Chapter 3

The Unfreedom of Poverty and War in Betool Khedairi’s *A Sky So Close*

Betool Khedairi’s *A Sky So Close* (2001)\(^{35}\) exposes the double violence Iraqi people are subjected to. They are victims of the physical violence of war and poverty and they are also victims of what Spivak terms “epistemic violence” (1994, 76), violence inflicted through thought, speech and writing that inaccurately records the historic violence they have been subjected to. *A Sky So Close* gives a voice to what is often hidden and concealed, the powerlessness of the very poor, the reality of war, and the suffering of the female body. Khadija, the central protagonist’s childhood friend, embodies what Spivak terms a “subaltern” because she is “removed from all lines of social mobility” (Spivak 2005, 475). She has no access to education or other resources which might allow her the opportunity to better her position in society. Through the character of Khadija, Khedairi confronts the gulf that separates human rights regimes from human suffering by giving voice to the real lived realities of people for whom such rights have little meaning in their lives.

The novel demonstrates how complex historical events became a dehumanising media spectacle. Khedairi imitates the reporting of the Gulf War in Britain to create a counter-spectacle, whereby the production of spectacular media events promoting policies of unilateral aggression becomes the spectacle. Writing in Arabic for an Arab audience is an act of resistance, she reclaims the narrative of war from within her own language. She presents a human face to the multifaceted difficulties of poverty and the endless violence and destruction during times of war.

---

\(^{35}\) The novel was first published in Arabic in 1999, the edition to which this chapter refers is the English translation, published in 2001. The novel was translated from Arabic into English by Dr Muhayman Jamil.
The novel also challenges patriarchal ideals of womanhood by writing about “taboo” and often censored topics within modern and contemporary Arab literature, such as sex outside of marriage, adultery, abortion, and female physical illness.

Betool Khedairi was born in Iraq in 1965, she is of dual heritage - her mother is Scottish and her father Iraqi. Educated in Baghdad, she gained a degree in French Literature from Mustansiriya University. After her father died in a car crash in 1990, Khedairi moved to London to care for her mother. She describes her time in London as a point of “total alienation” (Voykowitsch 2003). Her mother died of cancer three years later in 1993. She moved to Amman, Jordan in 1995, which is where she now resides. Khedairi writes in Arabic, her first novel, *A Sky So Close*, is semi-autobiographical and dedicated to her mother and father. The transience of the unnamed female protagonist of the novel is in many respects inspired by Khedairi’s life, the novel depicts a young girl navigating her parents’ conflicted relationship and the conflict surrounding her in Iraq as she comes of age. Khedairi explains: “[h]alf of the book takes place in Baghdad and the other half takes place in England. So, in Baghdad, she is the daughter of a foreign woman, and in England, she is the Arab” (Recknagel 2004). Khedairi slips between first and second person perspective and changing tense to situate the reader in the midst of a personal address to her parents.

*A Sky So Close* opens in Zafraniya, a small village in the Iraqi countryside, described as ““The Land of Saffron”” (6). The unnamed female protagonist escapes the turmoil of home with her friend Khadija, a young girl who lives in a hut near her parents’ farmhouse. Following Khadija’s death and her father’s heart attack, the family relocates to Baghdad. The war between Iran and Iraq begins, and in spite of this the narrator continues her arts education dancing ballet. Her father dies and as the war rages she finds love with Saleem who is a Christian sculptor conscripted into the
army. Her mother is diagnosed with breast cancer, and in order for her mother to receive further treatment they decide to move to England, thus ending the narrator’s relationship with the Iraqi soldier. As the narrator and her mother leave for England the Gulf War begins. The narrator has a casual sexual relationship with Arnaud whom she later learns is married, which results in an unwanted pregnancy. Her mother is now dying, and she decides to have an abortion. The novel ends with the narrator now alone in London going through the motions of life ruminating on the loss of her parents and her now war torn home. “I got the job at the translation bureau […] My life revolves around my work, television in the evening, and opening the mail in the morning with a cup of bitter coffee” (241). The peaceful normalcy of her existence contrasts with life in Iraq.

During a reading for her novel Khedairi describes the experience of watching helplessly from afar: “I was devastated because my family was inside and I was outside, seeing the darkness and the balls of fire and my country being destroyed. We were just paralysed,” (Parsons 2003). Khedairi regards herself as an Iraqi woman writing about the war with Iran, and the Gulf War as an “insider” writing from “outside” of Iraq. She asserts that she wanted to give “a glimpse of how the Western eye looks at an issue and how the Eastern eye looks at the same issue” (Parsons 2003). It is from this position of being an insider outside that enables Khedairi to offer a double vision - a critical reflection of life both inside and outside of Iraq. Khedairi demonstrates a feminist nomadic subjectivity that is similar to Fadia Faqir, as her novel is a “rebellion [against] subjugated knowledges” (Braidotti 2011a, 60). She seeks to challenge the “epistemic violence”, and to create a narrative of resistance that recovers the voice of the subjugated.
Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, interest in *A Sky So Close* gained momentum. The novel was translated into English in 2001, but reviews of the novel did not surface until 2003 (Anderson 2003, Jansen 2003, Karkabi 2003, Leinwand 2003, Parsons 2003, Recknagel 2004, Voykowitsch 2003). Most of the reviews tend to focus on analysing the protagonist’s experience growing up between two cultures and the insight she offers into Iraq. This is perhaps unsurprising given the author’s explanation of the novel in interviews: “It is not autobiographical, but inspired by my situation in Iraq and the ‘double culture’ theme. By the clash of habits, mentality, language and religion, and how the main character grows up and finds her own way” (Anderson 2003). By the author’s own admission this is a valid reading of the novel, and perhaps framing the novel in this way helped to drive the translation and publication of the text with foreign publishers eager to capitalise on the growing interest in Islam and the “Muslim World”. However, Khedairi’s novel does not conform to a particular Western image of Iraq whether “picturesque” or “repressed”, and the protagonist does not idealise her past experiences in Iraq, or her present in London. Her writing is not depoliticised in response to the climate of religious conservatism, as she inscribes desire into the novel describing the protagonist and her mother’s sexual encounters.

Khedairi explains her decision to write in Arabic: “I think in Arabic. I feel in Arabic. I express and write in Arabic. That covers my eastern emotions,” […] “If I have a problem, I use my western side. My logical side” (Leinwand 2003). Unlike the authors of the first two chapters, Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela, who actively choose to write in English for a distinctly Euro-American audience, Khedairi’s decision to write in Arabic sets her apart from most contemporary diasporic writers. Her novel was written for an Arabic speaking audience, and this chapter is based on an English
translation. It is important to therefore point out that as I am unable to read the original in Arabic I am arguably unaware of the subtle ways in which the novel may have gone through a process of editing during translation. Geoffrey Nash points out the limitations of relying on certain translations of a text, “translation is shown to operate in such a way as to smooth over difference and situate the texts firmly within the Anglo-American reader’s horizon of expectation” (2017, 4). Of course, this is not to suggest all translations operate to “smooth over difference”, but that there may be power differentials that operate during the translation process. Nash goes on to argue that Anglophone Arab women writers may contract “a gender pact” with Western publishers to reproduce narratives that meet the expectations of Western readers in their representation of Arab women (2017, 10). Nash ultimately concludes Anglophone Arab writing is “better situated than translation to resist such stereotypical formulation” (2017, 11). Although I am unable to comment on what may have been lost in the translation process, I argue that Khedairi’s text successfully defies hegemonic perceptions of Arab women writers.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first, “A Voice for the Voiceless” returns to a point I outline in my introduction, namely that whilst the limitations and advantages of international human rights are widely debated, the relationship between human rights laws and the real lived realities of the “subaltern” is relatively understudied. It is my contention that in A Sky So Close Khedairi seeks to give a voice to human suffering that is often invisible, and in doing so she emphasises that violated peoples have no access to the languages of human rights. The second section, “‘A War So Close”: The Silenced Female Body”, focuses on how Khedairi challenges the current discourses surrounding womanhood by writing about the suffering female body, the experience of having an abortion, adultery, and sex outside
of marriage. I argue that the body becomes a vehicle of resistance for Khedairi’s heroine. I also examine the gendering of violence during war, and the counter-spectacle Khedairi creates as a form of protest against the way in which war becomes a spectacle.

A Voice for the Voiceless

Upendra Baxi in *The Future of Human Rights* refers to “human rightlessness” to describe the predicament of “voices of suffering” speaking a “language of injustice” that does not translate into the world of global human rights (2006, 6). Upendra Baxi states: “human rights remain sensible for the violated only when human rights discourses convey a sense of suffering” (2006, xxii). *A Sky So Close* voices what Baxi refers to as the “‘small voice of history’” (2006, xxii). Khedairi writes about the everyday pain of the subaltern experience, and those who suffer often beyond hope. By giving a voice to human suffering caused by poverty and war Khedairi makes the stories of those that are often invisible visible. It is Baxi’s contention that “[h]uman rights languages forever promise more than they deliver in real life terms” (2006, 2). He elaborates that the “existing world of human rights has little or no space, for example, for the stateless, the refugee, the massively impoverished human beings, the indigenous peoples of the world, and peoples living with disabilities” (Baxi 2). This separation between global human rights laws and the real lived realities of those who are not aware or in a position to make use of their accorded rights speaks to the dilemma Khedairi explores in *A Sky So Close*.

The disconnect between the real lived realities and the language of rights that women and girls cannot hope to gain access to is a feminist dilemma that frames the
novel. *A Sky So Close* writes into existence the narratives that are not heard within Western media, describing the human cost of wars and sanctions, and humanising the experience of poverty. Khedairi writes as a way of coping with despair after witnessing the suffering personally, and from afar, as a result of the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf Wars. She refers specifically to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 661 in 1990, which imposed economic sanctions against Iraq in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. This she claims drove her to write:

[I]t is the “Iraqi pain” that ignites her and makes her pick up a pen. “When you catch a disease and you can’t find the proper medication, that is what I call pain,” she says. “When children die in the thousands or are born with deformities due to lack of nutrition and medical supplies because of the embargo, that is called pain. When you have to sell your belongings to survive, that is called pain.” […] As an author, she says she can underscore the commonalities of humanity (Leinwand 2003).

In keeping with this commonality, Khedairi explained the reason for her main protagonist remaining unnamed throughout the novel “anyone reading the book can become that character” (qtd. in Anderson 2003). It is useful at this point to briefly draw on Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which she emphasises the distance created by the spectacle of suffering. Sontag argues: “violence turns anybody subjected to it into a thing” (2003, 11). Furthermore, the capturing of suffering turns people into “anonymous victims […] war’s murderousness destroys what identifies people as individuals, even as human beings” (Sontag 55). The anonymity of Khedairi’s protagonist highlights the vicariously “safe” consumption of suffering.

Injustice is a theme explored throughout the novel *A Sky So Close*, it is a novel of contrasts. Women and children in poverty are contrasted with the distinctly middle-
class privileges of the protagonist; the suffering of those experiencing war first hand is contrasted with the protagonist watching the reporting of the war in the Western media. The first half of the novel explores the realities of women and children living in poverty, the second half examines the reality of war. In an interview Khedairi explained:

[S]ome of my friends died when I was a child […] But nobody told me that when I grew up many countries were going to bomb my country and deprive its children of food and medicine to the extent that reports say every ten minutes an Iraqi child is dying of sanctions. […] “I write fiction based on reality but the catastrophe of war asks fiction to step aside, it’s so horrific. The tonnage of bombs dropped on Iraq in the first war equaled seven Hiroshima atomic bombs” (Jansen 2003).

Khadija, (the unnamed protagonist’s childhood friend), lives in poverty, her deprivation extends beyond monetary terms, as it encompasses a deprivation of resources which provide the social conditions of life. Khedairi narrates the multidimensional experiences of poverty, for example the loss of personal space: “her relatives, who live in three huts that lean on each other like the people inside them. When she takes me there, it seems to be as though the rooms can’t contain them. They crowd each other underneath their low ceilings” (22-3). Khadija and her family remain outside of modernity, they are excluded from participating in political, public, and social life, and their lives remain unchanged by scientific and technological advances.

Khadija, unlike many of the other characters in the novel, does not remain nameless. Her naming gives humanity to the rural, poor, marginalised family that neighbour the protagonist’s farmhouse. Khadija’s family’s lifestyle contrasts that of
the protagonist. Although she is one of the few characters to be named, for the majority of the novel she is known by her nickname. “I only felt I was my true size when I was with Khadija; this person was the only creature in the world who made me feel that there was something, or someone, as small as me. I made her even smaller. I called her Khaddouja – “Little Khadija”” (6) [my emphasis]. The protagonist’s renaming reduces her “wild, skinny childhood friend” to a plaything, a “creature”. She is simultaneously given a personal identity and then branded inferior and reduced, which simulates the deprivation of human dignity that accords with the experiences of poverty. The relationship between Khadija and the unnamed female protagonist emphasises the global divide of wealth, mobility, and education, which serves to render Khadija powerless. It speaks to the erosion of individual freedoms and denial of fundamental human rights that is both a reason for, and a consequence of poverty.

Khadija becomes the protagonist’s “world” (6), but she is a source of conflict for her parents. Her father sees their friendship as providing a window into traditional culture and a simpler way of life of which he approves. However, her mother worries for her daughter’s health and safety, and dehumanises Khadija’s family to the caricature of the savage. “ –You mean you were with that dirty little girl again. Didn’t I warn you not to mix with that lice-ridden child? […] – No! She’s not your friend, she will only give you her diseases […] I’m sick of this isolated village and its primitive people” (8-10). The severity of Khadija’s deprivation juxtaposes the lack of compassion and indignation expressed by the protagonist’s mother. “My God! Haven’t you seen how her mother uses dried cow dung for the fire with which she bakes the bread? Haven’t you seen the hordes of flies that swarm around that cheese they make with their filthy hands?” (9) Khedairi uses the figure of the mother to
reiterate the vision of “an average Third World”, a move that Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains:

This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family orientated, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (1984, 337).

The novel exposes the pervasive internalisation of racialised doctrines of European superiority over Oriental backwardness, and draws attention to the interplay between race, class and gender in Khadija’s oppression.

In addition to a lack of proper sanitation, Khedairi depicts the malnutrition and starvation Khadija’s family experience. “The little one reaches out and grasps the nipple with her lips. She sucks her mother’s milk with all her strength, exhausted by her hunger. A fly lands at the corner of her little mouth; another hovers around the purple nipple. Nobody pays attention to the flies here – unlike my mother” (43). Food for Khadija’s family is limited and purely practical, which contrasts with the opulent party thrown by the narrator’s mother where guests indulge in an abundance of food at leisure. Khadija’s family are dependent on the land and their livestock to sustain them. “When their cow Najma – “star” – died, the whole family grieved for it. I felt sorry that they had lost one of their miserable animals, but I couldn’t understand how a cow could mean so much to them” (56). The protagonist’s lack of empathy for how such a loss would affect Khadija’s family who are so economically vulnerable
demonstrates the harsh reality of poverty is beyond the comprehension of those more financially fortunate, it represents fundamental economic inequality.

Khadija’s family are confined to the homestead because they have no means of transportation, their lack of mobility is another feature of their poverty. Whilst the protagonist can enter Khadija’s home, “they still welcomed me in any hut I chose to enter” (23), Khadija must remain symbolically outside of hers, “[s]he hides by the big farmhouse gate [...] entering our house was at the top of my mother’s list of forbidden acts” (7-24). The narrator’s mother regards Khadija and her family’s living conditions to be a shameful condition. The narrator sets herself up in opposition to Khadija and her family through the use of the pronouns “them” and “they”. “I never felt like a stranger when I was among them. They called me “The foreign woman’s daughter”” [my emphasis] (23). The protagonist remains an “outsider” within the local rural community because of her mother, whilst Khadija and her family are marginalised and excluded as a consequence of their material circumstances.

Khedairi presents a nuanced understanding of poverty, exploring both the cultural and socio-economic aspects. Khadija’s life is focused on domestic concerns, but she is desperate to go to school. “- You’re so lucky, I wish I went to school. But she didn’t. She joined all the others who didn’t leave here for a long time. It was you, Father, had predicted everyone’s fate. Khaddouja remained where she was” (54). Whilst the narrator is sent to the School of Music and Ballet because her mother will not allow her to go to a “primitive school” (9), the narrator is Khadija’s only source of education. “As for Khaddouja, she taught me how to ride Hatem’s bicycle in return for the first four letters of the alphabet, Alif, Ba, Ta, Tha. She couldn’t learn the others; nor was she able to write them. She found it very difficult to hold the pencil properly. But she still taught me how to catch butterflies” (53). Khadija’s lack of
access to education is a major source of her unfreedom, without an education her prospects for a life beyond the homestead are limited. In line with Amartya Sen’s theory of “Development as Freedom”, “Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency” (2000, xiii). The narrator’s family can afford to send their daughter to arts school to receive what her father considers to be an impractical education, whereas Khadija has to perform various tasks around her home to help her family survive. Literacy is a luxury they cannot afford. Sen views poverty as “capability deprivation”: “poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty” (2000, 87). Khadija’s illiteracy forms part of her unfreedom, as she cannot hope to achieve the life she wants there is no hope of self-determination.

The central image of the text, is also the title of the novel. “I rise higher towards the heavens… I breathe in the horizon… then… A sky so close!” (16) Whilst swinging on a seat hung from two palm trees, the unnamed narrator imagines she can touch the sky before the swing breaks and she tumbles to the ground. Khedairi explained this image: “‘It’s really a symbol of the freedom of childhood,’ […] “In Iraq, the sky was always so close and Iraqis often slept on the roof in the summer” (Karkabi 2003). The narrator’s fall can be read as the death of childhood for Iraqi children. The novel laments the wars and sanctions that have destroyed Iraq, and the lives and dreams of Iraqi civilians. For the narrator it is the loss of her friend Khadija that marks the end of her childhood. The narrator only learns of Khadija’s death upon accidentally stumbling into her funeral, as she finds her wrapped in a white cloth ready to be buried.
The white bundle laid out on the floor by her mother was Khaddouja. All I remember after that was someone’s hand pulling me away from that awful sight. Death and Khaddouja… I was unable to link the two! They told me that she’d come down with bilharziasis. They explained to me that her lifeblood has drained away everytime she urinated into the irrigation ditches, and that the continuing blood loss had ended her life (66).

Khadija’s death conveys a sense of hopelessness and marks a turning point in the novel. The narrator shortly thereafter moves to Baghdad. Khedairi demonstrates the consequences of economic unfreedom, as extreme poverty results in the loss of other kinds of freedoms. Khadija and her family have no access to clean water, sanitation, basic education, or healthcare. They are immobile, and remain symbolically outside of society and modernity. Ultimately, their poverty results in Khadija’s death.

The predicament of Khadija’s family demonstrates the limitations of rights discourses for those who are still almost completely invisible. In many ways *A Sky So Close* can be seen to highlight the fact that there is a hierarchy within human rights law, which tends to prioritise civil and political rights over economic, social and cultural rights. These rights are interrelated, as it is not possible to possess the former without possessing the latter. However, economic, social and cultural rights are often neglected, as the language used to define these rights is vague and aspirational they are difficult to enforce. Consequently, it is possible to conclude that human rights law tends to protect the most privileged, and fails to adequately respond to inequalities.

The basic principle behind international human rights law is to regard all humanity with equal dignity and worth. Arguably, the human rights movement is weakened by criticisms of cultural relativity. I engage with a range of criticisms in my introduction to the thesis, concluding that prioritising cultural relativism will only
result in human rights becoming negotiable commodities. Geraldine Van Bueren has pointed out that: “the tackling of poverty ought to be one of the less challenging areas of human rights as most aspects of poverty eradication do not raise issues of cultural hegemony. Access to water is not culture specific but is a universally embraced value” (2017, 54). However, economic globalisation and religious extremism are the two major challenges to all human rights (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000, 249). Khedairi’s novel emphasises the complex reality of the lives of those living in poverty, and it implicitly suggests that a single approach to poverty eradication cannot therefore be universally applied. As Christine Chinkin concludes: “[c]ontextual and cultural understandings of both the causes and experiences of poverty and human rights abuses are necessary components for identifying the obstacles to poverty alleviation” (2001, 571). To return to the point from which I began, the novel successfully brings to the fore the “small voice of history” (Baxi 2006, xxii), and gives prominence to that which is often omitted - the “voices of suffering”.

“A War So Close”: The Silenced Female Body

This thesis primarily focuses on diasporic Arab and Iranian women writers who write in English for a predominantly Euro-American audience. As I outline earlier in this chapter, Khedairi is one of the few authors explored in this thesis whose text I read in translation. Compared to the Anglophone writers in this thesis Khedairi emphasises the liberating possibilities of rejecting the English language. As Khedairi writes in Arabic for a distinctly Arab readership she avoids the challenges faced by writers

36 In an interview for The Irish Times Betool Khedairi calls the invasion of Iraq “a war so close” echoing the title of her first novel, she explained “When we were young children we used to sleep on rooftops in summer. We felt we could pick the stars out of the sky. But now instead of stars children see balls of fire” (Jansen 2003).
writing in a foreign language. The choice of what language to write in is often a fraught one. Many writers discussed in this thesis (such as Fadia Faqir, Yasmin Crowther and Nahid Rachlin) incorporate transliterations as a form of stylistic distinction and protest. Arabic or Farsi is integrated into their writing to foreignise the English language. Writing in English provides the authors with the freedom to escape the auto-censorship surrounding the female body and sexuality in their native language, and it also enables them to reach a global audience. For Khedairi, Arabic enables her to maintain a connection with her homeland and her Arab identity, allowing her a dialogue with Arab readers whilst living outside of her home in Iraq. Khedairi challenges what Al-Samman describes as the orientalist view “that claim[s] that Arabic cannot express “individuality” or “eroticism,” or the Islamist trend that claims that Arabic should be restricted to “sacred discourse”” (2015, 43). In writing about the trauma of war, class inequalities, the suffering feminine body, and sexuality in Arabic, Khedairi traces the traumatic history and conflict that has engulfed her homeland in order to reclaim it from the spectacle it has become in the West. She articulates the female body and sexuality in Arabic to resurrect the often silenced and erased voices of women.

