

Book Review

Cross cultural communication in my name is Salma, "My name is Salma-By Fadia Faqir"

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Can East and West ever meet? Can a geographical journey from the depth of eastern deserts to the western part of Europe-England engulf an empowerment journey for a young Arab Bedouin girl who was escaping for her life as she got pregnant out of wedlock? Can her past, language, culture, heritage and looks strike or fail to establish communication channels with her new set up? This paper is an attempt at tracing how a human being can find his/her way cross culturally in spite of impediments that might obstruct communication for a while, but eventually one can succeed in building bridges of interaction and channels of communication among people of different cultural, lingual, and religious adherences that are enriching to human life. Is communication possible when Salma, the main protagonist in the novel is torn between two different nationalities, two different languages, two different religions and two different identities? The English immigration official asks Salma: 'Is this your maiden or Christian name?', Salma, not understanding fully what he said, would answer the half communicated message by: 'Muslim no Christian!' Then the immigration officer would respond by somehow crossing over his own English language boundaries in an attempt at simplifying the question and using other languages synonyms to establish some kind of communication with Salma saying: 'Name? Nome? Izmak?' Salma then answers: 'Ismi, Ismi? Sally Ashiir.' Here, then, communication is established through trials, errors and concessions on both sides. The Arabic and the English language, the Arab girl and the English man, the Muslim and the Christian, and the East and the West seem to somehow manage to communicate. 'I was young, pregnant and unmarried.' (*My Name is Salma*, 94).

INTRODUCTION

The name 'Salma' is an Arabic word which means 'safe and sound'. Ironically Salma, the protagonist, is far from being safe or secure. This is a touching tragic story of a young Bedouin girl of seventeen who commits adultery and is pregnant out of wedlock. She is helped to escape by her teacher, Miss Naila, to flee away from her home village in order to preserve her life. Salma, who has violated the honour code of her tribe, has to be killed by a near male kin to restore the family honour. Her brother Mahmoud will be a living ghost that will haunt her to shoot her between the eyes till the end of her life.

The novel follows a non linear form of narration in order to reflect a cross temporal (past and present), across cultural (oriental and occidental) and cross lingual (Arabic and English) dimensions of the story. The present and the past events are tightly braided as Salma finds herself falling on past memories as they have left permanent scars on the present and on her future life. Salma is victimized by her past and enslaved by a dreary present that shows no prospects of hope in the future.

Salma escapes from her village 'Hima' - which ironically means 'shelter' or 'solace' in Arabic. She is put in a prison cell for her own safety. After giving birth to her daughter,

Layla, the infant is immediately whisked away from the mother, Salma, even before the latter could see her or nurse her. All that is left for Salma is her baby's black lock of hair and her breasts full and aching with the milk that does not find her baby's lips to nurse.

Salma is then taken away to Ailiyya convent in Lebanon where she is helped and given shelter by some missionary nuns. Finally, Salma is shipped away to England by Sister Asher, who gives Salma a new life in a new land under a new identity and a new name. Salma is now Sally Asher.

My Name is Salma is a novel of a search for and an assertion of identity. This young Arab Bedouin Muslim girl undergoes a detrimental journey from the East to the West, from the Arabian village of Hima in Jordan to the western English city of Exeter. The story is one of a physical and psychological journey from innocence to experience, from an Arab set up and Arabic language to an English environment and English language and culture, and from life to death.

In her own natural 'habitat', Salma is an outcast, and in her new adopted 'home' - England, she would always feel that she is an unwelcome outsider who does not

belong. She is an 'outsider' and a 'foreigner' wherever she goes. When Salma meets an English man who asks her about herself, she says "If I told him that I was a Muslim Bedouin Arab woman from the desert on the run he would spit out his tea. 'I am originally Spanish,' Salma would lie." (p. 27). And in another context she says: "Had I told him I was Arab he probably would have run faster. A Bedouin from a village called Hima, whose blood was spilled by her tribe for any vagabond to drink it...I changed my name, address, past and even changed countries to erase my footsteps." (p. 217).

