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Faculté des Lettres & des Sciences Humaines

B.P. 1168 Sfax 3000, Tunisie
Phone – 00.216.74.670.557
Fax – 00.216.74.670.540
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Sommaire : Tome II

Comité de rédaction – ii

Remerciements – iv

1

Nigel Farage, Reform UK and post-Brexit Britain:
Reshaping British Politics and ‘Fixing’ a Country
‘Damaged’ by Immigration – Page 1

Fathi Bourmeche

2

Geographies of Subjugation: Bordering Processes and
the Creation of the Other in Fadia Faqir’s *Willow Trees*
Don’t Weep – Page 24

Ahmed Ben Amara

3

The Interpellated Subject and the Lure of Hybridity in
Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* – Page 44

Sahbia Mouaddeb

Tome I – (Recueil d’articles rédigés en arabe) – Page 59

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Geographies of Subjugation: Bordering Processes and the Creation of the Other in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*

Ahmed Ben Amara
(University of Sfax)

Abstract

This paper examines Fadia Faqir's novel Willow Trees Don't Weep (2014) through the lens of critical border theory. The protagonist's repeated encounters with territorial borders, together with the narrative's shifting geopolitical landscapes, underscore the centrality of borders as the novel's master trope. Yet, instead of viewing borders as neutral spatial demarcations, this study argues that they function as sites of violence and exclusion, reinforcing socio-cultural inequalities and geopolitical power imbalances. Through a close reading of the novel's recurring images of limits, thresholds, and boundaries, the analysis shows how various forms of oppression – patriarchal, ideological, and postcolonial – operate through different bordering processes that shape the protagonist's identity and sense of agency. It further argues that the interplay of topographical and symbolic borders enables dominant power structures to lock individuals and groups into distinct categories, systematically excluding them from global networks of free movement. Ultimately, the analysis reveals the contradiction between the promise of a 'borderless world' and the continued proliferation of both physical and symbolic borders for marginalized populations.

Keywords: *Fadia Faqir, Willow Trees Don't Weep, Critical border theory, Bordering processes, Mobility*

Introduction

In their review of Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Sourav Paul & Shri Krishan Rai (2020, 132) describe the novel as depicting the struggle of a "subjugated woman to move beyond the hierarchical borders around her". This observation foregrounds one of the novel's central thematic concerns – namely the multi-dimensional nature of borders. The prominence of borders is hardly surprising given the protagonist's numerous border crossings and the constantly shifting geopolitical settings of the narrative. However, as Paul and Rai suggest, these boundaries extend beyond the physical and geopolitical obstacles that restrict movement, as they encompass the deeply entrenched social and cultural constraints that shape subjectivity, identity, and belonging. It is this understanding both of the prevalence of borders and their dynamic operations as material

and metaphorical constructs that forms the central argument of this paper. And while it is true that, in this book, Faqir continues her career-long focus on the experiences of marginalized women navigating oppressive structures, she nevertheless stresses the fact that this particular exploration of borders is, at its core, “human rather than gender based” (Fadi Zaghmout).

Faqir’s engagement with borders reflects the recent renewed scholarly interest in territorial boundaries and bordering practices, a development largely driven by the increasing role that borders play in contemporary political and social life. As political geographer David Newman (2006a, 172) observes, “[w]e live in a world of borders which give order to our lives.” This heightened border consciousness has contributed to the emergence of border studies as an interdisciplinary academic field dedicated to examining the political, social, and cultural dimensions of boundaries. These inquiries subsequently migrated to the field of literary and cultural studies, sparking what Johan Schimanski (2017, 9) terms “the border turn.” Through this sustained scrutiny, Astrid M. Fellner (2023, 20) notes, “the border has become an important paradigm in literary analysis, which provides a useful way of conceptualizing the increasingly difficult realities of transnational experiences in global times.” The Arab Anglophone novel, in particular, has been highly responsive to this paradigm shift, with numerous works exploring both territorial and symbolic forms of border crossings. British-Jordanian author Fadia Faqir’s novel *Willow Trees Don’t Weep* exemplifies this trend by employing borders as both material realities and powerful metaphors through which to examine the intertwined experiences of oppression, displacement, and belonging. In doing so, the novel reveals that borders function not only as geopolitical demarcations that regulate movement, but also as psychological, cultural, and ideological constructs that shape individual subjectivity and human relationships.