The search for love and the subject of sex and marriage is often intimately connected to the individual’s desire for freedom and fulfilment in modern and contemporary Arabic literature (Kilpatrick 1995, 10). Writing about love, relationships between the sexes, and women’s sexuality has become a symbol of revolt against social constraints and oppressions (Kilpatrick 11-12). It is also a means of expressing a rejection of codes of relations between the sexes, paralysing traditions and political injustices (Kilpatrick 11-12). In the opening of the novel, Khedairi parodies the stereotypes of the Arab and Islamic worlds typecast as “metaphorical
places of misery, where tyrannical men objectify and exploit women and girls, within and outside their own communities” (Chambers et al. 2018, 3). In *A Sky So Close*, the protagonist’s mother is a caricature, she is seduced by her husband’s exotic descriptions of the “magical East […] [with its] charm and fantasy” (30). When confronted with the “reality” she resorts to reductive Oriental myths that frame Muslim men as “sexually dangerous […] I’d probably get raped anyway” (31). Khedairi writes about the domestic disharmony between the mother and father in the novel to expose the dysfunctional relationship as a way of challenging traditional functionalist perspectives of the family.

The protagonist’s father views his wife’s maternal role as instrumental to their daughter’s development. However, Khedairi quickly complicates this when it is revealed she is having an affair, “[f]or six years my mother has been fighting time with all kinds of activities” (58). The narrator’s father is prepared to overlook his wife’s relationship with another man if she remains confined within the home for their daughter. “I pretended not to notice the soft way you danced with Dawood in front of my friends and their wives […] I’ll see how long you’ll keep using Millie as an excuse! But I will not allow you to work outside the house. You don’t need to do that, and certainly not while the girl is still in primary school” (47). The mother’s perceived sexual transgression within the relative sanctity of the home enables the narrator to dismantle traditional notions of the pious and devoted mother figure. Adultery is a form of protest against her confinement. Hsin-Ju Kuo has examined adultery as a themeatic strategy within immigrant narratives, Kuo asserts that “female adultery functions less as a moral transgression than as a means of psychological development, exerting a vital influence over reformation of the female characters’ diasporic identities, and developing their autonomy […] repositioning female agency”
For the narrator’s mother adultery signals a rejection of her transnational identity and an opportunity to reconnect with her home country and culture. Her mother’s infidelity acts as a trigger for the protagonist’s own sexual emancipation, which serves to disturb the façade of gendered normality and the patriarchal ideologies her mother has been defined by.

Just as Sammar gains strength from Rae’s weakness in The Translator, the protagonist’s mother is liberated by her husband’s heart attack. They move to the city, she learns to drive, becomes the breadwinner for the family, and enjoys evenings out with “foreign friends” (88). The gendered hierarchy is reversed when the mother finds her freedom, whilst the father is confined to the home and feels as though he has lost his identity. “You covered your face with the white bed sheet, and you too disappeared” (64). Khedairi depicts the mother’s affair sympathetically, and her unhappy marriage becomes the catalyst for her journey of self-discovery. When the mother has an affair it marks the first step towards her reclaiming her agency and self-determination. The father’s symbolic emasculation through illness empowers her.

The protagonist’s father romanticises his home in Iraq and the role of a wife and mother. When his wife fails to fulfill what Moghadam refers to as “the patriarchal gender contract”, whereby “[i]n the Arab-Islamic family, the wife’s main obligations are to maintain a home, care for her children, and obey her husband” (Moghadam 2004, 145), he relies upon neopatriarchal state practices to enforce his control. “I’m the only one who can decide about our divorce. You can do nothing without me, remember that well” (103). He seeks to prevent their separation, using their daughter as an emotional pawn. “If this is what you want, woman, then I’ll divorce you. You can have what you want. Go to him, or go back to England! The child is mine, she’ll stay with me, I promise you that. The law is on my side. I’ll keep it on my side
whether you like it or not!” (89) Khedairi thereby draws attention to the patriarchal Islamic customary laws that result in inequalities for women. Moghadam explains: “the children of Muslim marriage are taken into the formal custody of the father’s patrilineal kin group” (2004, 142). The protagonist’s mother makes it apparent to her daughter that she felt enslaved by her role as a maternal figure. However, towards the end of her life she laments her loss: “in spite of the distance that separated my western upbringing from his eastern essence, if he were still alive, [he] wouldn’t have left my bedside till I was myself again” (170). It is only as she nears death when she is in a weakened state that she longs to return to the protection he once offered her.

Khedairi, like Faqir, resists the autocensorship and silence surrounding the subject of the female body and sexuality. She departs significantly from Aboulela whose protagonist is denounced as having “come down in the world” after having sex outside of marriage (Minaret 239). Many of the diasporic authors in this thesis have discussed their choice to write in English as one that has enabled them to write more freely about the female body and sexuality. Writing about sex and desire in Arabic is an act of political resistance against repression, and this is enunciated by the mixed reaction Khedairi received:

An Arab reader, while praising these scenes for their artistic form, thought that the content was too liberal: It is an issue not spoken of when a woman cheats on her husband. It is not proper to have a physical relationship before marriage, let alone face pregnancy from a boyfriend and go through an abortion. On the other hand, a western reader could not understand why some of these sketches were, flowery descriptions and not direct sex scenes. It was suggested that the novel would be welcomed by teenagers in the west. But in
the Middle East, it was considered too controversial for this age group (Voykowitsch 2003).

Khedairi departs from the normative idea of womanhood that is predominantly focused on domestic and maternal concerns by incorporating sex outside of marriage, adultery, abortion, and female physical illness. In this way she resists the patriarchal ideals that associate femininity with docility, passivity, submissiveness, and selflessness.

Khedairi writes the female suffering body into existence. The mother’s experience of breast cancer, her mastectomy and the aggressive treatment she receives gives voice to the silenced and often invisible suffering female body. Initially the mother’s cancer is mediated through the daughter: “I felt that her emotional state was my responsibility. Entirely. I was afraid to reply when she said things about how her femininity had ended about the new deficiency she felt and the emptiness that she carried around inside of her” (156). Khedairi demonstrates how women’s health is often linked to their reproductive capabilities, and therefore the sick female body represents a failure to live up to patriarchal normative ideas of femininity. The mother initially internalises and reproduces these ideas. After her mastectomy she is described as an abject wounded animal:

When I heard her whimpering in that distinctive way, I knew she was trying to clean her wound on her own. I entered her room once without knocking on her door. I was shocked to find her lying on her back, having exposed her wound to the air. Her right breast sagged away to one side; the left looked like something that a hungry cat had left behind. After that, she asked me to get a private nurse to look after her until she’d recovered fully. She then shut the door to her room (156).
She retreats back into the private sphere of the home and seeks to hide her desolation and sense of shame from her daughter. Her traumatised body mimics the turmoil surrounding them in Iraq.

The mother’s response to her illness is to articulate her past, including her relationships with men, the regret she feels in her experience of motherhood, and her lost hopes and aspirations. She describes her sense of homelessness after her migrations, as she is seen as an English woman in Iraq and an Iraqi in England.

– I’ve never in my life felt that I am such a failure as I do now. […] – I failed in so many ways. I became pregnant with you by mistake, and I failed to correct that mistake… please don’t misunderstand me. […] – Then I got married… and I failed to make my husband happy… Then I emigrated, and I failed to understand my husband’s culture… Then I loved a man from my own background behind my husband’s back, and even there I failed, and could not keep my lover. […] – I stopped belonging here when I left England and decided to try and belong to the East. In spite of all my efforts, I could not belong there either, and now that I’m back here again, I find that I no longer belong to my original home-land. Everything is so different. […] – It is a foolish notion, this question of belonging. We only belong to the shadows of our bodies which follow us around as long as we’re alive (200-1)

Her reminiscence is not driven by nostalgia but an attempt to regain control over her pre- and post-cancerous body. It marks her effort to transform herself from a silent to speaking subject, and her attempt to recover her feminine agency. The mother’s sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction becomes ingrained in the protagonist, and leads to her staunch refusal to accept traditional feminine roles.
Khedairi uses the narrator’s mother to show the face of contemporary patriarchy. In her mother depicting her supposed “failures” the protagonist is able to challenge the conventions that define a woman’s identity and sense of place. The protagonist associates having a child with a form of entrapment, which she is determined not to submit to. Her decision to have an abortion alone contravenes customs that associate the female body with maternity. The abortion is symbolic of the protagonist reclaiming her body as her own and asserting her right to choose.

The protagonist’s body has been taken “without asking permission” (158), and betrayed by a “Reptile metamorphosing into a pig” (239). It has also been a conduit for the nation’s soldiers, and a witness to the banning of contraceptive pills and the trend of mass weddings “in an effort to increase the population and replace the losses at the battlefields” (140). During war women’s primary role is to “give birth to death either as a product, a killed son, or as an instrument, a son who will kill” (cooke 1995, 193). Khedairi’s protagonist rejects the gendered identity of a passive woman who resigns herself to the role of mother and wife. “I had to make a decision on my own. I think of my mother. I tell myself every night that I must face my mistake before it’s too late. I won’t suffer as she did. I must resolve the situation” (230). Her body thereby becomes a vehicle of resistance, as she rejects the traditional responsibilities associated with femininity.

The abortion procedure is narrated through a folk-lore story from the protagonist’s childhood. The doctor becomes a childless one-breasted monster who steals infants in Baghdad. “[T]he Siluwa monster arrives. She orders me to spread my legs and, putting her head between my thighs, she starts to vacuum out my insides” (233). The monster is also reminiscent of her mother, whose confessions of failure to conform to gendered notions of femininity influence the protagonist’s decision to
have an abortion. The narrator refuses to be confined to a mere function or to allow her desires to be silenced or subjugated. She refuses paternal language, and gives her mother what Luce Irigaray refers to as a “new life” as the translator of her body. “We must refuse to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to jouissance, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger” (2008, 43). In this way, the protagonist refuses to repeat her mother’s fate, as she breaks the lineage of the female suffering body to challenge the predominant discourse of womanhood.

War and violence in *A Sky so Close* is gendered. Within mainstream discourse there is a gendered binary categorization of bodies and a coding of spaces - the civilian is feminine and the combatant masculine. Similarly civilian spaces like the home, hospitals, and schools are feminine, whilst the battlefront is masculine. Women are afforded the status of being naïve objects of protection, and vulnerable victims in need of humanitarian salvage. This is contrasted with the warrior masculinity of the combatant. As J. Ann Tickner points out:

The notion of “protectors” is heavily bound up with the masculinity of war. Legitimizing war requires the perpetuation of the myth that certain people (usually gendered feminine) are being protected by certain others (always gendered masculine). Consistent with the prioritizing of the security of combatants, this protector/protected relationship is one of inequality: those who are protected lack agency or the ability to provide for their own protection (1993, 271-2).

The novel highlights how war serves to both affirm and offer an opportunity to transgress these spatial and behavioural gendered binaries. For example, the protagonist begins a sexual relationship with a soldier outside of marriage.
However, predominantly the subordinate position of women globally is only enhanced and often manipulated during times of war. Women become a synonym of land and property, and as such men are encouraged to fight to protect them. Sexually manifested violence is used as an instrument of war. The central protagonist’s first lover Saleem nicknames her “his little one” (165), which is reminiscent of the reductive naming of Khadija, and her father calling her “my little one” (91). Khedairi describes the protagonist’s relationship with Saleem as unequal because he is ten years her senior. She is depicted as powerless in their sexual relationship, “[h]e did things without asking permission” (158). The sexual and patriarchal imagery of the novel serves to emphasise the gendered ideology used in the service of militarization. “The war is raging outside; we’re here on the inside. […] He imprints the front lines on my lips. […] I can’t escape; I surrender. […] I am no longer his little one” (165). Khedairi interweaves war and sexuality throughout the novel to scrutinize their relationship with power and powerlessness. She mimics a gendered telling of war where to surrender or disarm is to be emasculated or effeminate. Weapons are often described in phallic terms promising sexual domination, as such language is a way of minimizing the seriousness of war and denying the deadly consequences.

The novel parodies the rhetoric used to justify militarism and war by associating the protagonist’s sexuality with peace. “It was a period of dancing, two lips swaying above and two below. Something was ending, and something was about to begin. […] With my eyes closed, I threw my arms backward. I liberated a dove the size of a clenched fist; it clapped its wings and flew from beneath my armpit” (175). Christine Chinkin and Mary Kaldor outline that this dichotomy between the masculine protector and feminine protected legitimises the violence of conflict, disguises the numerous active roles women play, and the gender-based violence
during conflict (2013, 168). By Khedairi encasing her protagonist within a static relationship of protector and protected, masculine and feminine, she highlights how such binary terms imply weakness and subordination. She exposes the reality of women’s experience of violence and disempowerment during a time of war.

Khedairi’s protagonist experiences the horrors of war second hand. She hears about the violence from Saleem, meets widows of men lost at war, reads letters from Madame, watches it on television with her parents, and listens to military communiqué. This serves to mimic the distance with which she imagines her readers view war. This distance increases upon the protagonist’s departure from Iraq as she is no longer perceived to be an insider. “People are fleeing with their families to and from Baghdad. We do not know when the final knockout blow will come. This event which you are calling “Invasion day”; we are calling “The Day of the Glorious Summons.” You have called this “a border dispute”; we have called it “Reuniting the Province and the Motherland” (199). Khedairi demonstrates how language is used to remove the reality of war. “Her letters were brief. Her words usually lined themselves up behind two teams, made of “You” and “Us.” The distance between them was now clearer than it had been in the past” (237). The repeated use of the “us” and “them” dichotomy serves to set up a juxtaposition between the powerful aggressor and the powerless victim. Khedairi thereby draws attention to the ideological curtain used to gloss over mass destruction.

Khedairi translates the reporting of the Gulf war into Arabic to create a counter spectacle. The reporting of the war becomes the spectacle:

The first air raid on Baghdad is being broadcast live on BBC television. John Simpson is describing the sounds of the bombing and the black smoke enveloping the city. […] Iraq does not retaliate; it merely resists the American
air strikes, which are meant to wipe out the Iraqi air force before starting a
ground war. [...] “Bombing Iraq was like lighting up a Christmas tree!”
Another pilot says, “The first attack was like a game of football. At first a
player hesitates because he’s afraid and hasn’t got any self-confidence, but
after you press for the first time, you get into the game and start attacking.” A
third pilot describes his share of the bombardment, saying, “I transformed the
area into flaming balls of hellfire!” [...] They travel at low altitudes to avoid
radar. Others travel above the clouds, incommunicado; the local people call
them “crows of death.” [...] Images of Baghdad. In the morning, it’s choking
in the thick smoke; at night it’s illuminated by balls of fire that roll around on
television screens (194-5).
The novel demonstrates how language can radically remove the reality of war,
disconnect war from humanity, and militarise the mind.

The narrator dissents from the coverage of the war in Western media, as she
feels betrayed by the disproportionate focus on minor stories. “Everyone is talking
about the poor birds whose wings have been weighed down by the heavy oil in the
midst of this war zone” (207). The narrator is also suspicious of the military
communiqué: “Our brave forces have surprised the enemy soldiers and inflicted upon
them heavy losses…” (122). The use of quotation marks indicates the narrator doubts
the reliability of the reports. She also draws attention to the manipulation and
propaganda of military communiqués during the war with Iran. The lack of objectivity
and criticality in the war reporting she describes serves to demonstrate how dominant
discourses fuel cycles of violence and war.

In contrast, the narrator’s perception of the war focuses on the personal and
domestic effects of the tragedy it creates. Alongside the loss of life, forbidden travel
and compulsory military service, she describes the hoarding of food, empty shops, lack of water, electricity, and phone lines. “Most of the women are now wearing black. Social introductions are based on the fact that this woman is a sister of a martyr; that one is the mother of a martyr, or the fiancé of a soldier missing in action; and this child is the daughter of a prisoner of war” (130). Khedairi emphasises how women during war become abject powerless subjects, as their identity is solely defined by their relationship to the men serving in the war.

*A Sky So Close* reveals the destruction, chaos and casualties of war. “‘The Iraq in my work is the human Iraq, not only the one of the headlines. World politics are taking over with no regard to the voices on the streets, the International Resolutions or the pain of humans under attack. My country is bleeding…” (Voykowitsch 2003). Khedairi describes how war is domesticated and normalised to the extent that it becomes part of children’s-play. “We became accustomed to the sound of the air-raid siren. The children in the street started imitating it to perfection. Sometimes we were unable to differentiate the sound of the children playing from the real thing” (132-3). She contrasts the co-opting of everyday spaces into the landscape of war, and focuses on the loss of lives. “[T]here were thousands killed. Mines have now been sown, adding a new dimension to the war as they rip the soldiers’ bodies, turning the earth underfoot to burning flames (140-1). Khedairi writes as a way of resisting the amnesia of war. She humanises the dehumanised, subverting the reduction of casualties to mere anonymous numbers.
Conclusion

War and poverty destroys what identifies people as individuals. Khedairi exposes apathy, and moral and emotional anesthesia surrounding victims of war, poverty, and illness. Events and people are objectified into something that can be possessed in the essentialist reporting within Western media. As Nadje Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar point out “[i]n general, it is the exception, not the rule to hear from an Iraqi about Iraq” (2013, xxxiv). Khedairi documents suffering to give a voice to the voiceless. In an interview Spivak insisted: “the only way that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony […] you don’t have to give the subaltern a voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity” (De Kock 1992, 46). Khedairi is not speaking on behalf of and thereby further subjugating those she represents, she inserts the subaltern into dominant hegemonic discourses. She works “for” the voiceless in order to speak truth to the unfreedom of injustice and inequality.
Chapter 4

“For each freedom we choose, we must give up another”37:

False Freedom in Yasmin Crowther’s The Saffron Kitchen

Exercising control over one’s life is a prerequisite of freedom, according to Charles Taylor “one is free only to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one’s life” (2007, 153). Taylor suggests that in order to be “truly or fully free” there can be no internal or external obstacles to freedom (2007, 162). To be “truly or fully free” implies it is possible to obtain a full, perfect, or complete state of freedom. I argue it would be more realistic to consider freedom on a continuum that is continually moving and shifting depending on the control we are (at that time) able to assert over internal and external impediments. Furthermore, to act of one’s own free will ignores the fact that people ascribe different values to different forms of freedom, and that freedom in one respect may conflict with other forms of freedom. The quote within the title of this chapter: “[f]or each freedom we choose, we must give up another” (133) draws attention to conflicted forms of freedom in the novel, where in order to obtain one form of freedom another is forfeited. What is lost in pursuit of freedom will form the focus of this chapter.

In the previous chapter I explored barriers to freedom, this chapter will focus on what I term false freedom – a state of unfreedom when freedom is not personally chosen but imposed. In Yasmin Crowther’s The Saffron Kitchen (2006), Maryam’s father forces her to flee Iran after he assumes she has dishonoured him by having sexual relations with a man outside of marriage. She gains the “freedom” of mobility

37 Yasmin Crowther’s The Saffron Kitchen (2006, 133)
to travel to England and live a life free from the obligations of familial codes of honour. However, this false freedom results in her losing her home, her sense of belonging, and her family. Maryam’s forced exile from Iran is not liberating because it is not a life she has freely chosen. According to Charles Taylor freedom is obtained through self-determinism. Taylor’s theory is arguably based on Epictetus’ discourse on freedom: “He is free who lives as he wills, who is subject neither to compulsion, nor hindrance nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid” (Scaltsas and Mason 2007, 127). Epictetus claims that freedom is not dependent on the absence of obstacles, but “the elimination of the desire for things that are under the control of others” (Scaltsas and Mason 2007, 129). This Stoic sense of freedom can be applied to Maryam’s predicament in exile. According to stoicism, Maryam could find freedom of mind by altering what she desires and wants to eliminate the power others have over her. She could transcend the obstacles her father presents to obtain freedom within exile, but she rejects this position refusing to abandon her desire for Ali and her home. Ultimately, Maryam challenges this state of false freedom when she returns to Iran to reclaim what she has lost. This decision is an act of resistance and marks the beginning of Maryam’s liberation, as she reveals her past trauma and rebuilds her relationship with her daughter.

Crowther connects Maryam’s rape with the CIA-sponsored coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (a democratically elected prime minister who nationalised the British-controlled oil industry). The violence described in the novel between the Shah’s militias and citizens loyal to Mossadegh is connected to the atrocity committed on Maryam’s body, as an assault on her body thereby becomes an assault on the nation. The return to the arbitrary autocracy of Mohammad
Reza Shah is associated with patriarchal domination in the novel. Maryam’s violated body becomes an emblem for the unfreedom of the nation. Crowther draws attention to a standard patriarchal trope that equates women’s bodies with nations in order to highlight how women are subjugated by gendered nationalist discourses.

*The Saffron Kitchen* moves between a mother and daughter, two countries and cultures which are all interwoven. The novel begins *in medias res* with Sara’s miscarriage and ends with the revelation of Maryam’s virginity test and rape. Maryam feels responsible for her daughter Sara’s loss and flees to Iran. After some time, Maryam asks Sara to come visit and during Sara’s stay she learns that her mother was mistakenly accused of having a sexual relationship with her father’s servant Ali. It is revealed that Maryam’s father, a general for the Shah, ordered a virginity test as a punishment and this resulted in the rape of his daughter whilst Ali is beaten to near death. Her father exiles Maryam from Iran, and whilst in England she meets Edward and gives birth to Sara. Maryam’s return to Iran allows her to be reunited with Ali and to finally try to come to terms with her past. Sara returns to London alone having gained an understanding of her mother and in turn herself.