Many were the important things our protagonist had to drop out in her new environment: her mother, father, brother, and most importantly, her baby. She had also to drop her white 'veil', as a symbol of her own religious identity in order to be able to survive in a western European set up. This has further accentuated her feeling of guilt: "...white veil, I slid it off, folded it and placed it on the bed. ...It felt as if my head was covered with raw sores and I had taken off the bandages. I felt dirty as a whore...a sinner who would never see paradise and drink from its rivers of milk and honey." (p. 114). 'Rivers of milk and honey' is a quote and a concept of reward taken from the holy Koran. It is part of a Muslim sensibility with which the novel abounds. A Muslim sensibility is quite evident in the narrative in the form of quoted Koran verses or Muslim religious concepts and practices such as prayers, wearing of a veil for women, forbidding the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the practice of premarital sex. Salma will always think of herself as a sinner, and would feel like being put into a washing machine to wash herself clean out of her sins. This caricaturization of her need of purification is more exaggerated in a death wish of being torn to pieces by a dog as a final salvation for herself from sins and sufferings.

Salma who used to be a farmer and a shepherdess in Hima is now an assistant tailor in Exeter. The 'black Iris' must try to turn into a 'white Sally', an English rose. The imagery of vegetation and flowers abound in the novel. Salma describes herself: "as a reckless flower opening up to the sun, I received Hamdan." (p. 33) Although as an Arab and a Muslim, the bedouin girl has always been advised the following: "IN DARKNESS OR AT DAWN, KEEP YOUR PETALS TIGHT SHUT and legs closed!" (p. 33) Salma also describes her daughter in an imagery of flowers: "a white water lily...Layla...The zigzagged hem {of the dress she sew for her}, the flowery collar, the small rose-like pockets, the tiny sleeves, the satin belt and the glistening pearls stitched around the collar," (p. 56). The previous detailed description of the flower like dress makes of Layla a flower in her own right in the eyes of her mother. The dress that Salma has sown for her daughter, which stands for all the beauty and purity of the unseen daughter, will be a life saviour for Salma. It will be used as an evidence of her skill as a seamstress, and this would secure her the much needed job as a means of livelihood in England.

Comic glimpses of wit appear at times within the novel

in sarcastic overtones when the young Arab girl with her limited command of English is plunged into England, and she tries to manage her way through. The immigration officer asks Salma:

"Where will you live?"

'Heengland, think,' I said.

'Where in England?' he asked patiently.

'The river meet sea,' which was the way little sister Asher had described Southampton to me.

'Oh! For God's sake!' he said.

'Yes, for God's sake!' (p. 20)

The English idiomatic expression of annoyance or impatience -'for God's sake' - is taken by Salma in a literal religious connotation akin to a very commonly used Arabic utterance of 'God willing'. She readily reiterates it for confirmation, thus rendering this subtle witty bend to the discourse.

In another episode an English official asks:

'Is this your maiden or Christian name?.....'

'Muslim no Christian.'

'Name? Nome? Izmak?' he said.

'Ismi, Ismi? Saally Ashiir.

'Christ!' he said. (p. 40)

Again her naivety and lack of command over the English language is met by impatience from a native English speaker, and the short dialogue ends with a religious bend again, though it is Christian in this case.

In the world of Salma, the two realms of Muslim and Christian faiths meet and merge at times. Salma in a moment of spiritual yearning goes inside a Cathedral, goes to the altar, kneels on her knees and prays a Muslim spirited prayer though she is within the walls of a Christian establishment. Yet when Sister Asher lectures Salma on Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity hoping to convert her to Christianity, Salma refuses adamantly such approaches. Two different contexts express her own point of view. The first is when "The Mother superior, tried to talk to me about Jesus, who died to save all humanity. I asked her not to talk to me about God." (p. 84) And in another situation, Salma insists to Sister Asher: "I cannot take off veil, sister. My country, my language, my daughter. No piece of cloth. Feel naked me.' Christ was crucified. He loves you.' She said. No crucifixion, no love me, I said. Miss Asher stood up and slapped me on the face." (p. 165) She is helped by Christians, but then slapped by one of them for non conformity.

Salma's different encounters in life drew smiles on lips as well as tears in hearts. In her assertion of her identity, she is asked by her Pakistani roommate, Parvin, who happens to be a Muslim but a non Arab woman:

'Are you Arab?'

'Yes, Bedouin me.'

'Wow! Fucking Bedouin Arab!'

'I fucking no allow,' I said.

