Dress as a Marker of Identity Construction in Arab Women's Literature from the Diaspora

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ABSTRACT. This paper argues that dress is not a mere choice an individual makes; rather, it metonymizes almost every aspect of one's identity. Through a critical analysis of Arab British novelists Fadia Faqir's (2014) *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Leila Aboulela's (2010) *Lyrics Alley*, the paper accentuates the skillful employment of dress in these novels and highlights its different implications. It also brings to light the strong relationship between the main characters and their choice of dress. In addition, this study draws on different theories of dress as an interdisciplinary subject in sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. The paper cites textual evidence which focuses on the different implications of dress and shows how these authors have used dress deliberately to comment on important social and political issues in their homelands and/in diaspora. Furthermore, it concentrates on these sartorial episodes to show that the identity construction of the main characters in these novels intricately intertwines with socioeconomic, political, cultural, religious, and psychological circumstances.

Keywords: Fadia Faqir; Leila Aboulela; diaspora; dress; identity construction.

O ator de vestir-se como um marcador de construção de identidade na literatura das mulheres árabes da diáspora

RESUMO. Este artigo problematiza que o vestuário não é uma mera escolha que um indivíduo faz; em vez disso, metoniza quase todos os aspectos da sua identidade. Por meio de uma análise crítica dos romancistas britânicos árabes de Fadia Faqir (2014) *Willow Trees Don´t Weep* e de Leila Aboulela (2010) *Lyrics Alley*, o artigo acentua o hábil emprego do vestuário nesses romances e destaca suas diferentes implicações. Também traz à luz a forte relação entre os personagens principais e a escolha da vestimenta. Além disso, este estudo baseia-se em diferentes teorias de vestuário como um assunto interdisciplinar em sociologia, psicologia e estudos culturais. O artigo cita evidências textuais que enfocam as diferentes implicações do vestuário e mostra como esses autores usaram a vestimenta para comentar deliberadamente questões sociais e políticas importantes em suas pátrias e/ou na diáspora. Além disso, concentra-se nesses episódios de indumentária para mostrar que a construção identitária dos personagens principais desses romances intrinsecamente se entrelaça às circunstâncias socioeconômicas, políticas, culturais, religiosas e psicológicas.

Palavras-chave: Fadia Faqir; Leila Aboulela; diáspora; vestimenta; construção de identidade.

Introduction

Thus in this one pregnant subject of clothes, rightly understood, is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in the *philosophy of clothes* (Carlyle, 1904, p. 91, griffin of the author).

And so suggests renowned nineteenth century Scottish philosopher, translator and historian Thomas Carlyle (1904) in his novel *Sartor Resartus*. The novel is perceived to be a commentary on the thought and early life of a fictional German philosopher named Diogenes Teufelsdröckh who wrote a book entitled as *Clothes: Their Origin and Influence*. As the above quotation indicates, dress is one of the most important

biographical aspects that is ubiquitous in almost every facet of one's life. According to Teufelsdröckh, every single aspect of the external universe is manifested in the clothes of individuals. In this respect, dress is deemed as a useful communicative apparatus which provides significant clues of different facets of one's personality and life. More specifically, in real life as well as in literary texts, dress reveals different definitive and informative aspects and hints of the identity of its wearer including social status, religious and political affiliations, gender, and profession among other issues.

In literary texts, dress plays a crucial role in the construction of one's identity and invokes a web of sociological, political, cultural, and psychological meanings. Thus, this paper examines the intriguing relationship between dress and identity in the works of Arab women writers in diaspora. This paper investigates how Arab British novelists Fadia Faqir's (2014) *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Leila Aboulela's (2010) *Lyrics Alley* skillfully employ dress in their novels and highlight its different psychological, socio-political and cultural implications. Therefore, this study examines the extensive employment of dress and its strong relationship with identity construction on the part of the main characters in the two novels. It discusses how the characters resist the constraints imposed on them by others through the righteous and conscious choice of their dresses. So, this paper claims that the authors intentionally employ dress in their works to point out aesthetic and thematic ends and to comment on the glocal sociological, political, and cultural circumstances in their homelands and/or in the diaspora. In this way, Faqir and Aboulela provide important clues about their main characters' psychological and socio-political concerns which can be reasonably speculated through their dress.

