



# Gender and Resistance: Exploring Female Agency in the Novels of Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela, and Hanan Al-Shaykh

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## Abstract

The social and cultural quandary and predicament of the female gender is primarily compounded of gender injustice, abuse and persecution among a plethora of constituents. The embedded belief in men, that women can be subjected to ill-treatment and that subjugation of women is their right has been held for long in the Islamic world. Women authors who have either experienced such atrocities or have witnessed them from close quarters, have endeavoured to bring to light, through their novels, the varied ways of resistance provided by women in different spheres of life. The works of Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela and Hanan Al-Shaykh, have portrayed strong women who fight back to take what is their birth-right – the right to live a dignified life in the manner they choose. Their resistance to inequality is a testimony to their grit that is willing to go to any lengths to secure respect and freedom in a society that denies them even the basic liberty to make decisions about their own lives. The acclaimed authors have depicted situations from love to oppression where strong-willed female characters attempt to express or liberate themselves through sheer will. The price that the women are ready to pay for their resistance range from disownment to escaping their country to sacrificing their lives.

**Keywords:** gender inequality, resistance, women, chauvinistic society, liberty

## Introduction

The lives of Arab women have been a subject of intense scrutiny through different perspectives of discourse. That women in the Arab world are oppressed is a widely held idea. However, very little is mentioned about the ways they offer resistance and the results it brings about. Female authors Leila Aboulela, Hanan al-Shaykh and Fadia Faqir in their novels under study – *The Translator*, *Coloured Lights*, *Beirut Blues*, *The Story of Zahra*, *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name is Salma* – respectively, describe the shackles women are bound to before deciding to call a stop on it and offering resistance according to their ability and circumstances. The defiance shown by the characters reflects and highlights the innate characteristics of Arabic females that can be labelled as 'indomitable'. At times, the protagonists know very well that if their resistance doesn't succeed, the price they have to pay is certain death. The fights that the women put up in the novels be it emotional or a question of their entity, are unevenly balanced and the odds are against them. But their love for freedom of choice far outweighs their fear of failure. Seen as weak and helpless because of their gender, the results of their resistance are unknown even to them but their attempts to break free from mental, emotional and physical slavery are emphatic cries that demand freedom from powerlessness.

## Circumstances and The Female Gender

To fathom the saga of gender and resistance about Arabic women and the manner in which they bring it about, it is paramount to study the circumstances that they find themselves in. That is so because "these factors change from one context to another depending on the socio-cultural, political, security conditions." (Khodary et al.). And therefore, each type of resistance and its outcome cannot be measured by the same yardstick. The novels under study have characters who are fighting a battle for liberty in their own way, for their own unique cause in dissimilar situations. Faqir, Aboulela and Al-Shaykh have included women from rural to urban backgrounds and their struggles that vary from emotional to physical abuse. Hence, the resistance of Zahra or Salma and that of the other protagonists cannot be compared. However, they can be viewed together to dissect the methods of resistance employed by the characters. That is so because their ultimate aim is to seek freedom from the ordeal they are suffering, be it emotional, mental or physical. Also, whether the stories take place in the lands of their origin or the lands they immigrated to do not matter because the culture factor of the Arabic society does not let go of an individual easily which makes the resistances of the women difficult to bear a favourable outcome.

Also, the question of gender and resistance is not always about the suppression of and subjugation of womenfolk to the traditions and social rules set by men. Upon a deeper thought it will be revealed that the women in the novels have created a mental and emotional block for themselves about making decisions that would make them happy. That includes choosing love or a partner and the freedom of expression and choice. The resistance is mental and emotional, it is also about offering resistance to their set mental and emotional resistance methods! The authors have narrated tales where the protagonists have been conditioned to act and think submissively, but upon the dawn of the knowing of their own worth, they employ methods to set themselves free. Sammar's love for Rae and the question of her faith, Zahra's dashes for freedom, Asmahan's emotional attachment to her country, Salma's love for her child, the compromises that Maha and Hanniyeh make, are situations where the women attempt in their own way, to find solutions which are a form of resistance. The women in the novels attempt to thwart further incursions into their lives from an extremely weak position with uncertainty about the results but their true resistance is in not giving up.

