

## **Alienation and Identity Transformation in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep***

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i6/21801>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i6/21801

**Published Date:** 10 June 2024

### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** People may suffer from different sources of alienation due to political and societal pressure. This study discusses two aspects in modern Anglophone literature: alienation, more specifically, different dimensions of alienation that individuals may experience; and identity transformation, through a novel written by the British Jordanian, Fadia Faqir, *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2013). The aim of this study is to investigate how Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* portrays the sense of alienation and identity transformation, identify the reasons behind this sense of alienation that the main characters' experience throughout the novel events and its impact on the identity transformation of the main characters. **Methodology:** The thematic descriptive methodology was used in this study where text was analyzed using thematic analysis approach based on Braun and Clarke's model. It began with a close reading of the text, followed by the forming of codes, categories and themes. **Results:** The analysis indicates various reasons of alienation the main characters experience throughout the novel events. The characters' experiences are heavily impacted by psychological, social, cultural, religious, and political factors. All the different sources of alienation contribute differently to the identity instability. It presented the process of changing that identity undergoes after facing and experiencing different sources of alienation in society. The processes and experiences Najwa had while tracing her father via Pakistan, Afghanistan, and England have influenced her to establish her identity and become flexible with each culture. **Conclusion:** The construction of the main characters' identities is largely influenced by their experiences of alienation in various cultures. Distinct cultures reflect different identities, and they are changed through time depending on where one lives and the extent of sense of alienation that he/she experiences. The theoretical implications of this study's premise show that alienation might be felt by people in different nations as a result of various social and psychological processes. The present research can enrich our understanding of the types of alienation that Arab individuals experience, both within, and outside their societies, and how this sense of alienation impacts on, and ultimately, can transform a person's concept of their identity.

## Introduction

This study discusses two common aspects in modern Anglophone literature: alienation, more specifically, different sources of alienation that individuals may experience, and identity transformation, through a novel written by the British Jordanian, Fadia Faqir, *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2013). This novel represents the real world situation that one can experience in Jordan and in everywhere which is stemmed from different sources of alienation which affects highly on their identity constructions. It makes sense that a widespread phenomenon like alienation would have such a long-lasting impact on modern writing as a natural outcome of the existential dilemma, both intrinsically and externally. Despite the term's widespread use, few individuals have a clear understanding of what it implies. Alienation is a term that most people are familiar with because of their familiarity with the writings of some philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists who have made substantial use of the phrase. One important theme in the chosen novel is the idea of alienation, which is also a common theme in many novels written today.

Seeman (1959) offered a robust concept of social alienation. Today, the five aspects he assigned to social alienation remain true in how sociologists research this phenomenon. Alienation has different dimensions i.e., physical alienation, when a person lives outside his or her culture in a different location from his/her native society, or psychological when someone experiences alienation within his/her society. This study attempts to shed light on the outcomes of these alienation experiences which leads to identity transformation.

Identity transformation is what happens when a character experiences alienation and tries to make changes to find him/her true self by taking certain actions like moving to another area or country or looking into elements from their past. In this process, certain aspects of their characters become clearer. By referring to the selected novel, the study also aims to show how the identity transformation of the main characters differs in the course of the novel, and how this results in a further sense of alienation. As a character development, alienation is a process in that alienation has its impact on man and his development. From a sociological point of view, alienation can impact on self-confidence (Wardani, 2016). Psychologically speaking, the term alienation refers to different psychological disorders such as loss of self, depersonalization, rootlessness, loneliness, powerlessness, isolation and the loss of beliefs and values (Leite, 2009).

The theme of alienation has had a strong impact on contemporary literature. Alienation results from a loss of identity, and the selected novel offers examples of the phenomenon. Alienation is a common theme of existential literature, which itself belongs to a literary, and philosophical movement (existentialism) that focuses on what individual existence and freedom are. For instance, Jean Paul Sartre (1946) believed that human beings make choices that define their characters; an individual's character is not formed by any pre-conceived or general notion of essence or nature that is fundamental to all human beings (Prejsnar-Szatyńska, 2021). In Sartre's view, humans express meaning through their actions in life as they try to make rational decisions within an irrational universe. "In a word, man must create his essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself" (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). The main argument of existentialism, which reverses the conventional metaphysical belief that the essence (nature) of an object is more essential, and immutable than its existence, is the proposition

that existence precedes essence. These ideas dominate *Willow Trees Don't Weep* through its main characters, caught up in situations, and systems beyond their control, and how they deal with such seeming futility and ultimately define, and transform themselves. Anglophone literature "*literary works were written in English but produced by writers who not themselves maybe English*" (Anjuli, 2023, p.563) which is highly influenced by the theme of alienation, and the reasons behind it (Saleem, 2014).