This chapter comprises of three parts. In the first section, “Emancipation Through Motherhood”, I point out that whilst the theme of mother-daughter relationships is recurring in contemporary diasporic Iranian women’s writing, there is limited scholarship analysing the significance of this relationship to women’s empowerment. In the second section, “Beloved Mother Vatan [Homeland]” I argue Crowther examines the historical connection drawn between the female body and the Iranian nation by associating Maryam’s violent virginity test and rape with the 1953 coup. I challenge Karim Mattar’s reading of the novel to suggest that Crowther is not presenting the redemptive possibilities for Iranian women within the Islamic
Republic, rather she is drawing attention to the gendered unfreedom whilst also rejecting the possibility of liberation through migration to the West. In the final section, “The False Freedom of Tab’id [Exile]” I examine the ways in which Maryam is oppressed and empowered through her experiences in exile, and how she attempts to overcome her unfreedom through migration.

Emancipation Through Motherhood

The topic of mother-daughter relationships is understudied in contemporary analysis of literature of the Iranian and Arab diaspora.38 The reason mother-daughter relationships have remained shrouded in mystery and silence within the Arab world is connected to the sanctity of family life (Abudi 2011, 3). Leila Abouzeid, a Moroccan writer, has explained the secrecy surrounding family life: “A Muslim’s private life is considered an ‘awra (an intimate part of the body), and sitr (concealing it) is imperative. As the Qur’an says: Allah amara bissitr (God ordered the concealing of that which is shameful and embarrassing)” (1998, iii). Within Iranian family dynamics proverbs such as hefz-e aberu (to save face), hefz-e zaher (to protect appearances), and ba sili surat-o sorkh negah dashtan (to keep the face red with a slap) convey similar cultural traditions of concealing family life from the public sphere (Fotouhi 2015, 96). This culture of silence may explain why Crowther denied permission to publish any quotes from an interview I conducted with her in 2014. The

theme of censoring family life from autobiographical writing is explored in detail in relation to contemporary diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs in the next chapter. *The Saffron Kitchen* defies the silence surrounding intimate familial relationships by focusing on the dysfunctional dynamic between Maryam and Sara.

*The Saffron Kitchen* is written in the style of a female bildungsroman. There are two predominant narrative patterns for this genre: the first is the typical adolescent journey from childhood to maturity which is common in male self-development fiction, the second is the crisis situation that occurs later in the heroine’s life which results in her awakening (Braendlin 1983, 78). Crowther’s novel fits within the latter pattern, Sara is married, educated and working as a teacher. The point of crisis is Sara’s miscarriage, which also serves as a catalyst for her mother Maryam’s return to Iran. It is only through Mayram and Sara’s journey to Iran that they are able to assert their subjectivity and heal their relationship.

Within diasporic Anglo-Iranian literature the relationship between the mother and daughter is a recurring theme, the diasporic daughter is usually trying to make sense of a conflicted relationship with her mother (Fotouhi 2015, 141-2). The conflict between Maryam and Sara is initially a consequence of Maryam passively projecting an oppressive male-defined version of motherhood. The oppressive dimensions of motherhood are examined in Adrienne Rich’s seminal book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986), in which she distinguishes between two meanings and experiences of motherhood. “[O]ne superimposed on the other: the

---

39 In *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism* Laura Fuderer contextualises the emergence of this genre: “Discussions of the female bildungsroman began to appear in the critical literature in the early 1970s, when critics recognized its rise as a reflection of the contemporary feminist movement. One of the earliest, a 1972 article by Ellen Morgan, identifies the female bildungsroman as a “recasting” of an old form that was distinctly male until the twentieth century. She describes the genre as “the most salient form of literature influenced by neo-feminism” because “[w]omen as neo-feminism conceives of her is a creature in the process of becoming, struggling to throw off her conditioning, the psychology of oppression” (1990, 2). Fuderer identifies over two hundred and fifty female bildungsromans written in English by women authors (1990, 1).
potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims to ensure that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (1986, 13). For Rich, motherhood is shaped by male expectations and structures, whereas mothering is female-defined and has the potential to be a source of power. Adrienne Rich defines the body of a woman as a “terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (1986, 55). She considers motherhood a state of “powerless responsibility” (1986, 52), which is not simply a state of powerlessness and responsibility, but a process of readily and passively transferring values of the dominant hegemony onto a daughter thereby subjugating her into the same state of powerlessness. However, a mother also has the potential to empower, resist and subvert the hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity.

In The Saffron Kitchen, motherhood is a site of potential oppression and liberation. For most of the novel Maryam serves as a problematic enforcer of patriarchal norms, as Sara’s sexual experiences and views of her body are tainted by her mother’s influence. “[W]e’d slept together for the first time; my first time. ‘That’s your foreign bit,’ he said, ‘saving yourself.’ I’d shaken my head. If only he knew the tales my mother had told, her dark foreboding. ‘In Iran, women are cast out just for the suspicion of dishonour. Always prize yourself, Sara’” (173). Maryam instils her own sense of shame onto Sara’s body. “Almost overnight, I became painfully self-conscious of myself, my body, its protuberances, shape, flow and juices: all bad, all spoiling, all beyond my control. That had been me at twelve” (9). Crowther demonstrates the oppressive conflation of the female body with male honour and shame. She also demonstrates that women participate in the policing of female bodies. Deniz Kandiyoti has examined women’s strategies and coping mechanisms within patriarchal systems and she asserts that women bargain with patriarchy to passively
resist by exchanging submissiveness and propriety for protection, security and stability (1988, 283). The ideological subordination of women is so ingrained into the patriarchal structure of Maryam’s Iranian cultural norms that this results in her subconsciously perpetuating the same patriarchal bargain with her daughter’s body. Maryam replicates the rebuff she received from Aunt Soraya as a sexually curious child seeking freedom from the expectations associated with her gender.

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias in *Woman-Nation-State* (1989) explain that there are five ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes in relation to state practisess, one of which includes participating in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as the transmitters of its culture. Women are often seen as the “cultural carriers” of the ethnic group because they socialise young children and other members of the ethnic group, transmitting their cultural heritage and ways of life (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 7-9). In *The Saffron Kitchen* the oral tradition of telling stories is used as a tool of patriarchy to affirm patriarchal customs. Maryam and her sister Mairy are told the story of Zohreh, a cautionary tale that teaches young girls to obey their parents’ will.

I had heard the stories of their childhood all my life, but many of them seemed to change from one telling to the next, so it became impossible to know what was real and what was myth. [...] They had told me the story of this woman, Zohreh, as soon as I could sit still on Mairy’s knee and listen, which was before I could talk. [...] as I grew older, Zohreh escaped less lightly and her punishments became more severe. At the end of the tale, Mairy and I would sit with tear-streaked faces (53-5).

Crowther demonstrates the central role storytelling plays in reproducing women’s subordination. Maryam initially fulfils her role as a “cultural carrier” of her Iranian
heritage, transferring cultural and ideological traditions onto her daughter. She controls her daughter’s perceptions of her body and sexuality. It is only upon her return to Iran that Maryam is able to reclaim the past she has been divorced from, and reject the masculinist cultural traditions and ideologies that have been deeply imbibed by her and transmitted to her daughter.

At the end of the novel an oral narrative is used to draw attention to forgotten and marginalised female voices of resistance. Crowther reclaims the art of storytelling by creating a female protagonist in Gossemarbart who refuses to be a passive victim, this story serves to inspire rather than control women. The tale focuses on a fourteen-year-old girl who is stolen from her family and forced to marry a “ruthless and powerful khan” (244). She refuses to accept him as her husband, “Gossemarbart was starving for her freedom, her family and the mountains, she did not stop” (248). She tries to persuade him to set her free but all her protests are met with violence. In an effort to contain her he inflicts a series of wounds on her body, including cutting off her hair, her fingers so she cannot write, and her tongue to stop her crying. She is freed by magic water that turns her into stone. “Gossemarbart smiled again. Her spirit danced with the stars” (249). Doctor Ahlavi narrates this story for Maryam, “because of what happened all those decades before” (249). The oral narrative conveys the strength of women and an enduring struggle for liberation, which serves to empower rather than oppress women in their quest for freedom and equality.

Within The Saffron Kitchen storytelling is a tool that can be used to reproduce or resist subordination. In a similar way to motherhood, it can both empower and oppress. Rich concludes that in order to construct new meanings to transform motherhood we need “to recognize the full complexity and political significance of the woman’s body, the full spectrum of power and powerlessness it represents” (1986,
To go beyond the patriarchal myths and perceptions that have informed our thinking and understanding of motherhood we need to remove “the blinders imposed by the traditional paternal order” (Hirsch 1990, 198). In the same way that Maryam’s false freedom is a consequence of her relationship with her father, her experience of motherhood is defined by a paternal relationship. Crowther implies power can be derived from motherhood, as Maryam cultivates her own agency through her maternal relationship with Sara. Ultimately, Crowther suggests this empowerment is dependent on motherhood being divorced from patriarchy.

**Beloved Mother Vatan [Homeland]**

Afsaneh Najmabadi argues the gendering of nationalist expression in Iran has received little if any attention (1997, 444). She contends that the body of the Iranian nation (*millat*) and homeland (*vatan*), have since the late-eighteenth century been envisaged as “the outline of a female body: A body to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for” (1997, 445). The purity of the woman (*‘ismat*), and the integrity of Iran were closely linked through the phrase *nāmūs-i Irān*, which means the honour and purity of Iran. Both Iran and women became subjects of male possession and protection, with sexual and national honour intimately constructing each other (Najmabadi 1997, 444). Of course, it is important to note that this is far from unique to Iran. Iran’s feminised national vulnerability is invoked through *ghayrat*, meaning a man would lose his honour should he fail to protect the borders of his beloved mother Iran from the hands of foreign imperialists. The *vatan* within patriotic discourse came to represent both a female beloved and a mother (Najmabadi 1997, 445). Najmabadi’s line of analysis of gendered nationalist
discourse can be extended to Crowther’s *The Saffron Kitchen*. In the novel Maryam’s body is connected to the historical events of 1950s Iran. It is implied that Maryam, like Iran, is in need of protection from a male guardian in order to avoid being plundered.

> Iran is like you, Maryam, a beautiful virgin in the world, surrounded by suitors, and much may be won or lost in the choices that are made.’ [...] ‘We, Iran, you and I, are strong. We cannot be alone in this world. We must choose one ally or another, one husband or another if we are to survive, let alone prosper.’ (68)

The conflation of Maryam with Iran arguably highlights that gendered nationalist discourses position women as objects rather than subjects, and such discourses inevitably pose a problem for the equality of women within Iran.

Marriage for women is portrayed as a type of war. Aunt Soraya attempts to suppress Maryam’s interest in contemporary Iranian politics by connecting it with forbidden sexuality.

> Iran has been made love to by London, Moscow, Washington, all in turn. Each fears we may ally with another. [...] She smiled at my blush. [...] She leaned forward. ‘Mossadeq has grown a sick old man whom the world mocks - the “blanket prime minister”, they call him. We need a strong leader to make strong alliances and secure our place in this world (68-9).

It is implied that just like her body, Maryam can have no control over the public political sphere because she is expected to be confined to domestic roles within the home. Crowther depicts politics as a male dominated space in which women will remain powerless. She further underscores this by reviving feminised tropes that populate discourses on war - victimhood, weakness and passivity are therefore
associated with femininity. The feminisation of Iran reproduces the trope of a country needing to be saved.

Pro-Shah politics are connected with female repression, as Aunt Soraya and Maryam’s father are complicit in systems of oppression. Soraya attempts to mislead Maryam in her promise that by marrying she will find freedom within a patriarchal institution. The 1953 coup reinforced brute force can be used to establish who is in charge, and this served to sustain the traditional power men have over women. Crowther describes this use of brute force to sustain patriarchal hierarchy in the family when Maryam refuses to have an arranged marriage. “‘You would deny my will?’ [...] ‘I will not listen to this nonsense any more, Maryam.’ I felt his spit on my face before he raised his hand and slapped me, my head jerking to the side. ‘Get out.’ His ring had cut my lip” (64). Maryam’s father is positioned as a ruthless violent patriarch who is connected to the uprising against Mossadegh.

The intimate relationship between the patriarchal family, nation and religion serves to “confine women’s role to mothering and present an image of women as mother, reproducer and nurturer of the family and nucleus of the nation” (Moghissi 1994, 61). The reputation of the whole family is dependent on the sexual purity of its female members, and the dishonouring of a woman is considered a sign of the male guardians’ failure to protect “their” women. The purity of Maryam’s body is imagined to be akin to national honour, and when she departs from the entrenched social norms and values Maryam’s father is expected to punish and cast her out of the family in order to protect and sustain patriarchal cultural authority. Crowther implies this ensures continued male domination and female subordination within Iranian society.

The coup to overthrow Mossadegh and the return of Mohammad Reza Shah to his Peacock Throne resulted in the decisive impeding of Iran’s progress towards
social democracy (Kinzer 2008, x). In the novel, the unrest and state disorder during this period frames Maryam’s dissent against her arranged marriage. The subsequent private familial disarray after her assumed transgression mimics the public chaos as she is violently punished, disowned and cast out of her family. Maryam is subjected to a brutal virginity test and rape which she keeps silent about for decades.

[S]he remembered the sound of saliva in the army doctor’s mouth, his hand punching up inside her. […] ‘I’ve never told anyone this. Before he sent me away, he ordered an examination.’ […] ‘It was a punishment more than anything, to see if I was a virgin, “intact”. I was only sixteen.’ […] ‘They did the test. That was bad enough. I thought it was over. […] ‘But then they treated me like a rag doll. All my clothes torn and thrown on the floor. I remember their spit on me, the smell of their sweat, their rough hands. I did not think it was possible to be hurt so much.’ […] ‘I was no virgin after that day.’ […] ‘I was spoiled. My father took me for himself, in a way, that day.’ (260-2)

It is only upon Maryam’s return to Iran that she regains her voice. In many ways the novel embodies the Iranian women’s literary tradition, which “advocates and celebrates the transcendence of […] women’s visibility, women’s mobility, and women’s voice” (Milani 1992, 238). By narrating her story Maryam finally frees herself from being defined by it. The revelation of her rape finally transfers the stigma of shame onto the men responsible for the violation. She reclaims power over her body by removing any sense of shame. Crowther suggests that by exposing the abuse she regains her agency.

Islam is portrayed as restorative, after Maryam’s revelation, Maryam, Sara, and Ali go to a mosque to pray before visiting the grave of Maryam’s father. “She [Sara] thought of Julian and Saeed and prayed for them, and for her own father and
mother, longing for the possibility of a new life beginning inside her as well. Maryam felt calm, resting there, thinking of all she would say to her father if she could see him now” (265-6). Karim Mattar reads Maryam and Sara’s return to Iran as evidence of “the redemptive possibilities available to Iranian women” (2012, 565). Mattar contends that Crowther is interrogating “the widespread perception that the Islamic Republic and, by extension, Islamic law, is incompatible with women’s rights” (2012, 555). However, Mattar fails to acknowledge that although Maryam regains her agency within Iran, Sara needs to return to England to be free. Maryam symbolically tells her daughter to “[g]o, Sara, be free” (268). Frederick Luis Aldama considers Crowther is “depicting neither the West as the place of gender liberation nor the Middle East as only a stifling straitjacket for women like Maryam, but where both places present an uneasy mix of freedom and constraint” (2009, 87). Crowther successfully confronts the stereotypical “cartoon of Iran” (132) within neoliberal political rhetoric, and she challenges the image of England as a sanctuary for the oppressed. However, I suggest the novel is more concerned with universalising the problem of gendered unfreedom.

Maryam’s defiance of traditions and expectations result in her being exiled from Iran, and she continues to be outcast decades after her departure from Iran. When she visits her niece she is met with disdain for bringing Ali. “You know the stories. I’m sorry, but I cannot have Ali here, under the same roof as my children, as you. My husband won’t permit it. [...] ‘Customs die hard here as elsewhere. Judgements are made for good reason and are difficult to change, however much time passes. They are the boundaries we must live within” (254-5). Crowther is careful to point out that Maryam feels trapped within the confines of conventions and customs regardless of her geographical location. “‘We never really escape. All I ever wanted as a child, a young woman, was to be free of etiquette and tradition, arranged
marriages and everything just so. All I found was another world where I had to work out the new traditions, habits, how to appear just so” (222). It is therefore implied that Maryam will only find freedom from these gendered expectations in both Iran and England by abandoning these prescribed gendered scripts that have imposed certain values on her body. Freedom is accordingly a process of exercising self-determination.

Crowther implies Maryam is unable to find freedom from within marriage, whether that is an arranged marriage in Iran or a legal union with an English man. She presents the complexity, plurality and heterogeneity of relationships between Iranian men and women. She also avoids propagating the stereotype that all women are subjugated by and in need of liberation from Iranian men. For example, Maryam’s older sister Mairy is content in an arranged marriage. “I’m happy here, Maryam. I know the order of things. I feel safe. But it’s all right for you to want something a little different” (58). She challenges the colonial feminist views, which often endorse Euro-American military intervention in order to rescue oppressed third-world women by creating unconventional characters who defy these stereotypes. Ali, for example, is the opposite of Maryam’s father. When Ali is reunited with Maryam he does not impose any obligations and expectations on her, or try to trap her within a relationship. “[H]ere Maryam is, and for however long she chooses to be here, I am grateful. But I would not keep her here against her wishes. I know she has a family on the other side of the world” (236). Crowther’s character Doctor Ahlavi also resists these stereotypes, as he tries to provide Maryam with the opportunity to escape home by training as a nurse. “Doctor Ahlavi said he had spoken to my father about how I could make a good nurse one day, and he told him he could seek a training position for me at the new hospital in Tehran” (99). He also attempts to prevent Maryam’s
rape: “[s]he remembered Doctor Ahlavi pleading with the soldiers: For pity’s sake, have you not mothers and sisters?” (261) Crowther thereby emphasises the danger in simplifying narratives that homogenise a nation. By drawing a connection between challenging conventional gender roles and the political upheaval of 1950s Iran, Crowther also highlights how these reductive narratives have been abused to inaccurately suggest there is a need to intervene politically or militarily to save a nation and its subordinated women.

*The Saffron Kitchen* explores the multiple layers of oppression women experience within Iranian society, across generations, and as migrants in exile. Farzaneh Milani explains the violation of women’s rights historically in Iran:

In the last few decades, any defiance of conventions, flaunting of family authority, and challenge to patriarchal authority, have automatically been seen and interpreted as a desire to Westernize. Feminism, a word for which there is no Persian equivalent to this day, as a movement and as a perspective has been readily labeled and dismissed as Western, an imitation of Western ways, a surrender to foreign powers. [...] Progressively, the issue of women’s emancipation became a major grievance of nationalistic reactions to foreign powers and their local representatives (1992, 7-8).

Crowther’s novel highlights the particular difficulty Iranian and other women in postcolonial societies face in challenging historically ingrained inequalities. If a woman defies the beliefs and cultural norms which confine women to domesticity her act of transgression is dismissed as a result of the corrupting influence of Western imperialism, and she is berated for betraying her culture in exchange for the infiltration and domination of alien values and beliefs. Women’s bodies are used as
tools in nationalistic rhetoric to dismiss women’s emancipation as a reaction to foreign powers.

In the same way that she avoids adopting a single perspective on arranged marriages Crowther is keen to avoid simplifying narratives on the issue of veiling or the *chador*. She references the complex political history of veiling, unveiling and revealing in Iran.\(^40\) Female image and identity remain a highly politicised terrain in Iran. Therefore, Crowther’s decision to reference both the political symbolism and physical imposition of veiling alongside the more positive implications of the act serve to accentuate the intricacy of its meaning. Rather than merely rejecting the *chador* as a symbol of backwardness and oppressive traditions she suggests that even a “Western” modern woman can feel comfortable in the chador. “[Sara] drew her chador close, feeling safe in its dark folds” (263). At the same time she references the brutality the secret forces used to impose the veil and the effect this had on women’s employment and public status:

Parvin in Tehran told me how one day she was able to walk through the city in her heels and headscarf, and then next day - after the Revolution - she was sent home from work and told only to come back if she wore full hejab over her hair, a manteau down to the ground and shoes that didn’t click as she walked. She never returned to her job. Her family was wealthy enough, and they sent their daughters to school in America. Now she can wear her heels in the street again, but her children will never come home (150).

The Shah’s decision to unveil was no different to those that imposed the veil, as both are a violation of a woman’s right to choose their clothing. The preoccupation with

\(^{40}\) The complex political history of veiling in Iran is outlined in the introduction to this thesis.
women’s dress and conduct is in itself a manifestation of the inequality between the sexes.

Crowther asserts that many women had no choice but to migrate in order to escape their bodies becoming a contested terrain of the nation. Ashraf Zahedi contextualises the complexity of veiling dynamics in Iran:

Iranian women’s concerns are not about whether to veil, but about their right to choose veiling. [...] Women’s resistance to unveiling and reveiling has been resistance to assigned identity, assigned image, assigned symbolism, and assigned gender roles. Compulsory unveiling and reveiling and revealing and concealing of female hair have deprived Iranian women of choice about their identity, self-presentation, and place in society. (2008, 263)

An Iranian woman has thus historically faced a double marginalisation - her unveiled body becomes synonymous with Western neocolonial forces interfering and imposing Western ideological forms. At the same time, a veiled Iranian woman’s body becomes symbolic of a rejection of Western powers, and a return to so-called traditional Islam. Crowther describes Maryam associating the veil with her traumatic past. “He meant no harm, I know, but somehow he pulled back a veil I’d tried to forget or ignore” (130). The metaphor of lifting the veil connects a state of undress to the trauma of her violated body, and a state of emotional and physical vulnerability. The novel implies forced veiling or unveiling like Maryam’s virginity test and rape is a violent medium for controlling and monitoring women’s bodies. The complexity surrounding the veiling and unveiling in Iran is intimately connected to gendered nationalist discourse that objectifies women. It is only upon the death of her father and within a relatively remote rural location separated from her family and Iranian society that Maryam is able to find her agency and voice. Arguably, this signifies that women’s rights are
incompatible with the Islamic Republic, and the solution is not to migrate to the West where one set of patriarchal customs are merely exchanged for another, but to return to try to challenge the gendered unfreedom of the nation.