Given the novel’s sustained engagement with borders and border crossings, this paper adopts a critical framework grounded in literary border studies. Building on the interdisciplinary insights of border studies and the subsequent “border turn” in literary criticism, this approach understands borders not as fixed territorial lines but as dynamic and socially produced phenomena. Central to this perspective is the concept of bordering, which conceives of borders

as ongoing processes through which inclusion and exclusion are continually negotiated and enforced. This shift toward what Schimanski (2006) terms a more dynamic or “processual” conception of borders underscores the increasing role played by border management regimes in various processes of “societal ordering and compartmentalization” (Newman 2006b, 6). In this sense, borders are no longer neutral, administrative, or territorial markers, but active instruments of power used to control, marginalize, and exploit human bodies. Henk Van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen (2002) extend this reconceptualization through their use of the verb “bordering”, a term that emphasizes the conceptual shift of the border from a static object to an active, ongoing process. Furthermore, they situate “bordering” within a powerful triad alongside “ordering” and “othering” to demonstrate how spatial lines are inextricably linked to social, ideological, and geopolitical oppression.

This paper contends that this evolved understanding of borders lies at the heart of *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, a novel that uses the protagonist's physical journey across national frontiers to expose bordering processes as active mechanisms of oppression and othering. The narrative follows Najwa, a young Jordanian woman, as she journeys from Amman to the United Kingdom via Pakistan and Afghanistan in search of her estranged father. Each stage of this journey reveals a distinct configuration of bordering, demonstrating how boundaries operate simultaneously in geographical, social, ideological, and cultural forms. In Amman, Najwa grapples with the symbolic boundaries dictated by a rooted patriarchal order and reinforced by conservative religious institutions, which circumscribe her identity, mobility, and agency. Her transition from the national to the transnational space then exposes the growing securitization of borders in the post-9/11 world, culminating in her perilous crossing of the porous Pakistan – Afghanistan frontier. There, she encounters the coercive bordering practices associated with religious extremism under Taliban rule. Upon arriving in the UK, Najwa becomes subject to a different regime of bordering. No longer marginalized primarily as a woman within her own society, she is reconstituted as the postcolonial and racialized “Other”, her Arab and Muslim identity rendered an object of suspicion within the Western security imaginary. Through these successive encounters, the novel

demonstrates that borders extend far beyond territorial boundaries, functioning instead as dynamic mechanisms through which identities are produced, hierarchies are maintained, and relations of power are continually enforced.

1. “Without a fence or borders”: patriarchal and religious othering

The novel’s exploration of bordering begins not at the territorial frontier but within the patriarchal structures of Jordanian society, where gender functions as a mechanism of exclusion and social control. Faqir (Moore 2011, 3) has repeatedly emphasized the continuity between familial, patriarchal structures and political oppression, as revealed in her observation that “[t]he family is a structure with a figurehead, a patriarch who makes all the important decisions and treats everyone as infants. You see that structure multiplied everywhere in the Arab world. The state functions that way as well: it is undemocratic and repressive.” This patriarchal dynamic emerges early in the narrative when Najwa reveals that her decision to leave her country in search of her father is driven not only by personal longing but by the social expectation that a woman cannot live independently without the protection of a male guardian. Following her mother’s death, Najwa is left in the care of her aging grandmother, a circumstance that places her in an increasingly precarious social position:

I had no option but to find my father. If my grandmother died, I would live alone in that house, something this city would not tolerate. Only women of ill repute live on their own without a male guardian. I would be pursued by predators, ostracised, and my door would be marked. If I’d had any choice, I would have let him go, for he was nothing to me, not even a memory. (Faqir 2014, 23)

This bleak vision of a future devoid of a male presence is further reinforced by the grandmother, whose warnings validate the cultural codes that mandate female dependency:

‘I’ll not last long. You cannot live in this house on your own after I am gone. What would people say?’[...] If you end up on your own in this house, it will be so shameful. Only loose women, ‘ahirat, live alone. You belong with your father.’ (28)

Beyond the conventional assumption that a male presence is required to validate a woman’s existence, the remarks of Najwa and

her grandmother are striking for their reliance on territorial metaphors to depict the condition of living without a male companion. In both accounts, the ‘house’ is described as failing to fulfill its traditional role as a secure enclosure. Within this view, the house constitutes a boundary for the women living inside, separating their private lives from the hostile public eye of the patriarchal society. Without a male guardian to secure the home, however, that boundary collapses, stripping the physical walls of their protective value and exposing the inhabitants to external intrusion. The grandmother’s stern warning deftly captures this erosion of territorial sovereignty and subsequent vulnerability: “You cannot live in this house on your own after I am gone” (28).