### **What are the main reasons for the sense of alienation experiences by the main characters in *Willow Trees Don't Weep*?**

#### **Powerlessness**

Powerlessness occurs when people think that they have no power to influence the processes of their lives. They think that events are happening out of their will, so they decide to give up, and that they are not part of the society and not engaged in the stream of life.

Najwa says: "When he left, twenty-four years ago, my mother changed. She took off her veil, cut her hair, packed my father's clothes, Qur'ans, books, aftershave, comb away, and prayer beads" (p.7). In these lines, Najwa tells us what her mother did after being abandoned by her father as a response to her feelings of powerlessness, and anger. Najwa's mother then rejected everything that had belonged to her husband, Omar, as an act to compensate for her sense of weakness, and powerlessness. She doesn't have the power to control the stream of her life.

Najwa also expresses a similar thought: "Although I was free to breathe, walk, work, I felt like a prisoner, condemned to my life" (p.5). Najwa explains that she does not feel comfortable in her society since she has a sense of powerlessness because she is condemned to live with social norms, and thoughts that are different from the ones her mother raised her in. She cannot feel free in such a community either, as it neglects her because she lives alone without a man.

#### **Meaninglessness**

Meaninglessness refers to a perceptible phenomenon when "the individual is unable to know what he should believe when his minimal standards for clarity in making decisions are not matched" (Seeman 1976, p. 405).

Seeman (1976) stated that this source of alienation indicates to the sense of individual in understanding the situations he is engaged in. With regard to meaninglessness, the ability of individual to predict social events and the outcomes of their own, and others' behaviours is reduced. In this context, meaninglessness is not like the first source in the sense that powerlessness due to the expectancy for individual control over some situations, sometimes may not necessarily match the cognitive clarity of these situations.

Some other sociologists defined meaninglessness as an individual's inability to understand "the very events upon which life, and happiness are known to stand" (Dean, 1961, p. 754) or what is happening in the world today (Middleton, 1963).

#### **Social/Cultural Isolation**

When a person feels that he/she can no longer share the standard system for the achievement of his objectives because of its ineffectiveness, he may adopt norms of his own

to be as a guidance for his behaviours ('Innovation' in Merton's model). Accordingly, when the individual has his/her own normative system, different from others, he /she feels himself/herself isolated from the society and its normal system.

Such dissociation from others, and the overall social system lead to a feeling of social separation ('rebellion' in Merton's model).

This conception received more attention in the intellectual aspect where the writers used this concept to refer to the separation of the intellectual from common cultural criteria (Seeman, 1976). Based on the reward values perspective, individuals who are isolated from the society receive a low reward value to aims or beliefs that are characterized with high value in the certain society (Seeman, 1976).

### **Self-Estrangement**

Fromm (1955) used this type of alienation, self-estrangement, widely in *The Sane Society*. He defined alienation as a mode of experience in which the individual sees himself as an alien, in other words, he feels that he has become as he is isolated from himself. Such definition was described by Mills (1951, pp. 184-188) who explained that:

In the normal course of her work, because her personality becomes the instrument of an alien purpose, the salesgirl becomes self-alienated... Men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other, and in time a full circle is made. One makes an instrument of himself, and is estranged from it also.

Seeman (1971, p. 136) himself recognizes that the concept of self-estrangement is a deceitful; he defined the self-estranged person as " an individual is self-estranged when he is participated in an event or activity that is not rewarding in itself but it is a mean that contributes in achieving extrinsic needs, such as the need for money, and security" (Kanungo, 1982, p. 28).

### **Identity Transformation**

The behaviour of the characters exposed the different conceptions of identity construction such as the religious identity, political identity, and conflict identity. These different streams of identity have emerged as a result of the different sources of alienation that the characters experienced. All these sources of alienation have ultimately affected the characters' conception of their identities positively and negatively. In consequence, *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, is a distinctive work of art, which has clearly expressed the concept of identity transformation.