**The False Freedom of *Tab’id* [Exile]**

Migration is a source of liberation and oppression in *The Saffron Kitchen*, as it is for many of the writers and protagonists in this thesis. Historically, gender discrimination has often connected women’s chastity with space and mobility. Farzaneh Milani explains:

> Mobility has often been associated with chaos and the opportunity for sexual promiscuity in women. The terms *kiabangard* (vagabond), *velgard* (vagrant), and *harja’i* (belonging or existing everywhere) are synonymous with prostitution when applied to women. If a woman dares leave her socially designated path, if she abandons her fenced-off space, she is branded a street walker, a universal truth of disrespect for women “out of bounds” (2011, 5).

Physical confinement is a central concern in Iranian women’s lives, and as a result a recurring theme in their writing. *The Saffron Kitchen* is no exception, Crowther highlights that women in Iran need permission from a male guardian to travel abroad: “you know we can’t leave the country without permission from our father or my husband” (58). To obtain control over mobility and space suggests political, social, and economic liberation. Maryam’s migrations are not emancipatory because she is forced into exile. She resists by continuing to migrate between England and Iran. However, because these journeys are a reaction to her father’s first enforced migration
her mobility remains defined by her father. She escapes this only upon his death and in visiting his grave.

In a similar way to Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* and Aboulela’s *Minaret*, the structure of *The Saffron Kitchen* mimics the liminal state of her protagonists. The novel shifts in time, place and perspective which mirrors the dislocation the characters feel. Moving between London and Iran, past and present, Sara and Maryam’s perspectives, first- and third-person, serve to disorientate the reader. Just as Faqir scatters transliterations of Arabic in English throughout *My Name is Salma*, Crowther interweaves Farsi with English in order to unsettle the reader. “‘Salbarla. Nesar. Solehmoneh. Are you paying attention, Maryam Mazar?’” (163) By interchanging between Iran and London, Farsi and English, Crowther avoids creating a binary opposition between the two. The continuous movement of the characters between Iran and England, signals identity is as much a process as their migrations. Maryam embodies the painful paradoxes of first-generation immigrants forced into the diaspora, as her exile leaves her lost between her place of birth and the home she has built. She remains caught between Iran and England because she cannot claim either as her home, and by the end of the novel it remains unclear whether Maryam will return to England or remain in Iran. For Crowther, a transcultural identity is not static but emergent and she resists any neat resolutions for her novel leaving her characters disconnected.

In a similar way to Leila Aboulela who uses epigraphs in her novel *The Translator* to align her writing with narratives of postcolonial and post-imperial migration, Crowther situates her readers and her writing amongst both Persian and British poets of the past by opening each chapter with an epigraph. In *The Saffron Kitchen* Crowther uses epigraphs as signposts and points of re-orientation for her
readers. For example, she incorporates the poetry of W.H. Auden; the first chapter begins with a quatrain from his poem “Leap before you look”, “A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep / Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear; / Although I love you, you will have to leap; / Our dream of safety has to disappear” (1). This reference to Auden might suggest that Maryam’s relationship with Edward is driven by a desire to avoid the isolation of exile, but this false sense of security can only ever be temporary. She foreshadows the confusion and uncertainty that embodies the migrant experience. Of course, it also speaks of a literary relationship between Crowther and English that is marked by diasporic belongings and complex longings. At the start of the fourth chapter Crowther makes another reference to Auden, “Time only knows the price we have to pay”, which is taken from the villanelle “If I could tell you”. This villanelle embodies one of the key themes explored in her novel - the past influencing the present. The effect of familial trauma travelling through generations is compared to the historical impact of the 1953 coup.

In chapter two and three Crowther references the medieval Persian poet using two quatrains from Edward FitzGerald’s translation of The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám. Crowther’s use of this epigraph could signal to the reader that she is positioning herself as a translator of the past. The reference in chapter two revives the theme of the past imposing on the present. “The dust of much trouble was raised” (25). Sara’s miscarriage is connected to Maryam’s rape, and both women feel helpless to prevent the trauma inflicted upon their bodies. In chapter three entitled “Ghosts”, Crowther quotes Khayyám again: “out of the / heart of dust / Hope sprang again like greenness” (105). Crowther opens this chapter with an epigraph that signals a fresh start for her characters can only be found among the “Ghosts” by revisiting the past.
Crowther also aligns her work with great Victorian and twentieth-century poets. Her final epigraph in chapter five references T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”, “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (267). The reference to this poem indicates the chapter will focus on renewal, and the uniting of the past with the present and future in order to overcome mistakes and build new life. Crowther also incorporates quotes from Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” throughout the novel. Ali teaches Maryam to recite the poem and it becomes an emblem of their relationship. “‘Ah, love, let us be true / To one another! For the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, / so various, so beautiful, so new...’ [...] ‘Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain...” (156). The reference to the final stanza of the poem is symbolic of her longing for a love that is never realised. It is implied that all that we dream of will ultimately devolve into chaos.

Crowther employs bridges as motifs for the bridging between characters, which for the most part are unsuccessful. Maryam explains her relationship with Sara’s father Edward: “[w]e tried to bridge our two worlds as well as we could.’ [...] She was no longer sure if she had tried as hard as she might have done; if a part of her hadn’t rather rocked the bridge, and kicked it hard to crumble beneath her” (120-1). She becomes dislocated from her body, loses her identity, and in turn her ability to speak for herself. Her father succeeds in silencing his daughter and taking control of her body by force. This act of violence exiles her from her home in Iran and her body. Her return to face Ali, her home town, and her father’s grave provides a bridging between herself, her body, and her past. Consequently, she is finally able to reclaim her identity and in turn her voice. Bridges are also used to signify journeys and border
crossings both culturally and geographically. The novel begins on a bridge with the trauma of Saeed’s attempted suicide and Sara’s miscarriage. The metaphor of bridges is symbolic of change and transience, signalling Maryam will resist settling and integrating into one place. Instead she will continue to wander back and forth across a bridge, subverting the cultural codes of both her home and host society.

Hamid Naficy contends living in exile is different to any other form of diasporic experience. “What turns an émigré, expatriate, refugee, immigrant, or a person in diaspora into an exile is this double relationship to location: physically located in one place while dreaming of an unrealizable return to another. The style of dreaming of the homeland and of staging a return to it is both dystopian and utopian” (1993, 17). Food transports the characters of The Saffron Kitchen to a space outside of England. As the title of the novel suggests the kitchen is a focal point of the novel, it is a site of nostalgia and a space where national identity is pronounced through culinary practises. Dining rituals can be read as tropes signalling potential conformity and obedience to gendered hierarchies. “The women and children ate after the men” (63). Food serves as a medium in the novel to communicate the patriarchal social structures operating within the family and the gendered inequalities that subordinate women.

The kitchen is a domestic space of servitude to men, but it is also a site of bonding between women. Crowther proposes that food enables Maryam to communicate with her daughter, and maintain her heritage in a foreign landscape. Annette Svensson in her research into aspects of cultural translation in migration literature asserts:

food practices manifest gender-related power hierarchies, illuminate stereotypes that strengthen cultural, regional and national power hierarchies as
well as serve as a temporary cure for cultural mourning. Additionally, the wish to cook traditional dishes illustrates non-adaptation and a resistance to translating the source food as well as the source culture, while the desire for the target food culture illustrates a wish to be, in Rushdie’s sense of the word, translated (2010, 88).

The nostalgia for the maternal world of food parallels the nostalgia for the mother country, craving cultural food is similar to “cultural mourning”\(^{41}\) after a loss of homeland. Crowther describes Maryam using food as a representation of her cultural belonging, which she transfers to her daughter in an effort to continue her cultural traditions.

Food for Maryam becomes a source of power, rather than subservience. As Elleke Boehmer has pointed out: “women are cast as icons of national values, or idealized custodians of tradition” (2005, 160). Maryam embodies the role of a cultural carrier of traditions, however within the private sphere of the home food offers the opportunity for rebellion. “She had brought a small bag of grainy black poppy seeds with her on the plane, [...] ‘Don’t tell your father,’ she whispered to me, and there in the middle of our herb and vegetable garden, I touched something strange and dangerous, a world where flowers became poison and smoke” (8). The kitchen and food prepared therein offers the potential to resist and contest patriarchal power.

Saffron is a recurring motif throughout the novel, from steaming plates of fragrant saffron rice, to the nurturing saffron Sara receives to put in her tea to help her heal after the miscarriage. When Crowther describes Sara and Saeed painting the kitchen wall the colour of saffron they compare its intensity to the “sunset”, “blood”, “‘Poppies and pomegranates’” (169). The process of painting the kitchen helps to heal

\(^{41}\) Roberta Rubenstein coined the term “cultural mourning” to refer to a loss of something with collective or communal associations. This could include a way of life, cultural homeland, geographical location, a cultural group, which he or she has been involuntarily or voluntarily exiled from. (2001, 5)
Sara, as she derives strength from the symbolic colour. “We lifted the roller together and gave the dirty, dull wall its first fiery stripe. [...] I felt tears in my eyes and started to laugh. We lifted the roller and swiped another flame across the wall” (169-170). This moment could signify a defiant reclaiming of the kitchen - a domestic, feminine space that women are confined to. Sara discards the typical associations of subservience, transforming the kitchen into a place of commune, safety and strength.

The Saffron Kitchen highlights the various ways in which patriarchal traditional customs can be challenged or perpetuated within the domestic space of a kitchen, and through the preparation and consumption of food. There are moments when the novel slips into what bell hooks refers to as a “commodification of Otherness […] within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (2015, 21). This is further supported by Claire Chambers’ reading of the novel “[t]he author’s tendency towards melodrama and food fetishization leaves an Orientalist taste in the mouth” (2019, 122). Within the novel Persian food is contrasted with a dish commonly assumed to be British cuisine. Edward recalls: “[w]e planned to meet in a restaurant on the harbour and have fish and chips. [...] All I remember is the sound of cutlery and the smell of batter.’ [...] ‘Maryam scarcely touched her food, just pushed it round her plate, and I suddenly felt so ashamed to have taken her there, with its cheap formica tables and plastic cutlery” (157). The British palate is dismissed as awkward, embarrassing and familiar. This contrasts with the food Maryam prepares, “the smell of her cooking, the soft, starchy scent of basmati, saffron and roasting lamb. I went through the kitchen with steam on its windows and along the narrow blue corridor with its long cupboards full of henna, herbs, dried figs and limes from her last trip home” (4). Persian food, and by extension Maryam, is portrayed as exciting, exotic,
tempting, alluring, and dangerous. The fetishisation of the food commodifies Iranian culture as something to be “eaten, consumed, and forgotten” by her readers (hooks 2015, 39).

This desire to know and understand the “Other” alienates Maryam from England, as she refuses to accept the vision of Iran presented by Euro-American mainstream media. “‘I suppose it’s become harder to be so far away from where I grew up. The older I am, the more shallow my roots have felt in England. There I have no one to share stories with, or to remember. In London, I’m surrounded by people who know this country through their news […] It can be lonely” (132). In a similar way to the narrator of A Sky So Close, Maryam becomes removed from her home in Iran, as she is forced to watch the historical events of the Iranian Revolution, Gulf War and hostage crisis on television. The distance this creates drives her desire to return. Edward explains:

[T]hings got worse for Maryam after the Revolution, when her family couldn’t come and go freely. We stopped visiting Iran ourselves; it just didn’t feel safe after all those hostage crises. It was as if she stopped getting the right mix of oxygen.’ I remember her tears in front of the nine o’clock news […] ‘That’s not my Iran,’ she would say, remembering the images of men beating themselves with chains, bloodied shirts on their backs. [...] She’d watch the news less and less, and would wander upstairs instead to her study and photos from the past (114-5).

Maryam finds that she can no longer translate herself when she becomes disconnected from the discourses used to describe her homeland. “[B]efore the Revolution [...] We were welcomed around the world for our oil, yes, but also for our culture, our civilisation. [...] Now, a quarter of a century later, if you have an Iranian passport,
people here, the authorities, think you’re a terrorist, someone who may have a bomb strapped to their belly. We’re in “the axis of evil”, they say, the scourge of the earth” (136-7). It proves impossible for Maryam to combine her vision of the Iran from her past with the Iran narrated in the present. Her return signals a rejection of the translated visions of Iran in the discourses created by Western media, and a renouncement of their power over her.

**Conclusion**

The crisis at the start of the novel abruptly disrupts Maryam’s means of identification as a mother and wife. It dissolves any restrictions or sense of commitment, and she consequently abandons the temporary liminal space she has occupied in London. Similarly, Crowther depicts Sara’s sense of unbelonging in Iran:

> I’ve never felt English but I know Iran isn’t my home. I have relatives here who I’ve never met, who I may never meet, who may be dead and buried. Still, they exist in my head - the conversations I might have had, all I might have learned from them. It’s like a thing that hasn’t quite been for me - Iran. It’s an idea in my mind that I may never understand, but that will always be part of me. I would fight for that idea, although sometimes I’ve hated it - my mother’s empty eyes, when I knew she was somewhere that I couldn’t follow. Mostly I’ve loved it - summer evenings dancing on the patio to Persian music (237).

By the end of the novel, it is suggested that Sara has accepted familial conflict and crisis, which is symbolically represented through her parents’ relationship remaining unresolved and discordant. Her mother refuses to continue to translate herself in
England, whilst Sara becomes a translated being moving back and forth between England and Iran. Both Maryam and Sara reclaim their Iranian culture separating it from the discourses of terror, fundamentalism, and immigration, which have emerged in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005. Similarly, Maryam’s reverse migration is symbolic of an assertion of her control over her visibility, mobility and voice, which are now devoid of patriarchal cultural traditions and gendered national ideologies.

Crowther’s comparison of the CIA sponsored coup to Maryam’s violent rape connects Westernisation under the Pahlavi dynasty to the violent patriarchal domination of women’s bodies. Ali Ansari explains that “[i]n Iranian culture, the Iranian monarchy means the political and geographical unity of Iran” (2003, 190). As I argue earlier in this chapter, the body of the Iranian nation is connected to the purity of Iranian women; under the Pahlavi dynasty it is implied that the political and geographical unity of Iran is metaphorically and physically secured by force. The novel connects the shaping of Iran’s national identity to women succumbing to internalising their violent patriarchal domination. The Saffron Kitchen depicts what I term a state of false freedom, whilst Maryam may have removed the physical impediments to her freedom, for decades she internalises her subordination and transfers this subservience to her daughter.

The internal conflict Crowther’s characters experience over the course of the novel mimic the public political disarray. By creating a gendered history and a narrative for women in Iran and England her characters are able to transcend borders and nations through their multiple migrations, and abandon patriarchal cultural and national ideologies which have defined their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Crowther’s characters attempt to translate and redefine themselves as
separate to these ideologies using tools such as food and storytelling. In rejecting discourses and histories which have alienated them they can reclaim both public political events and private experiences such as rape, which have served to shame and subjugate them. Crowther writes Iranian women into narratives that have omitted them. By challenging rather than accepting unfreedom Maryam is able to liberate herself from the repressive narratives which have served to define her.
Chapter 5

Unveiling Voices in the Diasporic Iranian Women’s Memoir Genre

Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2004) is arguably one of the most controversial texts associated with the diasporic Iranian women’s memoir genre. Much of the controversy surrounding Nafisi’s memoir stemmed from Hamid Dabashi’s critical interrogation of the text.42 In *Brown Skin, White Masks* (2011) he proposes that Nafisi is a “character type – the theoretical template – of the native informer” (Dabashi 2011, 15). Dabashi has theorised the figure of the “native informer” for over two decades, contending that the “native informer” serves the empire by providing an insider’s insight into a culture that they denigrate and dismiss (2011, 13). Dabashi’s theories on the character of the native informer were partly inspired by Spivak, who wrote “at best native informants [serve] first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other” (1994, 79). For Spivak, a native informant acts as a type of interpreter between the colonised and the coloniser translating relevant information that embeds governance and rulership. They function as sub oppressors who pacify the colonised with Western ideologies. Dabashi has modified the term informant to informer, in order to emphasise that to play such a role is an “act of betrayal” (2011, 12). He has theorised that “[n]ative informers have immersed themselves in the white-identified culture and they now serve it out of pure careerism” (2011, 20). Dabashi applies his theory of “native informers” to the increasing body of Muslim women’s memoirs, asserting that these writers serve to

---

legitimise concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world (2011, 69).

To be accused of being a “native informer” that confirms the dominant imperial narrative of oppressed Muslim women is similar to the criticisms other writers in this thesis have faced (see my analysis of Fadia Faqir in Chapter 1). This chapter seeks to interrogate the limitations and possibilities of this genre for the creation of narratives of resistance.

Dabashi’s critique is based on the purported demand in the global marketplace for a narrative trajectory of an oppressed Muslim woman being liberated from Iran and Islam by Western freedom. This chapter contends that diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs can escape the commodification and appropriation of their narrative as merely satisfying the curiosity for an illusory understanding of the “Other”. To a greater or lesser extent, each memoir discussed in this chapter attempts to reject reductive discourses that label them “enlightened escapees” (Ahmed 2015, 189). Instead of selling a narrative that homogenises Iran and Iranian women, their selective silence becomes their currency. They write about their self-censorship, and engage in the complexities of the politics of representation. Their selectivity becomes a productive paradox enabling them to regulate their privacy and achieve self-determination, whilst exposing the personal struggles and physical restrictions that restrain their writing. To different degrees of success, they transform themselves from an exotic object for co-option, to achieving a subjectivity that is resistant to categorisation and consumption. From within a diasporic space these writers prove that just as it is not possible to reduce “the West” to a monolithic unsupple space, Iran is just as multivalent and contradictory.
For nearly a thousand years men have dominated Iran’s literary tradition; women writers were largely invisible. This is not to suggest that women were not writing, rather that even in the last one hundred years women writers like Parvin E’tesami (1907-1941), Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-67), Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012), and Simin Behbehani (1927-2014) continued to be discouraged and underappreciated in comparison to their male contemporaries. However, after the 1979 revolution writing became a tool for Iranian women to find a voice from within the permissible private domestic sphere of their home, whilst at the same time allowing them the opportunity to enter a public space forbidden by the government. The public space for these writers is a literary space; therefore the space of publication becomes a compensatory one, particularly amid the crackdown on women’s presence in the public sphere after the revolution. Many of the women living in the diaspora were inspired to pen memoirs, finding a voice and a new audience for their experiences of being in between countries and cultures. These writers attempted to challenge the image created by the Islamic Republic and Western media by self-fashioning a mobile identity that is continuously being constructed. They embraced the memoir genre as a symbol of their agency, enabling them to reflect on their experience negotiating an identity in a non-Iranian context (Karim 2006, xxv).

There has been a plethora of memoirs published by Iranian women recounting their experience in Iran and in the diaspora. These memoirs all fit within the sub-genre of “return narratives”, which are often attractive to European and American publishers. The memoirs are fundamentally political in their intent, shaped by both the turbulent period in Iranian history and the geopolitical grid of the “war on terror”. They have contemporary currency as valuable commodities demystifying and creating a dialogue between Iran and “the West”. As such, the memoirs bring to the fore
important questions such as: how can we read these memoirs? What does freedom mean for the Iranian women in these memoirs?

This chapter will also probe the culture of silencing Iranian women within Iran and in the diaspora, examining how we can read their inherent need to self-censor. Why is it significant that they declare their selectivity in their memoirs? Is this self-censorship a form of agency or a sign of their passivity? To explore these questions, among others, I will analyse memoirs written by the “lost generation” of diasporic Iranian women in Britain and America, focusing on two memoirs by Iranian women who migrated to Britain: Kamin Mohammadi’s *The Cypress Tree: A Love Letter to Iran* (2011), and Rouhi Shafii’s *Scent of Saffron: Three Generations of an Iranian Family* (1997), and five memoirs by Iranian Americans, Roya Hakakian’s *Journey from the Land of No: Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), Nahid Rachlin’s *Persian Girls: A Memoir* (2007), Firoozeh Dumas’ *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (2004), Gelareh Asayesh’s *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (1999), and Afschineh Latifi’s *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (2005).

These memoirs were selected because the fashioning of the writers’ private selfhood relies on exposure and public circulation for validation. The decision to use life writing instead of autobiography signals a departure from celebrating the universalising life story or master narrative of the sovereign individual as an institution of literature and culture. This enables the writers to reflect on history, politics, religion, and culture without their narrative becoming an emblem or representative of all diasporic Iranian women. However, it is important to distinguish the memoir genre from autobiography. Autobiography is implicitly held to be a canonical institution of literature and culture; other forms of life writing are ascribed
less value (Anderson 2011, 8). Equally, the terms autobiography and memoir are
often used interchangeably, with theorists frequently debating the distinctions
between the genres. It is necessary to distinguish between the two, and whilst the
autobiography genre was established in the late eighteenth century and is widely
contested to be the superior form of self-reflection as a masculine genre, memoir has
been regarded as more feminine.