Another arresting territorial metaphor employed by Najwa, and one that resonates particularly strongly with the conceptual vocabulary of borders studies, is that of a “common land, without a fence or borders.” In a significant moment in the narrative, Najwa, accompanied by her mother and grandmother, takes a taxi from the hospital to her home. During the journey, she recalls, “my mother seemed asleep, and my grandmother kept wiping her tears with the end of her sleeve. The driver ogled me in the mirror; being the daughter of an absent father, they saw me as common land, without a fence or borders” (15). Her father’s absence has created a situation in which she is imagined as “common land” that is unclaimed and therefore available for appropriation. What is also worth noting is that the driver’s transgressive behavior occurs *despite* the presence of other women. This shows that the patriarchal system does not recognize female solidarity or authority as a meaningful protective barrier. In fact, the passivity of the other women, with the mother appearing to be asleep and the grandmother silently crying, suggests that they are themselves affected by structures that leave women with limited power to challenge male behavior.

The above passages articulate another fundamental characteristic shared by patriarchal systems and border regimes more broadly – namely their reliance on rigid systems of social categorization. As borders function through the production of distinctions between inclusion and exclusion, they rely on binary classifications that determine who belongs and who must be regulated or marginalized. As Newman (2006a, 176) observes, this tendency toward binary construction often “highlight[s] the border as constituting a sharp

edge and a clear line of separation between two distinct entities, or opposites.” In a similar manner, patriarchal structures organize social life through oppositional categories – such as public/private, honorable/dishonorable, self/other, and inside/outside – in order to regulate behavior and maintain systems of control. Within the novel, the city operates on a strict moral binary in which a woman’s ethical and social standing is entirely dependent on the presence of a male guardian. This male figure functions as a symbolic boundary that separates ‘virtuous’ women from “women of ill repute,” or “loose women” in the grandmother’s words. By choosing to live without a male presence, Najwa is perceived as having crossed that symbolic boundary, a transgression that “this city would not tolerate”. This conceptual divide echoes an earlier moment in the narrative where Najwa stands at the airport, preparing to cross the country’s *geographical* borders: “A line in the sand dividing the world into two had been drawn. On one side lived honourable women, those protected by their fathers or husbands, and on the other loose women like me” (Faqr 2014, 68-9). Najwa’s reflection reveals how cultural and social borders produce rigid binary categories through which women’s identities, morality, and social value are defined. In this instance, the opposition recalls Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987, 31) discussion of the “virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy” in her seminal text *Borderlands*. For both Faqr and Anzaldúa, patriarchal systems rely on dualistic frameworks that confine women within opposing archetypes: the pure, passive, and protected woman represented by the Virgin, and the autonomous, stigmatized, and socially excluded woman positioned as the ‘Putas’.

To remain on the “honourable” side of the social divide, women must accept male protection, which is a patriarchal euphemism for being successfully contained within the domestic spheres of fathers or husbands. ‘Protection’, therefore, operates as a soft form of imprisonment, where women basically have to trade autonomy for safety. To illustrate the reality of growing up under a regime that demands nothing short of total submission from women, Faqr repeatedly employs motifs of enclosure that expose the carceral logic underpinning patriarchal authority. For instance, Najwa recalls the suffocating domestic architecture of her childhood home: “We had spent years confined in this house. And the garden was walled, enclosed and overlooked itself” (Faqr 2014, 55). This spatial

imagery is significant because it reveals the layered forms of confinement imposed upon the female characters. The progression from “house” to “garden” to “walled” and “enclosed” illustrates an environment of concentric confinement that restricts mobility and reinforces isolation. The women are not simply enclosed within a home, but are systematically sealed off from the outside world by multiple physical barriers. Furthermore, the inclusion of the word ‘garden’ within this description provides a poignant commentary on the deceptive nature of patriarchal ‘protection’. Traditionally associated with openness, growth, and renewal, the garden would appear to offer a space of relative freedom. Yet, Faqir subverts these associations by depicting it as simultaneously “walled” and “enclosed”, which exposes the deceptive nature of patriarchal protection.