### **Conclusion**

In chapter four of the research, the various sources of alienation as depicted by Seeman's theory of alienation and portrayed in *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, were addressed in depth. It has been identified that there are five sources of alienation according to Seeman's theory. The first source of alienation *powerlessness* that refers to the anticipation or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot impact the occurrence of the results, or reinforcements he desires (Seeman cited in Senekal, 2008:p. 20) to what Marx referred to as a "loss of control" in his work. It is the case when Individuals are subjugated to a higher

unit, society, and must obey or follow a set of norms in order for everyone to be treated with respect and harmony. However, living in a peaceful environment necessitates that each individual set aside some -often hidden- ambitions or aspirations that may run counter to what society dictates. It's not only about what one wants to achieve; it's also about the reality that there are some factors or circumstances on a sociopolitical level that one cannot ignore or control – such as having the capacity to alter things. We can notice how different characters behave when they suffer the sense of powerlessness. Najwa, for example, suffered such a sense when she was a lone with her mother and grandmother without a male figure in a masculine society. In addition, her father, Omar suffered such a sense of powerlessness in his country Amman, so he chose to abandon everything and immigrate abroad as a way of solving all his problem. Omar's friend, Hani, did the same when he felt a sense of powerlessness in his country.

The second source of alienation is *meaninglessness*, it is an individual's perception of the events in which he is involved. Whereas powerlessness is used to explain alienation on an objective level, when the individual has no influence over external forces, meaninglessness is used to describe a lack of interior comprehension of oneself. The inability of a person to come up with a solution to a problem is hampered by his lack of comprehension of the context in which he finds himself. As a consequence, people like that go through a period of worry and personal crisis since they don't know what will happen as a result of their activities and so don't feel in control of themselves. That was clear in the novel when Omar chose to leave everything behind and abandon his family and his country. He, then, stuck in a difficult situation and he started asking himself to find an answer to what he has done.

Najwa, also, tried to find answers to everything around her, such as her mother and her father's behavior. As a result, she started her journey to find an answer to all questions. The third source of alienation is *Normlessness*, when society's established standards of behavior fail to meet one's personal purposes, alienation occurs, and laws lose their meaning for the individual. Furthermore, when there is a disparity between what society expects of a person – his behavior – and what society affords him to meet those norms, this type of alienation might manifest. A sense of normlessness made Omar and his friend Hani leave their country for the sake of finding another country with different rules and laws that may fit their requirements as citizens. The fourth source of alienation is *social-cultural isolation*, refers to a person's separation from a community since the rules are no longer relevant or efficient for them. Furthermore, the individual does not experience a feeling of belonging to that community. Although it may appear to be comparable to 'normlessness,' social alienation may be described as the point at which society as a whole is no longer adequate for a human being to be considered a member of it, and as a result, it can "lead to helplessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness. To put it another way, the individual believes that his own values are more valuable than those held by the community, so he recognizes that he is distinct from the others and that, in order to be loyal to himself, he must act on his judgment without regard for whether or not his decisions will be accepted by society. Faqir's novel clearly portrays this sense of alienation through Najwa's character. Najwa experiences such a sense of social alienation in her country Amman because she was alone without a male guardian in a masculine society.

The fifth source of alienation is *self-estrangement*, it has to do with oneself, so this last type of estrangement is the most intimate of them all. It happens when a person is unable to recognize himself, as if he is an alien, and can result in a very unpleasant, painful, and refractory to cognitive-level management or control emotional experience.

In addition, the inability to identify with others might lead to self-estrangement. The person may believe that he shares none of what the community has to offer; as a result, he may have self-doubt about whether he does not act like others because he realizes he is not like them or because he is unable to comprehend himself.

It has been noticed also, in this study that there is an obvious effect of alienation on the main character's identity construction. For example, Faqir has questioned the concept of cultural identity, creating a place in which the interrelationships of cultural, social, political, and personal concerns provide open oases for avoiding ideological positions. The two narrators' alienation and migration underline the fragmentation of identity that emerges from a sense of not belonging and a lack of roots caused by many dislocations. Cultural identities have history and come from somewhere. It may be inferred that the process of constructing Najwa's and her father's identities is largely influenced by their experiences of alienation in various cultures. The study of this research focuses on the answer to the second research question, which is about the building of the major characters' identities, specifically Najwa's identity as a Muslim lady, and how she tries to enhance her identity by modifying her looks. Her travel to other nations, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and England, also demonstrates her fluid identity as she changes and adapts to each community's new surroundings and culture. For Najwa and Omar, being in a new nation with new people and a new culture has had a significant impact. As a result, the creation of a self-identity is unavoidable. Najwa seeks to negotiate and communicate her identity by her appearance and conduct, particularly in Islamic traditions and rituals such as wearing the veil, which symbolically represents herself as a lady of dignity and respect while also reinforcing her Muslim religion. Distinct cultures reflect different identities, and they change through time depending on where one lives and the extent of sense of alienation that he/she experiences.

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