The difference between the life writing or autobiographies of men and women
is critically assumed to be most evident in the content. Women’s life writing tends to
focus on their relationships with others; these relationships within a family and
community enable them to construct an identity (Green 1988, 189). On the other
hand, autobiographies written by men concentrate on their developments and
accomplishments, fixating on “his universality, his representative-ness, his role as
spokesman for the community” (Brodzki and Schenck 1988, 1). Diasporic Iranian
women’s use of the memoir genre might mistakenly be accused of reinforcing such
gendered assumptions developed through the study of male autobiographies. In Iran
however, memoirs, travelogues and diaries are the preferred form adopted by men,
desiring to record their personal account of history instead of an autobiographical
personal story (Milani 1992, 206-7). Therefore, Iranian women’s use of the memoir
genre challenges these epistemological conventions. Rather than discuss the
scholarship surrounding the traditional differences and the problems associated with
form and classification when analysing gendered distinctions between the two genres,
this chapter will investigate whether Iranian women’s writing and their sense of self is
intensely performative. Its focus lies in determining whether this performance is
productive and agential or an instrument for their pacification.
The memoir genre has become a lens through which European and American audiences can “read” contemporary Iran, and this genre has often been accused of relying on tropes of domestic gender oppression and exilic gender liberation, which reproduces clichés of the “culturally representative” diasporic memoir written by scholars who are labelled “native informers” (Ostby 2013, 73-4). The difficulty with Iranian women writers adopting the memoir genre is that their publication and ability to enter into the public reading space becomes dependent on their degree of complicity in reproducing the stereotypical perceptions of Iran and Iranian women. However, these writers attempt to avoid such a charge to become a cultural mediator who distorts perspectives. Instead it could be argued that they create a series of productive paradoxes through revealing their self-censorship.

Initially it might appear that they seem to embody the conventional notions of the Iranian tendency to conceal the self. Farzaneh Milani explains Iranian culture “idealizes women’s public anonymity, [...] considers life narratives as exhibitionism, as an act of immodest self-referentiality, as self-absorption and an ultimate act of unveiling” (2013, 130). However, the mere act of writing and revealing self-censorship involves constructing and controlling their identity through performance. It is in the omissions, gaps and silences of the Iranian memoir genre that the truth of diasporic Iranian women emerges. This is a productive paradox because they are simultaneously revealing and not revealing, exposing that which is concealed. The way they tell their story, in this sense, invalidates the claim that they are “native informers” because they demonstrate that there is no definitive story for Iran or Iranian women.

The market commodification of Iranian women’s life narratives often reinforces the stereotype of them being confined by the veil and Islamic religion.
According to Nima Naghibi, Iranian women’s memoirs need to be examined in relation to Gillian Whitlock’s assertion that these memoirs serve as “soft weapons”, colluding with the politics of the U.S. government, helping to cement Iran as an Oriental other that is both inviting and threatening, therefore implicitly supporting colonial intervention (2009, 81-2). Whilst acknowledging that these memoirs dehumanise Iranian women into a static image of victimhood, subordination, immobility and entrapment, she also argues that they expose the impact of the Iranian Revolution and exilic life on women’s subjectivity. Naghibi goes on to assert

> [t]hese autobiographies tend to portray the revolution as an individual and collective trauma colored by a powerful nostalgia for the prerevolutionary era. 

[....] In the case of contemporary Iranian women’s autobiographies personal memoirs enter the political sphere by bringing to the fore questions of home and nation, identity and belonging (2009, 82).

Migrations become journeys of discovery. As the writers search for an identity in exile and upon their return to Iran, their sense of self becomes a process that is never complete but continuously changing. Their memoirs are less a revelation of the inner self, and more in line with the Iranian male perception of the memoir genre, which tends to focus on representing an experience of history. Their selective self-censorship is also made more significant because their selfhood is under constant threat of erasure from the state. In protest they are “writing back” against hegemonic discourses that misrepresent and distort the reality of Muslim women’s lives (Vinson 2007, 91). These diasporic Iranian women writers are not “writing back” to reverse the hierarchal order, but to interrogate assumptions legitimising the polarisation and subordination of Iran and Iranian women in relation to “the West”. However, their selfhood remains both restricted and tormented by the threat of commodification and
erasure. Consequently their notion of selfhood becomes a performance that is constructed because of the paradoxical positioning of their writing.

This chapter comprises of four parts. Part one “‘Half Voices’: The Productive Paradox of Self-Censorship” focuses on the multiple layers of self-censorship in order to make the case that this selectivity can be a productive paradox which enables the writer to regulate their privacy, whilst exposing the personal struggles and physical restrictions which restrain their writing. The second part “Parody of Disguise” will examine how identity is a performance for these writers. The marketability of their memoirs depends on their ability to perform the role of native informant which for some is a parody of disguise. “Resisting through Remembering” explores how writing silenced Iranian women into a history that has omitted them and helps the authors to maintain a collective group identity when in exile. Part four “Soft Weapons” concludes with a critical engagement with the politics of publishing Iranian women’s memoirs, assessing whether they are appropriated to become what Gillian Whitlock has termed a “soft weapon”.

“Half Voices”: The Productive Paradox of Self-Censorship

William L. Hanaway contends Iranian women use a “mezza voce” or “Half Voice” in their memoirs, self-censoring because they do not feel able to speak openly (1990, 55). Although it is clear that most memoirists are selective about their privacy, it is apparent that at critical points in their personal histories, Iranian women writers experience a loss of personal freedom and the imposition of radical codes of Islamic conduct; as a result they associate Farsi with constraint and oppression. English enables the writers to distance themselves from the restrictions and become
autonomous. Nahid Rachlin explains: “[w]riting in English gave me a freedom I didn’t feel writing in Farsi” (2007, 150). Having lost their childhood home the memoirs embody a formula found in “Misery memoirs” where the writer triumphs over a childhood trauma (Anderson 2011, 115). By writing in English and publishing in America or England these writers are liberating themselves from the threat of the Islamic Republic censoring the content of their writing or preventing the distribution of their work. Writing a memoir is not just an attempt to find liberation from a historical and/or social trauma, but an attempt to avoid the silencing of their voice.

Hakakian announces this narrative trajectory of survival from the outset of her memoir, beginning briefly with her successful life in the United States. This reassures the reader that everything will return safely to “normality” in the end. The other writers examined in this thesis are similar to Hakakian, because the choice to write in English is not simply synonymous with freedom it also liberates them from the position of victim and enables them to commodify their survival in an internationally circulated genre.

To write about Iran in Persian would be daunting. Instead of reexamining the memories, I feared that in Persian, I might begin to relive them. Persian could summon the teenager at sea. English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse. I did not know how to use the language of the censors to speak against them; to use the very language by which I had been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen, a young poet. The love of Iran was still in my heart, yet I could not return. The irrevocable journey I had made was not the physical one, out of Iran. It was the journey from “no,” from the perpetual denials. And what I had painstakingly arrived at, greater than even the new
land, was a new language, the vessel of my flight to vast possibilities (2004, 15).

Hakakian can only expose her experiences within the relative safety and stability of the reader’s world and language. Her decision to write her memoir in English becomes a protest against her subjugation. Denouncing any possibility of liberation from within Iran and Farsi, she feels forced to abandon her past in order to make sense of it. Although Hakakian begins her memoir with the caveat that she does not want to become “a poster child for someone else’s crusade” (2004, 14), the reasoning behind her choice to write in English portrays a subconscious alignment with her salvation, therefore perpetuating the myth of “the West” providing a sanctuary for the oppressed women of the East.

Literature has traditionally been considered a male domain within Iranian society, and women who write risk being labelled revolutionary and seditious. After the revolution, the Islamicisation of society redefined a woman’s place within public life, the family, and at work (Talattof 2000, 135). The ideal role for women was that of chaste wife and mother, and the veil became a symbol of Muslim virtue and a rejection of Western imperialist control (Talattof 135). With women’s liberation becoming a battleground for Western modernity versus Islam, women’s writing was considered transgressive because it was similar to speaking in public. However, the revolution ironically incentivised Iranian women to use writing as a form of protest against sexual oppression, forcing their personal and private experiences and struggles into the public.

Hamid Dabashi has expressed his concern that writers like Azar Nafisi are lucratively benefiting from “portray[ing] Iran as a land where crazed (clergy) men are abusing virgin houris who are impatiently reading Lolita while waiting to be liberated
by George W. Bush and his Christian Crusaders” (2007, 7). In order to avoid the denigration of Iranian history, Dabashi proposes that defiance and rebellion against both domestic tyranny and globalised colonialism needs to form part of the narrative trajectory of these memoirs (Dabashi 7). The debate surrounding Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is polarized, with critics such as Amy DePaul defending Nafisi for presenting a “valuable record” (2008, 90). Others, like Dabashi, argue that Iranian women’s memoirs “perpetuate a legacy of silence” (Milani 2011, 25), and that writers like Nafisi appeal to Western readers because they promote “feminist universalism” (Rowe 2007, 258-9), ignoring women’s different historical and cultural experiences. I suggest it is possible to read their silence and self-censorship as a productive paradox as their writing simultaneously reveals and conceals.

Many of the writers in this chapter acknowledge the powerful presence of women in Iranian society. For example, Shafii’s memoir opens with an assertive prologue outlining her motives:

> In modern Iran a woman must be a hero, a member of an upper-class family, or a prominent figure for whatever reason, to be written about or be heard of. My story is dedicated to those millions who are not allowed to speak about their lives or articulate their inner thoughts. I share my life with you, hoping it will make a difference in your perception of us, alien women in the West (1997, xiii).

Shafii does not occupy the position of a wealthy upper class Iranian woman. Her memoir emphasises her social mobility – she obtains an education, finds employment, including some positions of power. When she is no longer allowed to work she starts a child-care business, and is able to migrate to England when life in Iran is no longer safe or bearable. Her experiences depart from Western expectations, and her use of
the word “us” mimics the homogenisation of Iranian women, assuming her Anglophone audience will have preconceived ideas about her culture and history.

Autobiographical writing necessarily employs selective remembering; however, Iranian women’s memoirs often make their selectivity and partiality a part of their declaration. Shafii admits that Iranian history is inflected with self-censorship:

I was brought up in the spirit of self-censorship. We censor our thoughts, emotions, feelings, aspirations, and who we really are. Censorship is part of our literature, history, education and social upbringing. We have never been an open society and possibly never will. If we don’t self-censor, we come to harm. [...] Therefore, my story is ‘the truth but not the whole truth’ (1997, xiii).

Mohammadi makes a similar decision to self-censor to avoid placing herself and her family in danger through over exposure or an alliance with the Western media.

The regime ruthlessly strikes at the heart of what Iranians hold dear - their family ties - in order to control them. […] I may be bold enough not to mind what happens to me, but I would never want to risk the peace and anonymity of those I hold dear in Iran. The web of love that ties us all together is what is used even to control those of us living outside the country (2011, 263).

This declaration of incompleteness acts as an invitation to read into the writers’ personal stories the overbearing presence of the political proscription, which emphasises that the performance of self-fashioning their identity is influenced by the state.

The Iranian women’s self-fashioning becomes a productive paradox, because they sell their self-censorship whilst remaining in possession of their privacy. They market the shadows that they are hiding behind. By exposing the self-censorship these
diasporic Iranian women are forced to practise in order to protect their families and themselves their “Half Voices” become a symbol of defiance. In revealing the hidden restrictions that are imposed on them even in English and in exile, their voices and stories, however quiet, can still be heard.

Veiling becomes a metaphor for covering both the female body and voice. Many of the writers express how traditional Iranian norms and values dictate the need to physically conceal the female body, and censor a woman’s voice in order to preserve the honour of a family.

I have unveiled myself superficially but the veil still exists inside me. Once, I prided myself for breaking the rules of traditional society, only to find now, at a mature age, that there are covert rules which keep me in place. The shield of secrecy, the veil of the personal, controlled me throughout the story. I understood to my horror that my textual self-representation cannot be divorced from cultural factors. Walls, veils and harems are still well-placed in my blood (Shafii 1997, 227).

Iranian women are often fixed within a master narrative of immobilised victimhood and oppression. In writing their memoirs, they create their own script, transporting themselves into a public space. The exposure of their “private” world verbally and visually is an act of transgression, defying cultural norms dictating how women should remain veiled and be denied access to the published word. The memoirs reflect the contradictions often embodied in women’s literature in Iran today, portraying the fusion of confinement and liberation, obedience and rebellion, constraint and freedom, to develop creative forms of resistance.

The writers describe the multiple migrations between Iran and England or the United States. These journeys mark a refusal to be regulated and confined to any
space. Migrations to the West provide the writers with personal freedom, whilst their return focuses on a search for their lost identities. Mohammadi’s memoir departs from this trajectory, as she returns to Iran in search of autonomy. “Unbeknown to my mother and her worries, I lived an independent life in Tehran, moving into my own flat when a friend leaving for Europe gave me her keys. [...] After years of being trapped inside family homes, I was living in Iran as I chose” (2011, 252). However, she feels the need to censor her mobility in Iran, her liberation becomes synonymous with shame and secrecy.

The decision to write in English and self-censor might raise questions of authenticity and the subjugation or co-optation of the Other’s voice. The distance between the writer and her subject can be generational; educational; linguistic; and geographical, which may make it challenging for the writer to create an “authentic” representation of Iranian women. Equally, some of the women writers occupy a privileged position. For example, Mohammadi is highly educated and can speak a variety of languages. She lives in England and Italy.

All of the writers incorporate their experience in the diaspora, which establishes their personal lives are connected to politics and contested notions of collective identities. They all compare their lives to those around them. Rachlin contrasts her life in America with that of her sister in Iran, who is forced into an arranged marriage with a man who has mental health issues, and she dies in suspicious circumstances. They all attempt to make sense of who they were, who they are now, and how their past experiences and cultural heritage have shaped them. In doing so, the act of writing is empowering, liberating them by creating their own narrative and story. They are in control of their narratives, selectively weaving their stories together.
As public space for discussion and debate became extremely limited after the revolution, literature became a particularly important medium for women’s self-expression. The selectivity of the writers is significant because it exposes the struggle and restrictions that impedes their writing even in the diaspora. Self-censorship becomes redemptive, it allows them to demonstrate their concern for the situation of women in Iran, whilst releasing them from any obligation to reveal themselves entirely, and allowing them to manipulate and control their stories and their reception within Iran and the West.

The Parody of Disguise

For all of the authors, return journeys to Iran are part of a social and personal healing process, where they attempt to reconcile their memories, reconnect with family and friends, and reclaim their membership to Iranian society. The writers are immersed in a landscape of loss as they try to amalgamate their past with present-day Iran. This forces all of the exiled Iranian women writers to renegotiate the terms of their identification and confront the distance between their experience and that of Iranians who remain in Iran. All of the women share a sense of inherited and inhabited loss. In Judith Butler’s words, “[l]oss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as a community” (2003, 468). The collective experience of loss is an integral part of being in the diaspora, as there is no way of returning to a former condition. The authors’ identity is duplicitous, as they are positioned outside of Iran but their memoirs are marketed as capable of providing an insider’s insight into Iran. Like Khedairi, they occupy a paradoxical
position as insiders outside of Iran. This section of the chapter will examine my contention that for some of the memoirists, their identity is a parody of disguise.

Nostalgia plays an important part in the narratives, and in the writers’ search for their identities, particularly when their departure from Iran is violent and traumatic. All of the writers describe feeling dislocated within their host country. Nima Naghibi suggests that this trauma can be interpreted positively as a “productive wound”:

that compels a reconfiguration of Iranian and national identities. [...] The redefinition of the nation, of culture, and of gender roles are represented as both rupture and possibility in Iranian women’s writings, positioning Iranian women in the diaspora as key players in the process of reimagining Iranian women’s subjectivities through revolutionary trauma (2009, 89).

The difficulty with this reading of diasporic Iranian women’s writing is that Naghibi implies that a “redefinition” or “reimagining” is dependent on being outside of Iran. Any sense of empowerment they may achieve becomes affiliated with their exilic status, thereby playing into reductive narratives of emancipation through migration to the West.

Three departures from this model arise in Mohammadi, Asayesh and Rachlin’s memoirs because they are only able to articulate their subjectivity upon their return to Iran. It is their mobility between the two countries which enables them to achieve a renewed sense of self. Asayesh explains how she felt it imperative to return:

In 1990, when I obtained the green card that cemented my foothold in the West and permitted travel to and from Iran it was instinct that drove me to return. With that first trip back, I began the long, slow road towards
resurrecting a buried self. And vowed I would never suffer that inner shriveling of an isolated core, the immigrant’s small death, again (1999, 106).

Part of her identity dies when she is separated from her country of birth; to form a whole identity again she has to return and reclaim the part of herself she had lost. Asayesh discredits the pretence that Iranian women need to be emancipated by Western society in order to obtain self-consciousness.

The memoirs often describe a desire to find a place of belonging between their country of residence and country of birth. However, all the women describe feeling the need to abandon one in order to become a part of the other. For example, Dumas, similar to Mohammadi, feels the need to renounce her Iranian identity as a child. “When I was twelve, I decided to simplify my life by adding an American middle name” (2004, 63). Dumas’ performative identity leaves her feeling “like a fake” (65). Nevertheless, she fails to resist the culturally normative subject position.

During our Thanksgiving meal, my father gives thanks for living in a free country where he can vote. I always share gratitude for being able to pursue my hopes and dreams, despite being female. My relatives and I are proud to be Iranian, but we also give tremendous thanks for our lives in America, a nation where freedom reigns (Dumas 75).

Dumas claims to feel empowered by her life in America, but she becomes complicit in her own subordination because her identification is rooted within the dominant culture. Manijeh Nasrabi contends Iranian American memoirs of return maintain an “irresolvable state of ambivalence with regard to each society that characterizes the melancholic agency of these memoirs and allows them to construct alternative ‘strategies of belonging’ for diasporic citizenship” (2011, 488). The alternative “strategies of belonging” here collaborate in subjugating Dumas as she attempts to
qualify her Iranian-American hyphenated identity, making herself intelligible and perhaps more importantly marketable within the terms of the dominant culture.

Many of the writers describe the experience of feeling defined by their “otherness” and trapped by a nostalgic longing to return to Iran. Their memoirs expose the different strategies they employ to challenge their position as outsiders. So for example, when Mohammadi first arrives in England she feels ashamed to admit she is Iranian. “I was carrying - shame for the revolution, shame for the hostage crisis, shame that we had to leave, shame for the austere looks of Ayatollah Khomeini and the radical images of the Islamic Republic” (2011, 6). She disassociates herself from Iran in an effort to reinvent herself.

I drew a veil over the past and, like a refugee stumbling gratefully over a longed-for border, I set my face towards this new world, determined to fashion myself perfectly to it. From then on I stopped speaking Farsi […] I rejected everything about my country and remade myself as an English girl (Mohammadi 180).

Mohammadi demonstrates a retrospective realisation of her melancholic ambivalence towards Iran. She avoids a potential charge of serving as a “comprador intellectual” who de-narrates, demonises, and discredits an Iranian national identity in order to serve the impoverished imperial imagination because it is implied that this rejection is juvenile and only temporary (Dabashi 2011, 72-3).

Mohammadi initially appears to privilege an English identity and consigns herself to a world of mimicry and imitation, wearing a mask.

Growing up in Britain in the eighties, I had slipped on the mask of Englishness, had declared Britain my country, had stuck my flag in her soil
and given myself to her [....] Over the years, I became so good at wearing the mask that eventually, the mask became my face (2011, 211).

These memoirs are sold under the premise that they will reveal an authentic identity for Iranian women, and Mohammadi implies that underneath her mask of Englishness lies an authentic Iranian identity she hopes to keep hidden. Mohammadi, like many memoirists, equivocate Iran and culture as interchangeable, suggesting that there is a single unitary monoculture to represent Iran. This ironically mirrors the ways in which the Iranian regime is also guilty of reducing Iran to a single national culture, equating Iran with Islamic culture.

Mohammadi’s efforts to assimilate into British society contrast with her parents whose exoticism becomes another mask. “My parents wore their exoticism like a cloak, enhancing them in and also obscuring them from foreign eyes. [....] we were fiercely protective of them - and their exoticism - in public” (Mohammadi 214). She inverts the position of other, as the English become foreigners. However, the simile “exoticism like a cloak” implies that similar to Mohammadi’s attempt to become English, her parents’ Iranianness is a deliberately inauthentic performance, suggesting that there is no such thing as an ethnically and culturally stable identity.

Some of the writers recognise that they are positioned as an authentic authority with a native knowledge of Iran. Latifi addresses this within her memoir:

[t]hey wanted to do a little story about me, he said, a human-interest story: the Iranian-girl-in-Charleston-for-the-summer type of thing. [....] People kept stopping by to tell me how much they had enjoyed the story and what an interesting character I was. But I didn’t want to be an interesting character. I wanted to be a regular person, like everyone else (2005, 255).
This position for some is a parody in disguise, they are marketed in their memoirs as capable of providing an insider’s insight into Iran, but their identity is duplicitous, the mask of whiteness is just as inauthentic as their roles as native informant.

For some of the writers, their vision of Iran is often initially memorialised as a unitary culture in order to enable them to hold their homeland together. However, when they return, Iran becomes a place of dislocation because it no longer matches their memories.

There was no closure to be had. On the contrary, I’d opened up the floodgates. I was drowning in sorrow. I was crying about everything I’d missed by not having a father, and everything I would miss in years to come. […] Back in America, I would tell people I was from Iran. But now that I was home, as it were I didn’t really know what that meant. Yes, this was the country of my birth, but how much did I know about it? When you’re eight years old, nine, even ten, your street is your whole world. I knew nothing about my culture or my people (Latifi 2005, 305).

Latifi concludes her memoir with the realisation that she does not possess any knowledge; she is confused and disorientated by Iran and her Iranian identity. This contrasts with Mohammadi who embraces her multiplicity and mobility. “Everyone wears so many masks […] us Iranians masters of dissembling, our very genes encoded with the ability to appear to say one thing while meaning something completely other.” (2011, 244). Mohammadi embraces her multiple identities, which are never settled but in a constant state of formation.