Moreover, the female authors have brought to light that "different forms and degrees of oppression are capable of triggering a wide of array and degrees of resistance." (Siljak, 2014). The manner in which the outcomes of the defiance of the protagonists come about may not always result in victory but it showcases the positive spirit of the women to fight with the odds stacked heavily against them. An interesting observation that can be made is the age groups of the women protagonists because it tells a story. Zahra experiences oppression since her childhood while other characters offer resistance at different stages of their life. This proves it beyond a shadow of doubt that the fight of resistance for Arabic women is a never-ending one and the authors have underlined that fact throughout their novels through sub-plots and it would be better to argue about the gender issue of the protagonists "from a secular angle, both standpoints, religious and secular, are necessary." (Chafai, 2016). And that is so because, ultimately, the authors have connected the defiance of the characters to the social order in Arabic countries which is an implementation of the moral code of Islam.

Therefore, a belief exists that women are an entity to be oppressed, suppressed and denied fundamental rights. The female authors have used that belief as a foundation for their novels which exposes male chauvinism that asserts the inferiority of the female gender. The authors' depiction of non-compliance by women is an acknowledgement of the rise of a powerful natural force in the face of harsh realities but most 'women literature is a means of referring to and settling down their literary

concepts and not the basic notion of differences, thus, contradicting excerpts of males and females.’ (Vinson, 2008). The gender gap in the novels under study are extreme and that is one of the causes for the women characters to take a stance of noncompliance. The will to live with the freedom that they envisage, the wish for their sufferings and exploitation to end are the simple and basic desires of the protagonists in the novels. To fulfil their wish, they even go to the extent of moving to foreign lands and start anew. All in all, the oppressive circumstances of the female protagonists have dictated their methods of resistance. The ferocity of their resistances, whether strong or weak, successful or failed, don’t matter because their victory lies in their defiance.

## The Types of Resistances Offered

The authors have set their novels in rural, urban and foreign lands. However, the type of resistances offered by the characters remains unchanged. Among the many methods the women employ, they either flee the place of their suppression or try to overcome the barriers to their freedom through understanding, as in the case of Sammar and Shadia and Bryan in *Coloured Lights*. . Also, the resistances to seek freedom from situations needs to be considered. It is not only about the resistances to physical torture that the characters endure, it is also about the resistances to the restrictions put on their freedom of choice in terms of selecting a partner, or living a life by making their own decisions. And when they try to take their life into their own hands, the fate that Salma endured, speaks volumes. All in all, it can be summed up that, ‘the oppressions experienced by the female characters are managed through the practices of a matrix of domination. Matrix of domination refers to the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, sexuality, and nation.’ (Collins, 2000). And that matrix of domination is what the characters in the novels endeavour to break and make a dash for freedom – in every which way.

Additionally, the portrayal of resistances is inspired, at times, through real-life experiences of the authors, either as witnesses or by themselves. Zahra and Salma meet their fate for making choices that are not allowed to be made in the Arabic society. Zahra was resisting by wanting to have a stable life with a loving partner. Salma leaves her past behind her and moves to England for her safety. The resistance offered by the two women is a prime example of a situations where ones living conditions don’t change or improve without making personal sacrifices. Maha and Hanniyeh suffer to see a better tomorrow by enduring all that they don’t want to. The oppressions that the women undergo “is managed through intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. These oppressions are interrelated and organized through the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domain of power.” (Salvianny & Nurcahyani, 2020). This definition would aptly apply to the characters who are caught up in different situations from which

they want to escape. The reasons put forward for the oppression of women are many but the resistance in the women comes from the realization of their self-worth, and with it, stems the search for pride, honour and self-independence through empowerment.