The illusory nature of the kind of freedom and agency promised by the patriarchal regime is not entirely lost on Najwa, who gradually comes to recognize the contradictions underlying its rhetoric of protection and care. This awakening becomes particularly evident when she recalls walking home with her grandmother immediately following her mother’s funeral:

My grandmother and I were dropped by the mosque and we walked to our house under the warm midday sun. Children in the nearby kindergarten sang rhythmically, ‘I am a bird, I could fly, I could also say goodbye.’ I was not a bird and could neither fly nor say goodbye. Although I was free to breathe, walk, work, I felt like a prisoner, condemned to my life. (5)

Through a series of structural oppositions, the passage establishes a paradox between the perceived freedom of the patriarchal system and its intrinsic carceral quality. This tension suggests that patriarchal bordering does not depend on physical locks or visible chains to confine marginalized subjects, but rather operates through invisible boundaries that transform society itself into a panoptic prison. Najwa realizes that although she is permitted a limited degree of physical mobility – she can breathe, walk, and work – her future is entirely dictated by societal expectations and male authorities. Her inability to “neither fly nor say goodbye” is an indication that whatever limited autonomy she has hinges entirely upon her compliance with the symbolic borders of the system. Furthermore, the presence of three distinct generations of women (the children,

Najwa, and the grandmother) underscores the intergenerational continuity of this process of confinement, which is normalized from early childhood and stretches all the way into old age. This reinforces the idea that patriarchal confinement is not an exceptional circumstance but an inherited social condition, transmitted through familial and cultural structures that continually reproduce the boundaries governing women's lives.

Another significant aspect of this brief but evocative passage is its spatial setting. Najwa recalls that she and her grandmother are "dropped by the mosque", a narrative detail that merits close attention. While the mosque is, on one level, an important landmark within the city, its placement in the scene can also be read as being aligned with the social structures that shape women's mobility. This reading addresses the mosque's narrative function rather than its religious significance, focusing on how the text situates it within the novel's portrayal of patriarchal bordering. After attending the funeral, neither Najwa nor her grandmother actively *choose* where they go next; instead, they are passively "dropped by the mosque" before continuing directly "to our house." Their movement follows an invisible but highly regulated trajectory that takes them from one approved space to another, with little room for autonomous movement beyond these prescribed boundaries. In this manner, the mosque operates as a spatial border post that marks the transition from a temporary presence in the public sphere back into the private domestic realm to which women are expected to remain confined.

Furthermore, the detail that Najwa and her grandmother walk home from the mosque "under the warm midday sun" is also worth noting because it serves as a powerful metaphor for complete visibility, evoking the pervasive logic of surveillance that underpins the patriarchal order. Read in this light, the mosque's spatial prominence is associated not only with the regulation of women's movement but also with the possibility that such movement remains visible and open to social scrutiny. The novel repeatedly associates religious sites with elevated vantage points and visual dominance. This is established early in the narrative through Faqir's depiction of Amman as a city "built on seven hills," with its buildings "clung to the hills at random" (62). The city's topography is significant because it creates multiple elevated vantage points from which urban life can be surveyed. During one of her walks, Najwa stands on top

of one of these hills, gaining a panoramic view of the city below. Strikingly, this landscape is visually dominated by mosques – the physical emblems of institutional religious authority. As Najwa observes, “I counted seven mosques. The sight of green minarets, which sprang out here and there, would have appalled my mother” (63). Even when descending into the city center, Najwa’s field of vision remains regulated by these structures, particularly the Grand Mosque, which “despite its delicate appearance and pink-and-white stones, dominated the square” (23).

The imposing architecture of the Grand Mosque can be read as a spatial metaphor for the way the novel represents the mosque, and religious institutions more broadly, in relation to patriarchal bordering. This role becomes particularly evident when Najwa enters the mosque in search of her missing father, an act that transgresses the gendered boundaries governing the establishment, and immediately provokes institutional hostility. Through a calculated contrast between the site’s grand, intimidating exterior and its drab, grimy interior and aggressive caretaker, Faqir complicates the spiritual authority the mosque might otherwise project, presenting it, from Najwa’s perspective, as a space marked by surveillance, exclusion, and gendered regulation:

The toothless mosque attendant soaked the mop in the bucket full of water, dark with grime, wrung it out, then wiped the floor. Steam rose as soon as it touched the hot marble. He stopped and gawped when he saw me leaning against the gate. ‘What do you want?’ ‘I would like to see the imam.’ My eyes met his. He wagged his finger. ‘Shoo! It’s prayer time. No women, chit-chat or nonsense.’
 ‘Please.’
 ‘Shoo!’ He raised the mop.
 This mission was going to be harder than I thought. (24)

Najwa’s disillusionment intensifies when she becomes aware of the congregation’s hostility toward her presence:

The male worshippers sized me up as I stood on the pavement shifting my weight from one foot to the other. Some sneered, others made snide remarks and some found my presence outside the gate, a space reserved for males and beggars, offensive. I stayed put, despite the tic in my right cheek. (37)

The hostility displayed by the male worshippers can be understood in terms of a gendered mapping of the mosque and its surrounding space, which reflects assumptions about the distinct roles of men and women within the social order the novel depicts. In this context, the “pavement” functions as both a literal and symbolic boundary, keeping Najwa outside the religious institution. Likewise, the mosque gate separates the public street from the male-dominated sacred interior. Within this rigid spatial configuration, Najwa’s presence outside the gate is resented precisely because it represents a transgression – an unauthorized female intrusion into “a space reserved for males and beggars”. The episode thus suggests that, within the world of the novel, the mosque and the community around it take part in maintaining gendered boundaries rather than merely reflecting them. This dynamic is underscored by the fact that Najwa’s visit to the mosque is marked by a sequence of significant border crossings. To reach the mosque, Najwa first “crossed the busy road and stood under the arch of its main entrance” (23). At the next boundary, the “metal gate”, she must stand and endure the resentful gazes of the worshippers before a mosque attendant ushers her to a side door. Finally, a definitive crossing occurs when she is permitted inside to meet the Imam: “I took off my shoes and placed the sole of my foot gingerly on the threshold of a mosque for the first time, then crossed it” (38).

2. “Outside the circle of believers”: ideological bordering and the construction of the “Other”

When Najwa crosses the national borders of Jordan, she does so, at least in part, in the hope of escaping the country’s oppressive socio-cultural structures. Yet as Étienne Balibar (2002, 84) reminds us, “the ubiquity of borders” means that “some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all, in the geographico-politico-administrative sense of the term. They are in fact elsewhere, wherever selective controls are to be found”. Balibar’s remarks suggest the border is not merely a geographical boundary but a dispersed regime of control that accompanies those who attempt to cross it. Crossing a state border, therefore, does not necessarily free individuals from the structures of power that regulate their lives; instead, those structures are often reproduced in new locations and institutional forms. In Najwa’s case, the transition from the domestic sphere to the geopolitical space is marked not by liberation from

practices of bordering but by their proliferation, as new forms of surveillance, exclusion, and othering emerge throughout her journey.

By entering Pakistan and Afghanistan unaccompanied, Najwa symbolically turns her back on the patriarchal order of her native country, only to encounter an even more restrictive social system in which patriarchy is reinforced by religious fundamentalism. As a woman travelling alone and raised with secular values, she is immediately constructed as a morally suspect ‘Other’ whose movements, appearance, and behavior must be regulated to preserve the prevailing ideological order. This disciplinary logic is most visibly expressed through the compulsory wearing of the burqa. In their examination of the social consequences of full-face veiling, Peter Baehr and Daniel Gordon (2012, 465) emphasize its role in fracturing social solidarity by erecting ‘a sharp boundary’ between women and their civic communities. What is striking about this analysis is the authors’ deliberate use of a vocabulary closely associated with border studies, such as ‘boundary’, ‘partition’, ‘closure’ and ‘shield’. This vocabulary reinforces the conceptualization of the burqa as a mobile bordering mechanism through which fundamentalist regimes regulate women’s mobility across public space. In the novel, the burqa functions not as a mere garment, but as a literal, enforced physical boundary that restricts women’s movement and erases their visibility. The psychological toll of this enforced erasure on Najwa becomes particularly evident during Najwa’s crossing into Afghanistan:

Wearing a chador, head wrapped in a hijab made of a light woolen fabric, I sat in the back of a taxi next to a Pakistani soldier, two farmers and an old woman in a burqa. My mother, who went out of her way to secularise me, would vomit blood if she saw me wearing the blue shroud. I was uncomfortable under all that fabric and kept pulling it from under me and adjusting it around my shoulders. (101-2)

This passage illustrates how the body becomes an active, contested border zone, a site of struggle between state regulation and individual resistance, as reflected in Najwa’s continual efforts to adjust her attire. At the same time, she recognizes that the chador and hijab constitute the necessary condition for entering a tightly regulated social order, which explains why she “kept pulling it from under me and adjusting it around my shoulders”. Equally significant

is her awareness that this sartorial code marks a rigid ideological boundary between the secularism of her native culture and the religious fundamentalism that governs this unfamiliar environment. In adopting this mode of dress, Najwa enters a psychological borderland characterized by guilt and hybridity, where she is suspended between the secular world of her upbringing and the fundamentalist order she must navigate to survive.