However, these transformative identities are not always productive, as for Asayesh they are vulnerable to manipulation. After all, the “American dream” of material success and economic achievement manufactures a profound sense of
inferiority. Asayesh realises that she has internalised a language that quantifies your value and self-worth in accordance with “gas grills and dishwashers, three television sets per household, multiplex theaters showing new releases, blue jeans and Nikes and ninety-nine channels including MTV” (1999, 108). According to David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, financial success masks a lack of political and cultural representation (2000, 678). This idealisation of a capitalist Western lifestyle as superior leaves her feeling a sense of shame when she socialises with her Iranian friends and family.

The Iranians around me seem alien and poor and primitive. The child I was, dressed like these children, is alien too. I want to deny her claim on me. I am overcome by shame. I hate myself twice - once out of the ingrained self-loathing that comes from years of being convinced of one’s own inferiority, and once for the symptoms of that disease, my instinctive attempts to distance myself from my own kind (Asayesh 1999, 175).

She recognises a subconscious denigration of her Iranianness due to ingrained Western ideologies subordinating the “other”, which only doubles her sense of self-loathing. She realises she will always be a minority and her value will always be determined by her otherness, not her material possessions. She invests in objects and new ideals to replace what she has lost - her homeland, family, language, and identity, but these ideals and objects are always somewhat unobtainable. Asayesh is conscious of her identity becoming a product of her materiality; nevertheless she remains dependent on her endless consumption and marketability.

The currency ascribed to Asayesh’s identity is reliant on her ability to confirm the conclusions already drawn about her home country.

I was born in Tehran. Before my family moved to America, first for a two-year stay when I was eight and then for good in 1977, I was an Iranian girl.
Now my country is a mystery to me; shrouded in sinister images. I envision a dark land of ungovernable forces, peopled by bearded bogeymen (1999, 1). Asayesh demonstrates that the unfamiliar is more easily demonised, and that such demonisation is a façade. It is useful at this point to draw back to Moruzzi (whom I reference in Chapter 1). Moruzzi, writing in the context of the Algerian Revolution, argues: “[f]eminine mimicry, or masquerade, may allow a (female) subject to acknowledge the genealogy of her own victimization and her practical experience of its constraints without becoming immobilized within the identity of the victim” (1993, 262). Many of the writers adopt a form of feminine masquerade, as their memoirs are marketed to suggest they offer an insight into the lives of Iranian women. In actuality they often reveal more about their experience in the diaspora than Iran.

Hakakian resists the colonisation of her memories. She begins her memoir in New York, describing her reservations when an editor from the New York Times attempts to convince her to tell her story.

When you have been a refugee, abandoned all your loves and belongings, your memories become your belongings. Images of the past, snippets of old conversations, furnish the world within your mind. When you have nothing left to guard, you guard your memories. You guard them with silence (2004, 14).

Her personal experiences become a counter-memory, as she breaks the silence imposed on the marginalised. Aware that her memories are objects of value that are vulnerable to commodification, she attempts to protect their integrity. In breaking her silence her memoir represents a voice often missing from discourses, as she creates a productive space for a plurality of female subjects to emerge.
It is only upon having her daughter that Asayesh realises that historical traumas of loss are inherited and intergenerational:

Without Farsi, the Iranian in Mina will shrivel up and die. Even as I think this, I know that my greatest fear is of my own inner shriveling, not Mina’s. In guarding Mina’s heritage, I guard my own, for they are linked. My daughter, this piping voice in my house speaking words I learned at my mother’s knee, is a lifeline to my first self (1999, 213).

Losing the ability to speak Farsi, the language she grew up with, is a central concern for Asayesh, maintaining her linguistic heritage is connected to her Iranian identity. However, her memoir, much like her life, is a search for the “American dream”, as she commodifies her Iranian identity in the same way that she qualifies her successful assimilation, and in the process she erases her very being.

All of the return migrations described by the writers I discuss emphasise that they no longer belong in Iran, and they are yet to make their place in the diaspora feel like home. To become “Western” or “white” is unobtainable, as is unadulterated Iranianness, forcing an acknowledgement of the permanent state of loss, conflict and contradiction. The memoirs may be published and promoted on the basis that they can satisfy the illusory desire to unveil the “Other”, in actuality what I have sought to prove is that this is a parody of disguise, the memoirs conceal more about Iran than they reveal. Instead the reader is offered an insight into the sense of alienation and loss that often epitomises the experiences of living in the diaspora.
Resisting through Remembering

In the previous chapter I draw attention to the culture of silence surrounding private familial life within Iranian culture, and how this silence is closely tied to gendered nationalist discourse which connects the integrity of the Iranian nation with the purity of Iranian women. The act of writing a memoir subverts the dominant hegemony of Iranian women remaining silenced and invisible. Milani explains for diasporic Iranian women writing a memoir is a symbolic form of unveiling, thus few Iranian women publish details of their personal lives.

Propriety demands the omission of women - her body covered, her portrait undrawn, her life story untold. [...] Women’s textual self-representation cannot be divorced from her cultural representation. In a culture where walls and veils abound, where a woman is expected to cover her body as she is presumed to conceal her voice, in a sexually segregated society where access to her world and words is rather limited - in short, in a society where the concept of honor is built around a woman’s virginity, the token of her inaccessibility - autobiographies with their assertive self-displays and self-attention cannot easily flourish. (Milani 1990, 4-6).

The memoirists challenge this concealment of Iranian women’s voices in their narratives by writing women into a history that has largely omitted them.

The memoirists attempt to reconstruct and rewrite the dominant narrative of historical events in Iran. Through personal accounts they seek to represent the multiplicity of their experiences and marginalised voices. In this way, writing a memoir becomes an act of resistance. Mohanty discusses how women can re-imagine hegemonic discourses through writing: “[r]esistance is encoded in the practices of
remembering, and of writing. […] The very practice of remembering against the grain of ‘public’ or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggle to assert knowledge which is outside the parameters of the dominant, suggests a rethinking of sociality itself” (1991, 38-39). Mohanty’s theorisation that Third World women’s writing resists through a process of remembering is useful for my reading of the memoirs. She contends that reading, theorising and locating of these writings is significant since “the point is not just ‘to record’ one’s history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded” (1991, 34). It is this process of recording to which I now turn.

Rachlin’s memoir highlights the close relationship between history and identity. She confronts historically imposed static stereotypes of Iran and Iranians in the West, by focusing on how events like the hostage crisis alter perceptions of her Iranian identity. She explains that after this crisis her friends began to homogenise all Iranians, and her daughter experiences similar prejudice and is stigmatised for her name. “[T]hey lumped all Iranians, myself included, with them. […] My daughter came home from school one day looking sad; she asked me if she could change her name to Cindy. […] I didn’t know how to distill the complex political situation into terms that a seven-year old could understand” (241).

Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay have theorised the connection that can be drawn between history and identity formation. They posit: “[identities] are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. We need to situate the debates about identity within all those historically specific developments and practices” (1996, 4). They go on to contend, “how we have been represented […] bears on how we might represent ourselves” (1996, 4). Rachlin defies this historical identification by emphasising the double alienation she
experiences. She has become isolated within America and branded an outsider. She is also estranged from her home and can no longer recognise or relate to Iran in light of the historical changes. By emphasising the misconceptions of Iranians propagated in American society, Rachlin refocuses the lens highlighting how these events served to define how she and her daughter are identified in American society, a recognition which enables her to challenge this stereotype.

Asayesh’s political and historical understanding of the Iranian revolution is defined by Western media, which peripheralises her culture and history to the margins. “Sitting together in our cozy living room, we watched the revolution unfold in stark television images and switched it off each night with a click of the remote control” (1999, 107). Her ambivalence confines her to the role of passive observer; she positions herself outside of the political struggle, writing herself out of Iranian history. In contrast, instead of being estranged by the currency of oppressive imagery like Asayesh, Mohammadi devises her own words and images to represent pivotal historical events.

[M]y cousin Ebby was at the front line, fighting for Iran along the border with Iraq, at Khuzestan’s notorious no-man’s-land called Shalamcheh which had once been an oasis of palm trees but was laid to waste by the war. [...] He was just a few years older than me, but while I saved my money for my ever-growing record collection and lost myself in the dark thumping nightclubs of London, he was lying in rat infested trenches near the border, the dark night thumping to the rhythm of guns and artillery fire (2011, 192).

Mohammadi frames her understanding of the Iran-Iraq War within that of her cousin’s experience, revealing her disengagement through the story of another. The binary opposition between her life in exile in London and her cousin’s life in trenches
on the front lines interpolates representations of life inside and outside of Iran. She adopts a sense of apathetic detachment to faraway suffering as an outsider. Sontag argues: “our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may [...] be linked to their suffering, as wealth for some may imply the destitution of others” (2003, 92). It is possible to conclude that Mohammadi connects these two existences to draw attention to culpable indifference.

All of the memoirs avoid a confessional and purely private history, which pushes the subject beyond traditional boundaries within their culture. Typically confessional exposition is considered empowering, but for some women it can also become regressive because such self-assertion paradoxically creates feelings of shame, apology, self-abasement and denial (Anderson 2006, 122-3). These memoirs engage in the complexities of censorship and silencing, and avoid the Western obsession with the self, which promotes the hegemonic individualistic autobiography. Mohammadi, Shafii and Hakakian create a plural subject that does not replace or subsume the group. Instead, the plural subject becomes part of a whole and an extension of the collective. Thus, their memoirs become a form of resistance, challenging Western discourse by representing life on the margins in exile and within Iran. These memoirs assert an alternative history for those that are underrepresented.

Hakakian’s repetition of “we” and “they” emphasises the distance between “Iranians” and religious fundamentalists supporting Ayatollah Khomeini.

*We* were the ones, forced under veils, mummified. [...] *We* called ourselves Iranians. *They* addressed one another and strangers as “brother” or “sister.” *We* went by “Mr.” and “Mrs.” [...] *They* sent their sons, fathers, and brothers to the war front wearing a plastic key to Eden’s gate for a dog tag. *We* dodged the draft, if we could. *They* referred to their veterans with two or four missing
limbs as the “fortunate forty percent or eighty percent heroes.” We referred to them as double amputees and quadriplegics. […] We only wanted Tehran back (2004, 202-3).

Hakakian positions herself within a collective who have become disengaged with Iranian society upon Ayatollah Khomeini’s return. Her memoir embodies a form of “collective imagination” that creates “an identity for a subject that is dis-articulated and dispersed […] it is in writing that a collective memory can be invented; it is in writing that the myth of return is projected into the future” (Ashcroft 2009, 12-13). Hakakian is not nostalgically longing for Iran; her “collective memory” is the shared trauma of a dystopian past. Her anger and resentment invade her dreams.

At least once a night, I murdered Ayatollah Khomeini. […] The war with Iraq was in its fourth year. […] Murdering him was the only solution, given the magnitude of my desperation, given the magnitude of the city’s desperation. I could say desperation was the city itself. But that would be assuming the city was alive at all. It was not (2004, 198-200).

Hakakian’s obsession with gaining violent revenge for the loss and destruction of her home dispels the prevalent image of Iranian women as passive victims. Rather than contributing to a static image of Iran that is prevalent in nostalgic narratives that idealise pre-revolutionary Iran, Hakakian exposes the injustices of the past and present.

Shafii, like Hakakian, challenges the image of Iranian women as passive in their oppression. She describes Iranian women fighting against the women’s movement becoming a political tool during and after the Iranian revolution. “An unspoken, unwritten and unholy alliance amongst all men, the Left, and the Islamists shrouded secular women, pushing them into a corner, where they were left on their
own to fight; a fight which has continued to this day” (1997, 184). Shafii also creates a counter-narrative to Western discourses, and the Iranian government’s portrayal of events like the hostage crisis.

From then on, all attention was diverted towards the ‘Great Satan’, America. Anti-imperialist feelings among the whole population superseded other internal conflicts, such as armed conflicts with the Kurds over self-determination, conflicts with the Left and the women’s movement. It also diverted attention from economic stagnation and the collapsing of the infrastructure of the country (1997, 195).

Her memoir becomes a politicised response and engagement with historical conditions of patriarchy, economic hardship, war, informal empire, and revolution. As an Iranian woman in exile, she refuses to become disengaged from a larger collective history. Her memoir constructs a collective group identity for diasporic Iranian women to develop alternative ways of seeing themselves and understanding their historical experiences.

Not all attempts to challenge the simplistic one-dimensional representation of a headscarf wearing Muslim Iranian woman are successful. Mohammadi charts women’s dress in Iran through the different generations of women in her family:

Sometimes in busy places, I am happy to disappear under my headscarf and not have to participate. The Islamic Republic, in seeking to make women invisible, has opened up for us also a space to think, a space to be, that is not available in family life. For women in Iran, that room of one’s own must remain a metaphysical space, but at least it vaguely exists (2011, 267).

She embeds an intertextual reference to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, creating a comparison between Woolf’s renouncement of Victorian structures and
expectations that oppress women, and the cultural traditions which have served to repress Iranian women. The word “invisible” also recalls the “invisible presences” in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf explains the importance of these presences in *Moments of Being*: “[I]f we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream” (2002, 92). Mohammadi implies from this position of invisibility that women can find a metaphorical “room of one’s own”, and that within a repressive regime that subjugates women the adoption of the veil provides an opportunity to “think”. This problematically defends forced veiling, suggesting by extension it has the potential to be “vaguely” empowering. In seeking to avoid describing “the stream” she simplifies the historical complexity of forced veiling and unveiling, and condones the oppression of women.

All of the memoirs explore the dichotomy between an event and experience; they work through historical events in order to heal past trauma. Some of the authors experience events second hand, mediated through friends, family or the media, and it is only through revisiting and sharing these memories that have been hidden that they are able to escape being victimised by the trauma and gain understanding. To return to a point from which I began - to record one’s history is not enough. According to Mohanty we need to analyse the way that history is recorded. These memoirs are all written in English and marketed for Western readers. Their currency is connected to a perpetuation of myths. However, the memoirists share the same political purpose - to bridge the cultural divides and offer a notion of self and identity which defies the expectations and stereotypes both within Iran and outside in the West. Their personal accounts are, as Milani explains, a form of protest against acceptable paradigms of
Iranian women’s self-representation. To different degrees of success they challenge dominant discourse of Iranian history both within Iran and in the West, foregrounding the silencing of the marginalised female voice.

“Soft Weapons”

Within Europe and America, life narratives written by Muslim women have become an exotic commodity, trading in trauma, crisis and war. In the introduction to this chapter I outlined Dabashi’s theorisation of “native informers” and its applicability to the diasporic Iranian women’s memoir genre. Gillian Whitlock extends Dabashi’s theory and argues that contemporary autobiography is easily manipulated and employed as propaganda, thereby serving as a “soft weapon” (2007, 3).

The production and reception of autobiographical narratives is driven by the desire to humanise the experiences of people who often remain visually hidden and voiceless. The authors become mediators for complex global dialogues and encounters, enabling a way of thinking and the conception of the self and other. Whitlock is interested in when a text becomes a political tool of the hegemonic power, reproducing the stereotype of a subjugated woman, victimised by a community dominated by primitive customs. Like Dabashi, Whitlock asserts writers have an ethical and moral responsibility to avoid perpetuating negative characterisations in a political climate of prejudice and hatred. All of the memoirs in this chapter are at risk of commodifying the trauma they experienced, and they all adopt different strategies like self-censorship in an attempt to control how their readers perceive them. Accordingly, an analysis of Iranian women’s memoirs must critically engage in their complicity with a system of knowledge production, to
determine whether the texts collaborate in serving as “soft weapons” that support colonial intervention.

Hakakian’s memoir demonstrates the possibilities for this genre as a narrative of resistance. *Journey from the Land of No* is similar to *The Saffron Kitchen* because they both draw attention to the dominant ideologies within patriarchal culture that employ motherhood to socially control women, disempower and marginalising them to a static existence within the home. Hakakian suggests that generations of Iranian women are defined by their roles as mothers, and have become martyrs to their families:

motherhood, a place with suffering […] I had watched Grandmother, Aunt Zarrin, and Mother long enough to know that grim geography. They served the family freshly cooked meals while they stayed in the kitchen and ate yesterday’s leftovers. […] Motherhood was a melancholy affair. Mothers were martyrs. Everyone knew it (2004, 74-5).

As I outline in chapter four, motherhood is often defined as an institution of patriarchal culture that is considered integral to femaleness. Hakakian inherits these patriarchal ideologies, but she refuses to adhere to expectations of sacrifice and self-defeating suppression of desire.

Shafii is also equally critical of the oppressive model of motherhood. She challenges the enduring, intergenerational experience of motherhood associated with a loss of subjectivity when she has her first child.

Although I loved him dearly he made me angry with his demanding nature and his manipulation of my body and soul. I had to arrange everything around his needs. He deprived me of sleep, leisure, pleasure and what I really wanted to do. He demanded my full-time attention. […] Sometimes I was angry at having
had him at all, knowing that from now on I would never be as free as I had been and that this creature which had been created out of my body and who drew sustenance from me would manipulate me from now on. [...] Despite all this, I did not plan to stay home and be a full-time mother/housewife. I was not the type (1997, 133).

Shafii counters the traditional patriarchal family unit with an alternative image for Iranian women. She separates herself from her son, resenting the demands he places on her body, and regains her autonomy. Both Hakakian and Shafii refuse to be defined or confined to motherhood, and they break the cycle of the mother as an enforcer of patriarchal norms. They challenge the conception of Iranian women excluded from the public sphere and restricted to the home.

Not all of the memoirs succeed in challenging traditional perceptions of Iranian women. Mohammadi revives what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi refers to as “Persianate Europology”. He contends: “Misogyny and ethnocentrism were shared characteristics of both European and Persian narration of the Other. […] Both Persians and Europeans constituted the body of the “other” women as a site for sexual and political imagination” (2001, 61). Along these lines, one could argue that Mohammadi becomes complicit in the objectification and exoticisation of Iranian women, romanticising and justifying male patriarchy. She collaborates with an ethnocentric fascination with the eroticised other, minimising the loss of freedom after the transformation of the public and private space in gendered terms under Khomeini’s regime. She justifies forced veiling by dismissively suggesting Khomeini was just a possessive Iranian man seeking to protect Iranian women:

Perhaps the most gheiraty man in Iran’s history was Ayatollah Khomeini himself. After all, did he too not try to enforce all our women to cover
themselves from the prying eyes of ‘strange’ men? […] This duality presents no problem to Iranian women, whose natures easily encompass the two seemingly opposed desires - to party and to pray - but the men of Iran, long privy to the best-kept secret of the country - the incredible calibre of its women - have always been jealous of their womenfolk, scared of their strength and too enamoured of the quality of their loving and caring to want them to have too much freedom. Iranian men have tried, ever since Islam gave them a legitimate excuse, to keep us at home for their own enjoyment (2011, 218-9).

*Gheirat* is a Persian word meaning jealousy and here it is problematically used to imply Khomeini was just a chivalric man seeking to defend the honour of Iranian women. The image of Iranian men repressing exotic Iranian women is a realistic and easily identifiable image for Western readers. Instead of transforming a Western reader’s understanding of Iranian culture and society, Iranian women become victims of insatiable male desire, their exotic allure commodified for Western consumption. In her attempt to rationalise the patriarchal Islamist theocracy she becomes both complicit in the totalitarian regime and a native informer for the West.

Asayesh confronts the Western association between Iran and fundamentalism by comparing the stoning of adulterous women with schoolyard massacres in America, to suggest that they are equally barbaric. “Most Westerners see Iran as primitive and backward. Perhaps that is true, although the truth depends on one’s view-point. Tales of Jeffrey Dahmers and Ted Bundys, of schoolyard massacres and drive-by shootings, are as shocking to Iranians as stonings are to Americans - and far more common” (1999, 171). She challenges the perception of Iran as uncivilised, reasoning that stoning is as normal in Iran as mass murder in America. At the same
time she connects the practise of stoning with an inherent culture of associating femininity with illicit temptation.

[O]ne has only to read the newspaper each day - in the United States or any other country - to know that savagery is commonplace throughout the world. What disturbs me is that I see this stoning as part of the broader fabric of Iranian society. It exists on a continuum that begins with the demonization of the female form. This is a country where some orthodox families hide women’s shoes as soon as guests take them off to enter a house - because the shoes are too evocative of the female body (Asayesh 160).

Asayesh prefaces her criticism of stoning and patriarchal attitudes towards female sexuality, with references to violent gun crime in America. Like many of the writers in this thesis, she complicates monolithic representations suggesting such practises in Iran are atypical. In order to avoid encouraging a Western imperial gaze, she critically reflects on the inhumanity of both societies.

Hakakian capitalises on the long history of colonial desire to unveil the secrets of the feminised East, she creates a caricature of a fanatical Iranian woman preaching to students about the dangers of the sensual female body.

We, my sisters, daughters of our great revolution, we’re not afraid of earthly threats. […] “So the drill that I’m preparing you for is a ‘man drill.’ Learn this and you have bought yourselves a one-way ticket out of hell. If a man were to walk into this room, I naked as I feel without my veil, would have no choice but to pull the hem of my Islamic uniform over my head. […] that is not the edge of my hairline. It is the edge of the apocalypse (2004, 167).

In contrast to Mohammadi’s sympathetic rationalisation of Khomeini’s regime, Hakakian uses hyperbole to ridicule and reject the religious education she experiences
post-revolution. She describes all the students rising up and rebelling against the indoctrination, and refusing to be compliant or subservient, thereby giving a voice to Iranian women defying the new regime.