Moreover, the authors have stuck to practical solutions that the characters look to resist the atrocities that are committed against them. The most important factors that can be highlighted are the mental and emotional strengths of the protagonists – the strongest and the most potent form of defiance. The different stages of the Muslim females, from childhood to old age, has been encapsulated in the novels which points to the reality that resistance is cultivated in females from a very early age. And that is so because discrimination, oppression and suppression begin at an early age, and with it comes the power to tackle them in all sorts possible. It would be futile to name a few protagonists to highlight their story of resistance as all protagonists are fighting a battle, overtly or covertly, through their mental and emotional toughness. Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela and Hanan Al-Shaykh have skilfully plotted the stories to bring out the best form of resistance in the protagonists. Their attempts to bring in the Islamic culture, as a justification by some people for the ill-treatment of women, and the wrongly held interpretations of the Islamic scriptures to make females subordinate to women are calls to resist the falsehood that is promoted for the sake of female subjugation.

## The Outcomes of Resistances

Ultimately, the outcomes to the fights fought by females bring about different results. A few pay with their lives and the others achieve their goals. Those results may vary due to the type and degree of battles they were fighting. Zahra's abuse at the hands of her own people seems to be the worst among the protagonists. At the same time, her resistance is the most powerful. Hanan Al-Shaykh has created a character whose mental and emotional toughness stands out since she was a child. Her killing does not make her struggle a failure, because without it, she wouldn't have reached that far. The dilemma of the protagonists after falling in love with infidels is also a subject that has been touched upon by the authors as it is a very common happenstance and the protagonists handle the situations with sensibility and patience. That too is a form of resistance that yields positive results. The defiance or the noncompliance of the protagonists receives support from other female characters as 'the sisterhood bound among women unites their forces to survive in the oppressive domination.' (Fetters, 2016). By adding that dimension, the authors have underlined the need for women to stand by each other.



Therefore, a simple question that arises is whether the resistances of women in the Islamic world are influenced by the results that are expected? The answer to that would be an emphatic 'no' because they have nothing to lose. All the characters in the novels under different circumstances and stages of their lives make a decision to put a stop to their sufferings in a male dominant society with thoughts that imply that death would be a better option than the miserable lives that they lead. Their resistance begins by the birth of the awareness that they needed to be treated with utmost respect and with the dawn of the knowing that self-love is the root of all happiness. For Maha and Hanniyeh their resistance is hope. And so was their suffering in the thought that they would one day be free. In their case, "although women's oppression might bring a problem to their mental health, seeking professional help is not a common action and will be considered a crazy person." (Al-Krenawi & Jackson, 2014). While the authors have very clearly described and depicted the predicaments of women, they have entwined it with the courage they attempt to find the answers for their troubles. And the authors give the protagonists the weapon of resistance – active and passive – to overcome them.

## Conclusion

It can be said with certainty that Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela and Hanan Al-Shaykh have shone light on the grit and gumption shown by women in their novels that mirror real-life struggles and experiences. The indomitable spirit of women is a beacon of hope for all those females who are victims of suppression and oppression. The manner in which the protagonists find answers to their ill-treatment in the form of resistance is a testimony to their passion for noncompliance and defiance of societal norms that denies women basic and fundamental human rights. The stories of women that belong to a range of age groups makes a telling revelation that female abuse begins at a young age and so does resistance. That resistance is an inborn trait in females and propels them to act for their liberation from all sorts of ill-treatments. Also, the methods employed by the protagonists are different, and at times, subtle. The knowing and awareness of being treated with respect and honour makes the characters offer resistance to varied degrees and varied forms, which are, in effect, or an extension of the personal experiences or the witnessing of incidents of defiance. Ultimately, the authors send out a message that women have to defy multiple forces to seek liberty in love and happiness.

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