This condition of spiritual suspension – being neither entirely secular nor traditionally religious – triggers a profound existential dilemma for Najwa, as she navigates both the hostile terrain of Afghanistan and the fractured landscape of her own identity. The sight of a group of Afghan girls praying, for instance, serves as a painful reminder of her position as an outsider:

After we finished, they did their ablutions, then stood in a line and prayed. I felt awkward sitting there and kept fiddling with my pendant. Was I a Muslim? Why did I find bowing to Allah so difficult, even humiliating? Watching believers worship their god was so embarrassing I broke out into a sweat. My mother would run her hand over her uncovered hair. ‘It’s lonely standing outside the circle of believers. (111)

The passage highlights Najwa’s struggle to reconcile her westernized, secular understanding of faith with the humility and complete submission required in Islamic prayer. This tension thrusts her into the painful liminal space of standing outside the community of believers. As a border dweller, Najwa is forced to confront the systemic alienation experienced by those who navigate diasporic or cultural borders. In doing so, she undergoes a difficult initiation into what Anzaldúa calls a new “mestiza consciousness”, an evolving awareness of the self as shaped by competing, fluid identities.

The unravelling of this existential crisis is shaped by what Najwa perceives as the rigid binaries through which this fundamentalist order constructs difference and responds to dissent. Time and again, she is reminded that any deviation from its strict religious orthodoxy places her beyond the boundaries of the faith community. This becomes particularly evident in her encounter with Abu-Bakr, a local Afghan connected to the Mujahedeen, who presents absolute and unquestioning piety as the sole criterion for belonging – a standard of devotion that even Najwa’s father is unable to meet:

'I am Omar Rahman's daughter.'
 'I don't believe you.' He spat a splinter.
 'You must have seen my passport.' The tic in my face was back
 [...]
 'What's he like?'
 'Absent-minded medic.'
 'Absent-minded?'
 'Always thinking, thinking. Not pious enough.'
 'What do you mean?'
 'Did not pray regularly.' He spat another splinter.
 'Did you?'
 'Yes. Five times a day, plus night prayer.'
 'Why pray, then train to shoot?'
 'Because the world is full of kafirs, like you, who are killing
 Muslims wherever they find them.'
 'Like me?'
 'Yes. The old woman told me. You don't know how to pray.'
 'Is that a crime?' I turned into Raneen, my mother. Her revenge
 was complete.
 'It should be.' (92-93)

In border theory, maintaining the perceived integrity of a territory or community and legitimizing practices of inclusion and exclusion often requires the strategic creation of an "Other." As Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naersson (2002, 126-7) observe, bordering processes can "go as far as political practices of elimination, of the cleansing of the other that lives inside an imagined community." In the novel, this logic is embodied in Najwa's designation as a 'kafir' – an infidel whose failure to conform to prescribed religious practices aligns her, in the eyes of the regime, with hostile external forces that are supposedly engaged in "killing Muslims wherever they find them" (Faqr 2014, 93). That Najwa, a born Muslim, is labeled as 'kafir' is a testimony to the uncompromising nature of this ideology and its willingness to systematically purge those it constructs as internal Others. Ironically, however, it is precisely this doctrinal rigidity that compels Najwa to follow in her mother's footsteps and to mount an act of resistance against the regime: "I turned into Raneen, my mother. Her revenge was complete". Through her identification with her mother – a transgressive figure who deliberately stepped outside the "circle of believers" – Najwa reaffirms her commitment to an independent, questioning self in defiance of the regime's demands for absolute conformity. Thus, in

embracing her mother's subversive legacy, she ultimately reclaims her place in the borderlands, inhabiting the liminal space that has shaped her identity throughout the novel.

The rigidity of this ideological border system is also reflected in the prevalence of equally inflexible *territorial* boundaries. The 'checkpoint' emerges as a significant textual motif through which Faqir conveys the complexities and dangers of navigating such contested terrains. As a conventional symbol in border-crossing narratives, the checkpoint represents the institutional mechanisms through which identities are scrutinized and access to space is controlled. Thomas Nail (2016, 110) argues that the checkpoint "constitutes a distinct border regime in which individuals are increasingly subjected to forms of identification and classification." Najwa's encounter with the checkpoint illustrates this process, as she finds herself subject not only to restrictions on her movement but also to the regulation of her behavior and emotional expression:

When we arrived at the checkpoint, we stopped. The soldier got out and joined a group of policemen standing by a hut. The driver pointed at me. I thought he wanted me to get out of the car. He shook his head and waved his licence. I gave him my passport and the permission. He got out, holding the documents, salaamed, gave the two policemen a parcel, chatted with them, slapped his thigh, laughed, adjusted his hat, got my papers stamped and came back. I sighed and smiled. He frowned at me. Smiles, like words, must also be forbidden. (102)

The fact that "[s]miles, like words, must also be forbidden," expands the meaning of bordering beyond physical mobility. The checkpoint determines not only who can cross but also how subjects are permitted to behave and express themselves. Najwa's smile becomes an act of transgression because the authoritarian border regime demands submission, silence, and emotional discipline. Her reaction suggests that surveillance has become internalized: she learns that even an apparently innocuous gesture can attract suspicion. In this sense, the checkpoint resembles a panoptic space, in which the possibility of being watched produces self-regulation.

3. “Foreign and frail”: bordering and geopolitical othering in Britain

Najwa’s ultimate disillusionment with this rigid ideological order coincides with yet another border crossing. While navigating the literal and symbolic checkpoints of the Afghan territory, she learns that her father has shifted his activities from the battlefields of South Asia to the West, joining a militant group operating in London. This revelation prompts another journey, as Najwa arrives in the former colonial metropolis harboring romanticized postcolonial expectations of its beauty and openness. Yet instead of William Blake’s “England’s green and pleasant land”, she encounters sterile “giant buildings made of steel and glass” (Faqr 2014, 168) and, more importantly, institutional boundaries. Her experiences in the UK gradually reveal that the Western nation-state reinforces its borders by constructing the Arab Muslim subject as an enduring “Other.” This realization begins at the airport, where Najwa is subjected to an intense interrogation that exposes the border as both a physical site of “suspension and immobility” (Drew 2020, 1) and a psychological space of anxiety and vulnerability:

‘What’s the purpose of your visit?’ He pushed his glasses up.
 My English, which my mother had invested so much in, evaporated.
 ‘Reason for visit, study at the university.’
 ‘Which university?’
 ‘Westgate.’ I swallowed.
 ‘Do you have a letter of acceptance?’
 ‘Yes.’ I gave him the forged letter [...]
 He read it slowly.
 ‘So you are going to study music?’ He pushed his glasses up again.
 I breathed in, counted to seven, then spoke. ‘Yes. I love traditional music.’
 He checked my visa again and again, ran his finger over it, screened it. (170)

Najwa’s deliberate attempts to suppress her physical reactions by swallowing and counting to seven illustrate the immense emotional labor required to survive this performance of state sovereignty. At the same time, this forced emotional self-regulation reflects the extent to which post-9/11 borders have become sites where state power is constantly reenacted through surveillance, unequal power relations, and systemic exclusion.

The airport scene anticipates Najwa's disillusionment with the myth of the west as a safe haven for freedom. Upon arriving in London, she discovers that the geopolitical border does not end at passport control but extends into London's streets, public transport, and places of residence. The metropolis she has imagined as a bastion of openness is instead structured by pervasive mechanisms of surveillance and control: "A uniformed man stood by the entrance to the London Underground. So you cannot enter the city, except through a guarded tunnel. This time I would be arrested" (172). This immediate encounter with the security apparatus of the Western state reawakens her fear of official authority and confinement. For Najwa, the presence of the uniformed officer guarding the entrance to the Underground recalls the patriarchal barriers she has fled, while the enclosed, subterranean space reinforces her sense that, as an Arab Muslim migrant woman, her movements remain subject to constant scrutiny. Her thought – "This time I would be arrested" – is also worth noting, as it highlights the psychological burden of inhabiting the city as a precarious migrant in the post-9/11 era. As Petya Tsoneva argues, the regime of tight surveillance that was installed across western cities following the events of September 11 effectively transformed them into spaces that "reproduce segments of the Middle East." (xiii) It is this unsettling continuity between the homeland and the former colonial metropolis that leaves Najwa isolated as she searches for her father, acutely aware that she is "alone in this big city on a forged visa" (182).