In a similar way to Hakakian, Shafii confronts the hegemonic belief that social advances in Iran would only be due to interventions from the West, and any gender imbalance is a result of their primordial culture. Shafii demystifies the growth of Islam in Iran and the origins of campaigns to rid Iran of any “Westernisation or Westoxication” (1997, 142). She argues that fundamentally it is a result of the Iran-Iraq War, which she suggests was waged and supported by the West. “We believed America was behind Saddam’s invasion of Iran and the immediate consequence of such feelings was a mass mobilisation against American policies in the region. Anti-imperialist feelings increased even among those educated in the West. We blamed America for the unexpected and the unwanted war” (1997, 199). She contends that her Western readers’ governments have played a part in preserving the patriarchal structures in Iran, because their intervention changed the course of history helping to bring radical clerics into power.

Rachlin and Dumas present progressive Iranian family structures. Rachlin’s Iranian father realises his mistake in forcing his older daughter into an arranged marriage and agrees to send Rachlin to be educated in America with her brothers. “He knew I would put up a bigger fight than Pari if he tried to marry me to someone he and Mohtaram selected” (2007, 131). Dumas’ parents are content for their daughter to choose her own husband,

Perhaps the people we think we know best are the ones who surprise us most. Once my mother realized that I wanted to marry François, she said, “He will be like a third son to me,” and wiped the tears off her face. At that very
moment, my mother threw aside everything she and her generation knew about marriage and entered a new world where daughters select their own husbands. She became a pioneer (2004, 144).

The Iranians in exile often leave to escape the trauma of the past and to find freedom. Autonomy thus becomes a Western construct, which brandishes Iran imprisoning and restrictive. However, these memoirs embody the plurality of Iranian society both within Iran and in exile, in so doing they avoid their narratives becoming “soft weapons” as they refuse to become complicit in stereotypical reductive narratives.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to show that Iran cannot be reduced to a fixed or static image, and the memoirists prove a singular “authentic” representation of Iranian women does not exist. At the same time, there is always a danger that even when deconstructing and criticizing terms such as the “Other” or “the West”, it is all too easy to reinforce homogeneity (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 6). The memoirists establish the West to be a more nuanced space. For some, it is a place of comfort and escapism, “[s]itting together in our cozy living room, we watched the revolution unfold in stark television images and switched it off each night with a click of the remote control” (Asayesh 1999, 107). For others, it is a place of violence and prejudice: “I saw Parastou covered in blood. Her face swollen and full of bruises. The ambulance was about to take her to hospital. […] This was the ugliest face of London I had seen so far” (Shafii 1997, 221). They purposefully present a diversity of experiences among diasporic Iranian women who have settled in Western societies.
These writers are critical to understanding the possibilities of the memoir genre for a feminist consciousness in Iran and in the diaspora. The controversy surrounding women’s dress in Iranian society is just as contentious as the public disclosure of women’s lives. Women’s life writing can be a feminist act of assertion, challenging patriarchal domination enabled through women’s invisibility and silence. The memoirs enable diasporic Iranian women to enter into the public literary space, providing them with an opportunity to shape and defy convention. Memoirs written by marginalised people often challenge conventions and power relations, these are no exception; they employ their memoirs as a tool to assert their agency. They reclaim the memoir genre from an Iranian male literary heritage, and try to avoid becoming an exotic commodity, reaffirming stereotypes of Iranian women and Islamicism. Unfortunately whilst their intention is to redefine conceptions of Iran in order to change the relations of power in society, they do not always succeed in achieving self-definition. Nevertheless, these memoirs have emotional and aesthetic value because they have the capacity to shape how we think about others and ourselves. Their self-censorship gives them the authority and self-determinism over their stories; they control their subjectivity and how it is perceived. The more they acknowledge the difficulties they experience writing their memoirs, including exposing the multiple layers of self-censorship they impose upon themselves, the more ownership and authority they have over their story and identity, making it harder for their narrative to be appropriated and commodified.

These diasporic Iranian women writers transform self-censorship into a productive paradox, fashioning their selfhood whilst selling the exposure of their selective privacy. Although, their marketability is dependent on their complicity in performing the role of an authentic insider, most of the writers are conscious of how
their narrative is vulnerable to commodification. Once they become conscious of this their performance becomes a parody of disguise, as they imply there is not one single story to represent a nation, they provide a range of experiences of life in Iran and in the diaspora. Their memoirs teach us that the complex cultural mosaic of Iran cannot be reduced to a singular Islamicised culture, and neither can they reduce their imagined homeland in the diaspora to a unified notion of culture. Instead what becomes clear is that Iran, much like “the West” is a site of cultural plurality, diversity and contradictions, which invites a recalibration of our understanding of Iranian history and culture.
Chapter 6

“Death to freedom, death to captivity”:

Beyond Shahriar Mandanipour’s “Islamic” Love Story

The quest for sexual and political freedom is central to Shahriar Mandanipour’s *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2011). Within neoliberal political rhetoric and popular culture, Western freedom is often set in opposition to the unfreedom of Islam, and Mandanipour’s text complicates the meaning of freedom and oppression. He blurs the boundaries between what has been freely chosen, and coercion and force, to suggest that proposals of freedom and unfreedom are an inherently global problem, and oppression is not exclusive to Islamic societies. Mandanipour compares challenging censorship along with the struggle for gender equality, and in doing so he equates the relationship between the censor and writer with that of male-female relationships. He highlights the limited social space available to demonstrate dissent and he shows how sexual morality is influenced by social and cultural issues. The conflict inequality creates for women (both internally and externally) is similar to the political conditions challenging writers who struggle to continue their work. Both are made to bear the burden of cultural national values. When Mandanipour puts down his pen and leaves the text unfinished, he opens up the possibility of exploring the different ways in which censorship and gender inequality/oppression can interact to produce a narrative of resistance.

This thesis has primarily focused on British Iranian and Arab women writers. This final chapter examines a work of autofiction, which blurs the boundaries

---

43 “Strictly speaking, the law [in Iran] forbids social contact between the sexes and regulates sexual conduct” (Talattof 2000, 135).
between fiction and autobiography. Mandanipour’s text, although authored by a male writer, is included in this thesis because not only does it propose an alternative to both memoir and fiction genres, it also offers an original contribution to conceptualisations of freedom within the Iranian literary landscape. This chapter thus also gestures towards the future development of this research project, which will be outlined in the subsequent conclusion.

Mandanipour introduces his protagonist Sara amid the turbulence of student protests in contemporary Iran: “she is timidly holding a sign that reads DEATH TO FREEDOM, DEATH TO CAPTIVITY” (2). Both the demonstrators and the anti-riot police are perplexed by her message and they dismiss her as “one of those Communists who have recently come back to life,” who must be watched “with extreme vigilance and caution” (3). For Mandanipour, this sign embodies the dilemma he finds himself in and one that he shares with his protagonist Sara. The phrase is repeated at the end of the novel to emphasise the cost of this dissent. Neither Mandanipour nor Sara can escape surveillance, if they achieve freedom they will remain captive because censorship can become an internalised norm. Equally, even if they resist and find their voice, it could cost them their freedom, country, home, loved ones and possibly their lives. Thus, they become imprisoned by their own voice. Mandanipour (the narrator), eventually concedes, “I no longer have any energy or passion to write” (292). He refuses to continue to speak on behalf of Sara, or allow anyone to dictate his story. Instead, when Sara is finally given a chance to speak, she uses this voice to describe the paradoxical feeling of captive freedom: “To allow a plant freedom to spread throughout the garden is beautiful. […] Now I realize that it seemed as if a pair of terrifying eyes were looking at me from inside the bush” (292). Mandanipour reveals they are both stunted with fear and their identities and voices are
being erased. Their resignation ultimately results in their metaphorical and literal disappearance from the text.

*Censoring an Iranian Love Story* was written in Farsi and translated by Sara Khalili. The text has been published into at least ten other languages, but Mandanipour has never achieved his dream of publishing his love story in Iran, his “homeland” (6). The conclusion of Mandanipour’s text seems to concur with the position outlined by J. M. Coetzee, writing in the context of South Africa, in *Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship* (1996), in which Coetzee explains, “[c]ensorship looks forward to the day when writers will censor themselves and the censor himself can retire. […] Writing does not flourish under censorship” (10-11). Coetzee acknowledges that censors tend to brand the “undesirable” “uneasily and even haphazardly assimilat[ing] the subversive (the politically undesirable) and the repugnant (the morally undesirable)” (1996, vii). Mandanipour demonstrates the censorship he experiences is based on both political and moral grounds, to show us that writers and “freedom-loving women” (289) are equally “undesirable”.

Mandanipour attempts to self-censor his own work and write an Islamic love story, but in the end he laments, “[l]ook at what has become of my hopes and dreams. Every single bone in this story is broken. Every single one of its chapters has gone to a wasteland around Tehran, those same places where they burn rubbish” (291). Although Mandanipour does not succeed in publishing his love story in Iran, perhaps rather ironically, he does win novel of the year prize at the Muslim Writers’ Awards in 2011. Irfan Akram, the director of the awards explained in an interview that he hoped the organisation would “give Muslim writers confidence in their abilities and offer a platform to communicate their experiences and creativity through the power of the pen” (Janmohamad 2011). Mandanipour’s refusal to write the love story that Mr
Petrovich, “an official of the holy government of the Islamic Republic” (291) would approve of, results in his declaration that “writing a love story with a happy ending is not in the destiny of writers of my generation… and my work on this story is done. I no longer have any control over it or its characters” (292).

In a similar vein, Coetzee described the relationship between the censor and writer:

Working under censorship is like being intimate with someone who does not love you, with whom you want no intimacy, but who presses himself in upon you. The censor is an intrusive reader, a reader who forces his way into the intimacy of the writing transaction, forces out the figure of the loved or courted reader, reads your words in a disapproving and censorious fashion (1996, 38).

Mandanipour connects the censorship of his text with Sara, and she becomes the collateral cost he must forfeit in order to gain approval for publication. Sara, like the text, becomes raw material that Mr Petrovich can mould according to his desires. Mandanipour refuses to oblige Mr Petrovich’s fancy and objectify Sara into a helpless victim whose value and destiny is determined by a man; in so doing, putting down his pen becomes a protest, a refusal to accept all that is oppressing him and Sara.

As I have outlined in the previous chapters, there is a growing interest in Iranian writers, and considerable scholarship has focused on Iranian writing about the diaspora, in particular the genre of Iranian women’s memoirs (Fotouhi 2015, 5). In chapter five I closely examine Gillian Whitlock’s Soft Weapons (2007), which discusses this genre of writing as a “serious and emerging discourse” (Fotouhi 5). Since the publication of Whitlock’s book interest in this genre and literary scholarship expanded (Fotouhi 5).
However, there is limited scholarship on Mandanipour’s writing, with the exception of Marie Ostby who in her essay “Decensoring an Iranian-American ‘Memoir’” compares his autofiction to the diasporic Iranian memoir genre. She argues that Mandanipour successfully “elude[s] what Gillian Whitlock terms the transnational “economy of affect” that publicizes, protects and ultimately drives the reception of memoir across borders” (2013, 73). Ostby concludes that Mandanipour might be attempting to complicate the “contemporary Iranian novel-memoir hybrid as a literary space […] [that serves] as acts of resistance against the circumscribed powers of states” (93). Ostby’s comparison between Mandanipour’s autofiction and the diasporic Iranian memoir genre is problematic, and to conclude that Mandanipour succeeds where many of these memoirists fail in escaping the “economy of effect” and labels such as “enlightened escapee” (Ahmed 2015, 189) and “native informer” (Dabashi 2011, 15), results in the homogenisation of the experiences of these writers.

Mandanipour left Iran after securing a fellowship to travel to the United States for the International Writers project at Brown University in 2006 and is currently a visiting professor at the same university. His experience in academia in America places him within a privileged minority of diasporic Iranians who would have quite a different experience of the diaspora compared with those exiled into a harsh socio-economic position. Although Ostby is careful to acknowledge Mandanipour’s position, she focuses on the threats and intimidation which have forced him to remain in exile (Ostby 2013, 74-5). The memoir genre referred to by Ostby is largely populated by diasporic Iranian women and as Therese Saliba and Jeanne Kattan argue the complexity of “the roles of power, economics, literacy, and the marketing of the so-called Third World authors, particularly women, in the global economy,” [my emphasis] (2000, 84) can easily be ignored or obscured when they are read within a
transnational context. Ostby fails to factor in the socio-economic and gendered differences between Mandanipour and the memoirists she refers to.

Rather than comparing the nuanced differences between the genres of memoir writing with autofiction, this chapter will focus on the symbolism of the love story that Mandanipour is so desperate to tell, which contrasts with the Islamic love story that he is permitted to write. The love story becomes an emblem for a crucial site of struggle, not just for Mandanipour, but also for Sara’s suitors, who fight to claim her and the love story as their own. Sara, the object of desirability, becomes synonymous with the nation, a vision for Iran that is being fought for. The construction of Sara as the idealised feminine woman binds her virginal body to “sovereign nationhood” (Chatterjee 1993, 130), whereby she must erase her sexuality in the world outside the home to ensure that the “integrity of the nation” is protected (Gould 2014, 220). The policing of women’s bodies normalises the alliance between gender and the nation (Gould 224).

Mandanipour tells his story using three typographical layers, which emphasise the differences between Sara’s three suitors. Each suitor depicts a different section of Iranian society. Dara represents the disenfranchised youth of Iran, a subversive underclass who are paradoxically revolting against a revolutionary government, thus they have no place within Iranian society and remain lost amid the lack of opportunities not just for those that challenge the state, but for those that are born into lower socio-economic positions. His education and hope of bettering himself are quite literally beaten out of him and he resorts to floating through life, aware of all that he cannot have and that includes his love Sara. Dara’s love story is for the most part in bold font but is often crossed out.
Sinbad, Sara’s second suitor, has her parents’ approval; he is a bureaucrat turned businessman whose wealth enables him to escape the wrath of the censor.

People like Sinbad who belong to the nouveau riche class of Iranian society and, because of their government-granted import monopolies, have amassed wealth that no Western industrialist could ever dream of. They have no fear of the patrols from the Campaign Against Social Corruption. Even if they commit murder and are arrested, with a single telephone call to a government official their record will be cleared. (159)

Sinbad’s narrative remains in bold and is never crossed out. Sara’s final suitor is the censor himself Mr Petrovich, who is based on a character from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment. Mr Petrovich wants to claim Sara as his own, “[e]ver since I read segments of your story, she has attracted my attention. Don’t think I have wicked intentions. I want to ask for her hand in marriage. Rest assured that I can make her happy… delinquent boys like Dara will have ruined Sara” (290). As a representative for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, obtaining Sara’s hand in marriage equates to safeguarding Sara and in turn Iran from being corrupted and penetrated by “that house of sin” (292).

Rebecca Gould elucidates the significance of the connection between women and the nation. She contends the “nation could be regarded as politically fortified only so long as the women who upheld its domestic foundations had never been penetrated by their husbands” (2014, 220). Mandanipour refuses to turn Sara into a token sacrifice for a national identity that subordinates women’s freedom and identity for the sake of the nation. Instead, she remains independent and unnarratable, as Mandanipour cannot represent her voice any more than Dara, Sinbad or Mr Petrovich.
Gender is at the heart of the struggle for both power and freedom in Mandanipour’s text. He blurs the lines between prohibitions on the grounds of religion and gender, and this confronts a failure Karima Bennoune has pointed out in international law in the language used in the drafting of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Bennoune argues that whilst “Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental human right […] the language displays an exclusionary dimension often found in considerations of religious freedom which frequently ignores the lives of women and the reality of their pervasive subordination, including by and in religion” (2007, 398-9). Mandanipour articulates this silent space of subordination inhabited by women, because it is one he is familiar with as a writer. In this way his self-imposed silence could be read as a form of solidarity confronting the consequences of denying fundamental human rights and freedoms.

In the inaugural issue of the journal Feminist Dissent, Dhaliwal et al. contextualised the struggle to find a “genuine space for dissent and analysis” within “a new global capitalist order where gender is increasingly instrumentalised to sustain power” (2016, i). Mandanipour’s text could be seen to call for a simultaneous deconstruction of censorship alongside a feminist critique of gender inequality. Mandanipour explains,

[I]n Iran there is a politico-religious presumption that any proximity and discourse between a man and a woman who are neither married nor related is a prologue to deadly sin. Those who commit such prologues to text, and such texts to sin, in addition to retributions that await them in the afterworld, will in this world too be sentenced by Islamic courts to such punishments as imprisonment, the lash and even death (8).
Crucially, the responsibility to preserve modesty lies with women. Bennoune points out that “women of Muslim heritage are under pressure to cover more and more of their skin, their hair, their very beings. To disappear. The mere physical manifestation of their existence is now a provocation” (2015, 8). Furthermore, it has long been acknowledged that female chastity is often fused with national integrity, with discourses of nationalism inevitably gendered and the preservation of the home embodied in the physical person of the woman.

Partha Chatterjee, writing in the context of colonialism and nationalism in India explains how indigenous traditions are set in opposition to Western society:

The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national-culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized (1993, 126-7).

Mandanipour articulates this double bind through Sara, who like many women, is given the responsibility of preserving the spiritual quality of the national culture. The home becomes the space where traditional values must remain intact, to ensure the space remains unconquered and uncompromised. This legitimates a woman’s confinement to the home, because it is assumed by nationalists that if Western values and norms are adopted within this space then the integrity of the nation comes under threat, and one’s very identity and autonomy is annihilated (Chatterjee 1993, 121). Mahnaz Afkhami, the first-ever minister of women’s affairs in Iran, explains that “women’s participation in society was an even greater threat, since it struck at the heart of hierarchal, patriarchal family and community structures” (2016, 42). At the
centre of this conflict for Muslim women’s human rights is often the dilemma between the demands of modernity and tradition.

Mandanipour anticipates the standard anti-national charge against diasporic authors associated with neocolonial powers by enunciating the way in which women are used as a battleground on which the fight against an oppressive nativist government is being waged. This problem is embodied in Sara’s choice between Dara and Sinbad.

She knows with all her being that she is not willing to repeat her mother’s life, to let her youth and dreams be frittered away in the kitchen for the ideal ambition of how best to feed the family, with only hardship on the kitcheny horizon. […] Each time she thinks of marrying Dara, all the financial and political difficulties that await her flash before her eyes, and consequently she thinks of Sinbad, […] She sees herself with him in the capital cities of Europe, drunk on the beauties and joys that await her there, with all the things that she knows can only be attained with money and Western freedom (195).

Mandanipour exposes the limited opportunities for Sara. She can choose to become a housewife to a man of limited means or an “unchained Eastern beauty” fetishised into the exotic other in exchange for “Western freedom” (195). Similar to the “new patriarchy” Chatterjee describes in the context of Indian nationalism (1993, 127), with both men, Mandanipour emphasises Sara would be swapping one form of patriarchy and subordination for another.

Traditional indigenous culture is often set in opposition to the perceived cultural modernity of the West (Chatterjee 1993, 117), but Mandanipour is not suggesting that liberation lies in Westernisation of social, economic, cultural processes and modes of governance. From the very first page we are informed that,
“The anti-riot police, armed with the most sophisticated paraphernalia, including stun batons purchased from the West, stand facing the students” (1). Throughout the text Mandanipour emphasises that he is not subscribing to the notion that Iranians or Muslims are unable to understand Western notions of freedom of expression. In fact, he alludes to the culpability of Western powers in aiding authoritarian political culture: “they have input their findings into special software that we purchased from a Western country” (141). Bennoune would concur with this accountability, as she contends:

Many wanted the United States to take a long look at its own policies that had promoted fundamentalism – whether collaborating with the Saudi government, financing fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan, or violating international law in our own treatment of Muslim majority populations in places like Iraq. […] Empowering civil society is not a strategy that has really been tried in combating Muslim extremism. The West has mostly empowered autocrats […] [who] have often constrained liberal civil society any way they could because they are more afraid of its democratic spirit than of fundamentalism (2015, 332-3).

Antifundamentalist and progressive Muslim voices are rarely heard or transmitted and they receive little international attention. For these reasons, Mandanipour’s decision to write in Farsi, his native language becomes quite pertinent.

In the previous chapter I argue that diasporic Iranian writers often describe exchanging their national language for an international one as both necessary and liberating. Although Mandanipour shares this diasporic status writing and teaching within America, he refuses to cater to a Euro-American audience by making himself more globally accessible to achieve the financially lucrative advantages of a wider
international audience. “The word vessāl, in the ages-old Iranian literature, has many explicit and implicit religious, mystic, amorous and sexual connotations and hence is not really translatable” (57). Mandanipour attempts to alienate and displace both the reader and censor using language; neither is left feeling entirely comfortable because he deliberately complicates the translation of the text and his intended meaning. As a consequence he avoids being labelled Westernised or accused of cultural betrayal. It is possible to conclude that his strategy seems to be to foreignise his resistance, rather than homogenise the unfamiliar for the benefit of Western readership.

Mandanipour’s text maintains a perpetual state of conflict to replicate the emotions felt by a writer who is negotiating governmental structures and anticipating censorship. The text conveys a sense of hopelessness. When we first meet Sara she is protesting, but we are informed,

[I]n precisely seven minutes and seven seconds, at the height of the clash between the students, the police, and the members of the Party of God, in the chaos of attacks and escapes, she will be knocked into with great force, she will fall back, her head will hit against a cement edge, and her sad Oriental eyes will forever close (7).