She smiled. (p. 90)

In another situation, Salma asks an English employee to tell Parvin, her friend, the following: "If my friend come out please say urinate me.' I will tell her that you've gone to

the Ladies.' "the English employee would correct her as such.

Salma is thus torn in between two different nationalities, two different languages, two different religions and two different identities. She would insist on being called 'Salma Ibrahim El-Musa, saying affirmatively "I want Arab name." (p. 161) when she is warned that she will be deported from England if she would not use her English name-Sally Asher. The latter is not only a name but it also denotes a nationality, an identity and a sense of belonging. Some other instances Salma/Sally is dismayed at the unreadiness of the western community to accept her as part of them. When she attests to her adopted 'Englishness' by saying: "I am English',...It was like a curse upon my head; it was my fate: my accent and the colour of my skin. I could hear it sung everywhere: in the Cathedral,' WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?' Sometimes even the cows on the hills would line up, kick their legs in unison and sing,' Where do you come from, you? Go home!" (p.167)

My Name is Salma can be considered an Arabic novel but written in English. English is the outer layer of the narrative, but its core and content displays evidences of Arabic language and Arab culture as well as Muslim practices, beliefs and allusions. The atmosphere of the novel is coloured by Arabic words and sayings and Arab notions, food, plants, herbs and attires. The general arabized oriental mood is enhanced by the mention of: camomile, sage, mint tea, thyme and musk gazelle roses and jasmine, are also the reference to falafel, kebab, turkish delight and ghee butter-sugar sandwiches as different types of Arab-Oriental food types which add their own peculiar taste to the story.' Milk and honey' is a significant reference that is used by the writer and the narrator either as a simple food elements, but also more significantly as a religious reference to paradisaical state of bliss that the true believers are promised. The narrative uses Arabic words and quotes that are almost always followed by the English meaning or interpretation: Allah (God), imam (Muslim religious leader), yakfi (enough), najas (impure), and/ Il'aar ma yimhiyeh ila il dam (dishonour can only be wiped off with blood.)

Traditions and religion play a significant propelling agent in the events of the novel. What has come to be known as the 'crime of honour' was the engulfing issue in the story of Salma. Salma, who escaped safely to England, is constantly haunted by the imaginary revengeful figure of her brother. She is also haunted by her own guilty conscience. Therefore, she goes to a surgeon and asks for an amputation of her nipples which stand symbolically for the sexual act, the sin she has committed in adultery; the nipples also stand for the nursing of one's baby, again a deed she would always feel sorry and guilty for NOT doing it. The 'nipples' stand for the sexual violation that Salma has committed by indulging with Hamdan, the father of her child, in premarital sexual relationship. Her nipples that she wishes to amputate also stand as a reminder of her role as a nursing mother to Layla, her daughter, which she has failed in fulfilling. The

bitterness and anguish to have breastfed and breast held her child will haunt her till the end of her life.

The story ends tragically with Salma going back to Hima summoned by a strange almost mystical urge to unite with her daughter. She is informed by her blind mother of the murder of Layla by the revengeful brother. Salma goes to Layla's resting place, hugs the earth under which the daughter lies. Salma, at last has her chest, breast, nipples as close as she could with her long forsaken daughter. The 'black iris' -Salma-in the final chapter titled 'The Black Iris' is shot and killed. Her blood flows to unite her with a daughter she has never seen. As a final epitaph, the refrain, the incantation the poetic disjointed words that the author repeated over and over with very minimal alterations in reference to different characters, she finally put that as a final tribute to her daughter -Layla. This refrain, which is repeated on pages 15, 75, 231 and 258 with its oriental Arab elements, runs as such:

Layla was emerald, turquoise encased in silver, Indian silk cascading down from rolls, fresh coffee beans ground in an ornate sandalwood pestle and mortar, honey and spicy ghee wrapped in freshly baked bread, a pearl in her bed, a lock of fine soft black hair, tiny wrinkled fingers like tender vine leaves, pomegranate, pure perfume sealed in blue jars, rough diamonds, a dew-covered plain in the vast flat open green valley, a sea teal at the edges and azure in the centre, my grandmother's Ottoman gold coins strung together by a black cord, my mother's wedding silver money hat, a full moon hidden behind translucent clouds, the manes of white thoroughbred horses, the clear whiteness of my eye, my right arm, and the blood pumping out of my broken heart. (p. 258)

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