While the airport terminal and the subterranean tunnels of the Underground represent the state's visible, institutional borders, Najwa's subsequent experience in a London café marks a critical shift toward the less tangible boundaries that structure everyday life in the metropolis. Upon entering the café, she notices that the arrival of a group of young veiled Muslim women triggers an angry reaction from a young man:

A scruffy young man standing outside the cafe shouted, 'Oi! Scarecrows! Camel heads! Go home!'
The women seemed accustomed to this. Unperturbed by the abuse, they continued chatting. (185)

This incident illustrates how exclusion shifts from the visible infrastructure of border control to what Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and

Cassidy (2018, 2) describe as ‘everyday bordering’, defined as “the everyday construction of borders through ideology, cultural mediation, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and everyday forms of transnationalism.” Here, bordering is enacted through routine social practices of exclusion operating at the intersection of xenophobia, racism, and misogyny. The scruffy young man assumes the role of a self-appointed border guard, who attempts to police the symbolic boundaries of the nation by deciding who belongs and who remains an alien intruder. His abuse demonstrates how, in the post-9/11 Western metropolis, the veil is frequently read as a mobile marker of foreignness – a visible sign of an identity perceived as incompatible with the secular ideals of the nation. This recalls Najwa’s earlier experiences in Afghanistan, where the burqa similarly functions as a bordering mechanism that regulates inclusion and exclusion. Thus, although the ideological premises differ, both contexts transform women’s dress into a means of regulating social boundaries and determining who may legitimately occupy public space.

As disturbing as these insidious acts of public ostracism are, they represent merely the surface of Najwa’s alienation. Her most devastating experience of exclusion comes through Andy, the Englishman she meets on her flight to the United Kingdom, who enters her life at a moment of profound vulnerability and exile. His kind attention initially represents for her the alluring, safe, and sophisticated face of British society that she has not yet seen, and therefore temporarily validates her presence in an otherwise hostile social landscape. However, Andy’s kindness is complicated when Najwa accidentally overhears a conversation with his mother in which he describes her as “foreign and frail”, thus revealing that his perception of her is already shaped by assumptions about her foreignness and vulnerability. This latent othering becomes more explicit once Andy discovers that her missing father has joined Al-Qaeda. His attitude changes abruptly: he ceases to view Najwa as an individual and instead reclassifies her as a geopolitical threat and a social liability. Although this discovery is understandably unsettling, it does not fully justify the clinical and impersonal coldness of Andy’s subsequent reaction:

I got up and walked towards him.
He stepped back.

‘Andy?’ I pleaded.

His shoulders slumped, and he rubbed his ear. ‘My mother is going to France soon. You need to find alternative accommodation.’

I shook my head.

‘Goodnight.’ He left without a second glance. (208-09)

In this exchange, Andy decides to reject Najwa without affording her the opportunity to explain her situation or defend her case. Through this silencing, Najwa is reduced to the status of a subaltern – a marginalized individual who is structurally deprived of the right to speak or be heard within a dominant power system.

Another significant aspect of Andy’s abandonment is the way it echoes Najwa’s earlier experience of paternal abandonment in the East. This structural parallel suggests that she is caught between two distinct yet similarly oppressive systems, each of which limits her agency in different ways. In the East, her father’s abandonment exposes her to the overt forms of physical and emotional violence associated with patriarchal authority. In the West, however, Najwa discovers that domination often operates more subtly, cloaked in the language of liberal individualism and tolerance. Andy’s response reveals that his acceptance of Najwa is conditional rather than unconditional, as he withdraws his support with startling detachment once her family connection to terrorism disrupts the image he has formed of her. His rejection suggests that the racialized migrant woman remains vulnerable to exclusion and disposability even within a society that presents itself as open and egalitarian.

Conclusion

This study has argued that in *Willow Trees Don’t Weep*, Faqir engages with critical border theory by reimagining the border as a dispersed and pervasive structure of power rather than a fixed geopolitical boundary. Through Najwa’s navigation of an oppressive domestic environment and her subsequent journey across Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United Kingdom, the novel demonstrates that bordering extends far beyond the territorial frontier into religious institutions, patriarchal family structures, airports, urban spaces, and everyday social interactions. Whether manifested through patriarchal authority, religious fundamentalism, or post-9/11 surveillance and xenophobia, these different forms of bordering operate through a shared logic of binary classification, exclusion,

and control, continually determining who belongs and who remains an outsider. Thus, by synthesizing insights from border studies with postcolonial theory and literary analysis, this paper demonstrates that *Willow Trees Don't Weep* expands the meaning of the border beyond the realms of migration and state sovereignty. The analysis reveals how bordering is enacted simultaneously through institutions, ideologies, and everyday encounters, making exclusion a lived social and psychological experience as much as a territorial one. Reading the novel through this framework, therefore, not only illuminates the complexity of Najwa's journey but also highlights the continued relevance of border theory for understanding the intersecting dynamics of gender, religion, race, and belonging in contemporary postcolonial literature.

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