At the end of the text, when Sara speaks “the wisest and most ironic response that can come from the lips of an Iranian woman,” Mandanipour crosses out “She opens her eyes that had been closed to the fantasy of a kiss” (289), proving that every attempt to resist is futile Sara will remain objectified, destined to passively accept the exclusionism that constrains her opportunities and life prospects. Her death in the opening to the novel might signify that her story, much like Mandanipour’s, is not easily translated, neither can it be passed on.
The conflict between life and death is fused with the struggle between truth and fiction. In this autofictional text, Mr Petrovich is a character of Mandanipour’s creation, but to what extent he represents an interaction in real life with a censor is unclear. When Mandanipour describes Dara’s attempted murder it is ambiguous as to who is threatening his life, “with a stab of his knife renders the Achilles tendon in the assassin’s right foot useless. […] Stunned, I look at this Dara who is walking out of the dead-end alley, and I feel the blade of a knife against my Achilles tendon” (264). Initially we are led to believe that Mandanipour himself could be responsible, until he accuses Mr Petrovich, thus alluding to the possibility of the writer’s subjectivity fusing with that of the censor. Crucially, the distinction between Mr Petrovich and Mandanipour, like the line between truth and fiction, has become so unclear that the story is indecipherable.

Mandanipour seems intent on preventing his struggle and that of his protagonist Sara, becoming a globalised commodity, in order to avoid “[t]he most frightening thing about imperialism, its long-term toxic effect, what secures it, what cements it, is the benevolent self-representation of the imperialist as savior” (Spivak 1992, 781). Mandanipour identifies the barriers that prevent women and writers (both male and female) from fulfilling their potential within their first home. The desire for the abolition of socially institutionalised gender roles and the socio-political and religious pressures on writers are never realised in the course of his text, which is perhaps the most sharply autobiographical point. Mandanipour’s text articulates the “precarious position” that Gayatri Spivak identifies results in “divided loyalty”:

[B]eing a woman and being in the nation, without allowing the West to save them. […] Women can be ventriloquists, but they have an immense historical potential of not being (allowed to remain) nationalists; of knowing, in their
gendering, that nation and identity are commodities in the strictest sense: something made for exchange. And that they are the medium of that exchange (1992, 803).

Women are instruments of power in Mandanipour’s text in the same way that a writer is expected to reinforce state ideologies. The closing image Mandanipour presents us with is Sara’s desire to return home and “lock the door from the inside” (293). Venturing out into the world to defy the restrictions placed upon her might signify her desire to preserve what Chatterjee defines as “one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity” (1993, 120). Her withdrawal implies that her womanhood and identity cannot be determined by, or found in, a union with Dara, Sinbad or Mr Petrovich. Neither Mandanipour nor Sara have a viable route to emancipation, thus they both retreat.

Mandanipour frees himself from imitating a Western construction of freedom, which, as Sadia Abbas points out, is incredibly difficult in the current climate. She points out that “in the wake of September 11, 2001, it is virtually impossible to hear the word “freedom” without an entire colonial history, and the consequences of the encounter between Muslim societies and the West, being summoned” (2014, 44). In the process of writing, Mandanipour concludes that he is not prepared to forgo his integrity as a writer or to commodify his characters and text in order to be published in Iran. Although Mandanipour abandons his love story, his refusal to become an instrument helping to maintain state control or justify Western colonialism is a significant political protest, placing him in a “precarious position” (Spivak 1992, 803), and one which he shares with Sara. By merging the struggle against censorship with gender inequalities, Mandanipour’s text could be seen to demonstrate that freedom and agency is often considered the sole property of Western modernity, and
these notions tend to be set in opposition to the Muslim woman. Mandanipour and Sara’s joint refusal to surrender to someone else, results in their desertion becoming a form of self-assertion.
Conclusion

“[W]e must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause.)” (Atwood 1996, 314-5)

This thesis began with a quote taken from the opening of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is therefore fitting that I should conclude with a quote drawn from the epilogue of the novel. It is taken from what purports to be a keynote speech delivered at the imagined twelfth symposium on Gileadean Studies, by a professor known for his comparative study of Gilead and Iran. In an “editorial aside” Professor Pieixoto interrupts his speech to warn against “passing moral judgement” (Atwood 1996, 314). Through the character of Pieixoto Atwood signals the importance of academic writing addressing fundamental issues. It is implied that academics or readers who fail to take a moral or political stand against tyranny serve as apologists for evil. Significantly Pieixoto’s interlude is met with applause, suggesting that even some time in the future, the year “2195” to be exact, it is contentious to confront misogyny. Atwood offers an ominously foreboding warning that inhumanity and injustice will continue to be met with “cautious” reticence well into the future.

Atwood’s novel warns against avoiding contentious issues, so it is with this in mind that I sought to address what I consider to be a vital question, what does it mean to be a “free” Muslim woman in the diaspora? There are three stereotypical narratives associated with a Muslim woman in the diaspora: they are often victims of
oppression; survivors who have escaped to Europe or North America; or pawns for the hegemonic power. This thesis was driven by a desire to find literature that sought to complicate these stereotypes but perhaps more importantly, that had, in the words of Braidotti, “nomadic consciousness” because the writers had “forgotten to forget injustice” (2011a, 60). In attempting to challenge the dominant narratives, many of the writers included in this thesis faced another obstacle, namely that in writing about injustice and inequality within Muslim countries and cultures in the diaspora they were accused of perpetuating stereotypical narratives, homogenising all Muslim women as oppressed. By the same token, scholars that critique the promotion of religious patriarchy are also accused of being Islamophobic and serving (neo-) imperial agendas. As a consequence, writers like Leila Aboulela who promotes what I term “free enslavement”, a form of faith based empowerment that is ultimately not emancipatory, are largely celebrated rather than critically interrogated.

In the introduction to this thesis I point out that conventional frameworks for freedom and unfreedom found in the positive and negative debate do not adequately conceptualise the barriers that women experience. I outline that Sen’s “well-being freedom” and “agency freedom” can be usefully applied to a feminist construction of freedom that prioritises the determining relationship between having the means to exercise agency, and the social conditions and structures that may enable or limit a person’s choice. An interesting pattern emerged in my analysis of diasporic Arab and Iranian literature - many of the writers depicted the barriers to freedom, such as access to education, or the right to decide whom one marries - but these barriers were linked to the choices available. A lack of “well-being freedom” resulted in an absence of “agency freedom”, without the means to enable their freedom many of the texts describe their protagonists desiring their own subordination. For example, in Faqir’s
novel, her protagonist Salma eroticises her enslavement to Hamdan, her desire for subservience is socially constructed by patriarchy. This extends to Salma’s experience in exile, as her economic freedom is dependent on her ability to assimilate by whitening her appearance her choices cannot be separated from the social conditions and structures that have influenced them. The “freedom” she pursues in Hima and in exile is oppressive. The novel concludes with Salma finding her agency when she refuses to remain in exile and returns to Hima, she achieves freedom through resisting all that has sought to subjugate her. Within Crowther’s novel, the protagonist Maryam has what I term false freedom, she does not freely choose to leave Iran nor does she want to be parted from her love Ali, she is forced to be “free”. She eventually discovers that she is not in fact free at all, and similar to Faqir’s Salma, Maryam returns home to engage in a struggle for her freedom and home.

All of the writers challenge the dichotomy of “Western” secular freedom versus the unfreedom of Islam, and attempt to destabilise conventional routes to “freedom”. Many of the texts suggest gendered unfreedom is a global problem, and it is their protagonists’ return rather than their escape that liberates them. Aboulela’s novels put forward an argument for a redefinition of freedom, she advocates that one can autonomously choose a life of constraint, in other words, freely choose to be unfree. The regressive non-emancipatory politics of Aboulela’s novels proposes a remedy to a lack of “well-being freedom” whereby a person may not have the means to exercise freedom, despite this she implies it is still possible to demonstrate agency. Similar to the advocates of the importance of positive freedom, Aboulela ascribes to the idea that the content of a person’s desires are of no consequence, as all that matters is that they are freely chosen. Crucially her protagonists’ self-sacrificial enslavement to Islam seems to be driven by her characters not obtaining something
they desire, for Najwa it is Anwar, and for Sammar it is her first husband, and then Rae. When they cannot have the men they desire, they turn towards Islam as a remedy to their exilic isolation and broken hearts. In this way, it is possible to also apply Epictetus’ theory of freedom to Aboulela’s novels, when what you desire is not obtainable, if you alter your desires you can still obtain freedom. In chapter four I reject this remedy to unfreedom, I term it a type of “false freedom” that ultimately is not liberatory. Take for example Khadija’s predicament in *A Sky So Close*, if we were to apply this same principle to Khadija’s inability to access education the solution to her poverty and unfreedom is not to re-imagine what it means to be free or to alter one’s desires. The texts in this thesis point towards the impossibility of separating and distinguishing between positive and negative freedom, well-being and agency freedom, they are interdependent.

This thesis has sought to draw attention to the imbalance of power in representations of Muslim women. Historically concerns have been raised about “Middle Eastern and North African women [who] vent their anger at their societies […] [they] appear on the feminist stage as representatives of the millions of women in their own societies. To what extent they do violence to the women they claim authority to write and speak about is a question that is seldom raised” (Lazreg 1988, 89). Scholars have since drawn attention to the epistemic violence performed by “native informants” who are complicit in replicating rather than challenging distorted static images that essentialise Muslim women (see for example Dabashi 2011). Scholarship has also extended to examine the role of the publishing industry, Muslim women writing in the West are often commodified by the commercial book industry - their stories are reduced to either a “Victim story” or an “Escapee Story” (Kahf 2006). In chapter one I draw attention to Said and his argument that there is no space,
including that of scholarship, uncontaminated by imperialism and contemporary forms of Islamophobia from which to create counter narratives (Said 2003). Taylor and Zine propose that what is needed, is writing that dissents and disrupts these Orientalist binaries and tropes (2014, 13). In chapter three, I argue that Khedairi’s novel exposes the “epistemic violence” Iraqi people are subjected to, Spivak’s theorisation of the violence inflicted through writing is useful for reading the literature in this thesis. All of the writers are attempting to challenge the historic violence imposed on the bodies of Muslim women. They attempt to recover the voice of the subjugated, and challenge apathetic responses to injustice and inequality.

Since the victimisation of Muslim women is often connected to sexual suppression, writing about female sexuality as a Muslim woman can be an act of resistance. Kahf has pointed out it is “extremely difficult to speak against it as a Muslim without your voice getting stolen for other, Eurocentric agendas. This is a terribly secondary thing to have to worry about when your time should be spent fighting” (2006). Shame is a recurring theme in the texts examined in this thesis. Faqir and Crowther depict the violence inflicted on women’s bodies that are accused of dishonouring the male members of their family. Aboulela describes an unveiled sexually active Muslim woman as grotesque. Mandanipour highlights the impossibility of any sexual relations outside of marriage in contemporary Iran, whilst many of the female memoirists refrain from writing about sexuality altogether, and instead discuss their self-censorship. Khedairi is the only author to disassociate shame from sex in her narrative, her unnamed protagonist is determined not to repeat the pattern of female subordination and suppression of desires. All of the narratives emphasise the silencing and repression of female sexuality is pervasive, but as many of these writers prove, “[j]ust because the West has its stereotypes does not mean that
fear of what “the West” will think gets to determine everything we write. That’s self-crippling. It is a reaction to a reaction” (Kahf 2014, 251). Many of the writers in this thesis are raising their voices in protest, at patriarchal and (neo-)imperial distortions within their home and host societies, they dismantle and problematise the stereotypes by refusing to remain silent.

The complex relationship between motherhood and patriarchy is another recurring feature of the literature of this thesis. Mother-daughter relationships have the potential to empower or oppress, Mervat Hatem asserts there tends to be three types of “mothering”:

For some, mothering is the primary justification for the sexual division of labor that restricts women to the private sphere as dependents on men. For others, it is the basis of a particular social status from which women derive some power in patriarchal societies. For a third group, mothering enlists women’s complicity in the social reproduction of gender inequality (1999, 191).

The co-option of motherhood by patriarchy is the most prominent form of “mothering” within these texts. For example, Crowther and Mandanipour’s novels emphasise that women can become powerful enforcers ensuring compliance and preservation of patriarchal gender roles. A fourth formulation, in addition to those outlined by Hatem above, of “mothering” emerged in my reading of this collection of diasporic Iranian and Arab literature, whereby as a consequence of witnessing or experiencing oppressive forms of “mothering” some of the writers describe completely rejecting the role. Khedairi’s heroine has an abortion, Hakakian and Shafii describe motherhood as something that is suffered, they attempt to resist and facilitate the transformation of a mother’s role within the family.
In chapter five I discuss the deployment of women and female bodies as symbols for the integrity of the private sphere of the home, the homeland, and the nation. Many of the texts expose the conflation of the female body with the nation, and the violent policing of female bodies in the name of preserving and protecting the “honour” and “purity” of the nation. The struggle for home within these texts becomes a struggle to reclaim the female body, as can be seen in Faqir and Crowther’s novels. “Honour” is also tied to the silencing of women and gaining control over the female body – an object that is perceived to be owned by the family and the nation. Faqir’s novel is partially located in an unidentified village called Hima, in the Levant, the lack of specificity emphasises the ubiquity of honour killings. Within Crowther’s novel women are tools in nationalist rhetoric, and emblems of the nation. For some Iranian women, Crowther implies the only solution is migration. For both Faqir and Crowther’s novel, the struggle for home and freedom is closely connected to their resistance against gendered nationalism.

In *Reflections on Exile* Said defined nationalism as “an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs” (2001, 182). Nationalism according to Said has a reciprocal relationship with exile “the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel’s dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other […] Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group” (2001, 182-3). The diasporic authors of this thesis describe the predicament of being simultaneously insiders and outsiders in respect of their birthplaces as well as their new homelands. Aboulela and Crowther promote a form of Islamic femininity as a remedy to this predicament, Islam within their novels is a source of strength and comfort for women, and promotes the coming together and
formation of a supportive female community. Islam is promoted as a source of potential empowerment for women. In Crowther’s *The Saffron Kitchen* praying helps Sara and Maryam heal, just as it restores Sammar in *The Translator*. For Aboulela, Islam offers a space to withdraw, for example, in *Minaret* the hijab becomes a cloak of invisibility under which Najwa can disappear. For some of the writers who experience or describe forced or self-imposed exile, Islam becomes a form of passive resistance to their predicament; it creates a new group to belong to, and a cure for their solitude.

I outline in chapter five that women serve as “cultural carriers” for the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989), and one of the ways in which women reproduce and transmit culture is through language. For the diasporic Iranian and Arab women writers of this thesis the language they use forms part of their quest for freedom. Many of the writers attempt to assert freedom from the interference of publishers, and freedom to write honestly about contentious issues in a language that is their own or they claim as their own. For many, the English language is liberating, as it offers the opportunity to discuss topics such as sex, religion and politics, and addressing such issues within their writing is a form of resistance. Some writers also resist by revealing that which is hidden, they disclose their self-censorship, and their silence becomes a productive paradox. In chapter three I reference Geoffrey Nash’s argument that Anglophone Arab writers are better placed to negotiate the global marketplace compared to those writing in Arabic. He suggests a translated writer may not be privy to the soft powers that can influence the translation of the text. He posits an Anglophone writer is more able to intervene in, and resist such interference, or at the very least they will have a voice to expose any difficulty they might experience during the publication process. Fadia Faqir is a good example of this.
Anglophone writers are more likely to be published. Of the thirteen texts examined in this thesis only two are read in translation. There are relations of power that operate through language, my research indicates there are two ways in which these writers have resisted literary unfreedom - the predominance of English language within the literary marketplace. The first was utilised by many of the Anglophone writers in this thesis, who adopted what Braidotti refers to as a “linguistic nomad[ism]” (2011a, 29), a process of including transliterations to defamiliarise the English language. I explain in chapter one that this technique serves to create a transnational literature, which resists a simplistic ordering and analysis of texts according to the language the text is written in. It mimics the writer and/or the fictional characters’ sense of alienation in the diaspora, the reader is meant to experience the same sense of confusion and dislocation that may be felt by a person who has migrated. This technique also creates a language of resistance that injects marginalised voices into the English literary canon. The second form of resistance against the privileging of the English language is a complete rejection of this language. Khedairi and Mandanipour’s texts are read in translation, and their decision to write in Arabic and Farsi respectively marks a refusal to cater to the Euro-American literary marketplace. They construct from within languages that are marginalised within this marketspace. Of course this is true of all translated non-anglophone writing, to refer back to Thiong’o, “writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages […] what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them” (1993, 452). Mandanipour draws the reader’s attention to his efforts to resist translation, he interrupts the narrative to boldly state his words have been chosen to obstruct a censor and translator.
Inequality is a feature of the literature of this thesis. Mandanipour and Khedairi enunciate that wealth affords greater opportunity to resist. Mandanipour’s anti-hero Sinbad belongs to the nouveau riche of Iranian society, he can afford to evade the censor and the government “patrols”, he is able to buy his freedom. In *A Sky So Close*, readers are prompted to compare the unnamed protagonist with Khadija. Khadija’s poverty deprives her of a future outside of the homestead, and her untimely death contrasts with the heroine’s move to Baghdad and then England. Some of the memoirists discuss the Iranian revolution limiting opportunities particularly for women, they only escape because they have the means to migrate. Sen’s “capability perspective” is useful for understanding the connection that can be drawn between poverty and freedom, he argues we need to shift “primary attention away from means […] to ends that people have reason to pursue, and correspondingly, to the freedoms to be able to satisfy these ends” (2000, 90). Inequality is a symptom of more than just poverty, it is symptomatic of deprivation of capabilities and thereby freedoms.

This thesis has drawn on three theoretical frameworks, the debates within these theories are similar. Philosophers of the concept of freedom disagree over the distinction between positive and negative freedom, in particular, the importance of agency to freedom, and the idea that it is possible to demonstrate self-mastery even if that agency is decidedly constrained. Within International Human Rights laws, scholars are divided, many ascribe to the importance of universalism, whilst others argue for a cultural relativistic approach. To extend this argument further, within feminist scholarship there are binary framings that pit the Western secular feminist against the indigenous Islamic authentic non-feminist (Tadros and Khan 2018, 2-5). These debates are arguably analogous to those who prioritise positive freedom and the idea that there are times when it is justifiable to intervene in the name of justice.
(Berlin 2002, 179), and those who advocate that freedom is determined by self-mastery (Christman 1991, 359). It is important to point out that I am not seeking to reduce or essentialise the complexities of these debates, but to make the point that what these binary dichotomies have in common, is that they only serve to further victimise and silence minorities whose various forms of unfreedom are lost within these grandiose debates. Rather than simply rejecting these dichotomies, I have sought through this thesis to reveal the limits and engage in an ongoing deconstruction of these polarised positionalities.

Alongside the prioritisation of Anglophone writers within the literary marketplace, in my introduction I make the point that histories of Arab and Iranian immigration in particular are underrepresented, and within world literatures in English the voices of Iranian and Arab women writers are often omitted. I have therefore tried to foreground the British Iranian and Arab diasporic experience within fiction, autofiction, and autobiography. The commissioning of literature is unequal, texts written in English are privileged over those in translation, as are those that perpetuate the stereotypes, as such the relationship the authors have with the literary marketplace is a feature of my analysis. This literary inequality also drives the second phase of my project. I consider this thesis is the first part of a larger project. Having focused on the diasporic experience, in post-doctoral research I intend to concentrate on the marginalised non-diasporic Arab and Iranian writers who are often neglected. The first phase of the project has focused on the writers’ engagement with the concept of freedom, the second phase will, in part, prioritise literature that has been censored. In order to resist this inequality within the literary marketplace, alongside examining literature that has been banned, I propose in postdoctoral study to research self-published texts, film, art, and writing on digital platforms.
I wish to conclude by drawing back to an image taken from Mandanipour’s
*Censoring an Iranian Love Story*. In the opening to the autofictional novel when the reader is first introduced to the protagonist Sara, we are informed she is unaware “that in precisely seven minutes and seven seconds” she will die. Crucially, Mandanipour notes in bold font that whilst Sara was present at the protests, she “is not a member of any political party, but she is timidly holding a sign that reads DEATH TO FREEDOM, DEATH TO CAPTIVITY” (2011, 2). This paradoxical statement embodies the hoplessness of her unfreedom – even when free one remains captive. The novel was originally published in 2009, the same year of the Iranian Green Movement. Sara’s fate tragically prefigures one of the most notable images of the movement, the murder of Neda Agha-Soltan. Like Sara, it is reported that Neda’s presence at the protests was accidental, she got caught in the movement and decided to join, she was not political she merely wanted freedom (Fathi 2009). Mandanipour describes Sara “timidly” observing whilst the student protestors brand her an “infiltrator”, the “fanatical members of the Party of God” dismiss her assuming she must be a sign of “American imperialism”, both sides conclude “she doesn’t exist” (2011, 2-3). The debasement of the innocent Iranian woman quietly protesting is obscured, and the significance of her presence lost. She is a symbol of both freedom and unfreedom at once.
Bibliography


Accessed 5 August 2016.


Bhargava, Rajeev. “Political secularism: why it is needed and why we need to learn from its distinctive Indian version.” SSOAR: Open Access Repository, 2006.


Dabashi, Hamid. “Native informers and the making of the American empire.” *Al-Ahram*, Issue No. 797, 1-7 June 2006,


---. My Name is Salma. Doubleday, Transworld Publishers, 2007


---. “In the Aftermath of Critique We Are Not in Epistemic Free Fall: Human Rights, the Subaltern Subject, and Non-liberal Search for Freedom and Happiness.” *Law Critique*, 25, 2014.


Karim, Persis M. *Let me tell you where I’ve been: New writing by the Iranian Diaspora*. The University of Arkansas Press, 2006.
“Reflections on Literature after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and in the Diaspora.”


---. *Writing Muslim Identity.* Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012.


“Open Letter to the Home Secretary”. *The independent review into the application of sharia law in England and Wales*. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, February 2018, pp.27-34.


Sustainable Development Goals. “17-point plan to end poverty, combat climate change and fight injustice and inequality.” 2015,