Through the intermingling with their societies, the main characters in the two novels travel at least between two countries. In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Najwa uses different types of dress to adjust her identity to the different cultural contexts she is exposed to while in search of her father Omar Rahman. Being the scapegoat of her father's abandonment, Najwa initiates a journey in which she undergoes difficulties and disillusionments that, nonetheless, provide her with the chance to probe her identity, reflect on its multiple components and attempt to create a stable self out of the fragmented identities she has. Najwa's journey would not have been completed successfully without the considerable and effective use of dress in different stages as the events unfold. Similarly, in *Lyrics Alley*, Aboulela sheds light on her main characters' endeavors to grapple with the historic events that they witness on the eve of Sudan's independence. The ways in which Mahmoud Bey, Nabilah, Soraya, Ustaz Badr and other characters dress up speak volumes in this novel about their positions on the nationalist, cultural and socio-political conditions and circumstances of their country.

The semiotics of dress

This study uses anthropologists Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher's (1992, p. 1) dress definition in their article *Dress and Identity*. According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992, p. 1), dress of an individual is "[...] an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body". Based on this definition, dress includes a wide array of body modifications such as "[...] coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath", and a long list of different "[...] garments, jewelry, accessories" (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1), and other items added to the body as supplements. In her book *The Language of Clothes*, Alison Lurie (1981) argues that dress is a universal non-verbal language through which individuals first communicate with each other and deliver important information or misinformation. Lurie also believes that the language of dress has its special vocabulary and grammar: "[...] the vocabulary of dress includes not only items of clothing, but also hair styles, accessories, jewelry, make up and body decoration" (Lurie, 1981, p. 3).

Dress has been studied across different disciplines. In his seminal book *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes*, Michael Carter surveys different opinions and theories by scholars on dress and fashion from the nineteenth century till the latter part of the twentieth century, including the works of sociologist Herbert Spencer and economist Thorenstein Veblen. These thinkers, Carter asserts, view dress as "[...] a set of rules and regulations governing the relations between the strong and the weak" (Carter, 2003, p. 28). In other words, the first function of dress among the upper class is to display to other society members their

disengagement in any kind of manual labor; conversely, the overtly occupational dress is a clear remark of one's engagement in manual and industrial work. Drawing on the works of sociologist and social philosopher Georg Simmel, Carter also argues that dress is a successful stage of social interaction which results in a duality between imitation and differentiation. Dress plays a pivotal role in the group conformity which is manifested in traditions and uniformity, and self-assertion as represented in variation and individualism. In other words, lower class people seek to adjust themselves to the upper class through the imitation of their dress code while the latter differentiate themselves through new types and models of dress.

Psychoanalysts are concerned with the basic motivations of dress and argue that the dressing behavior is a psychological one. To illustrate, Yunia Kawamura (2005, p. 14) argues that dress can be an "[...] intimate part of the personality or self". Kawamura (2005, p. 14) contends that dress is "[...] a non-verbal language, it communicates to others an impression of social status, occupation role, self-confidence, intelligence, conformity, individuality, and other personal characteristics". Similarly, Annette Lynch and Mitchell Strauss (2007, p. 13) highlight fashion's psychological dynamics and argue that dress is recognized as our "[...] social skin" that unmasks "[...] our sexuality and our inner self" to others. Besides, they assert that dress emanates from "[...] fundamental feeling of incompleteness ... [and] dissatisfaction with the self as it is" (Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 13). Lynch and Strauss argue that people create rituals carrying the original meaning of these cultural practices into the present time, and thus culture is a "[...] historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols" (Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 40). In a ritualized context, those who put on symbolic ceremonial dress experience the infusion of the imagined identity and the real one to deliver the meaning of such transformed versions of everyday life.

In her article, Rosie Findlay (2016, p. 81) explores the ways in which "[...] wearing can be an imaginative act". She argues that both the choice and putting on the clothes not only affect the "[...] overlaying of the form of the body" but also influence "[...] one's sense of whom one is as clothed" (Findlay, 2016, p. 81). Findlay is basically concerned with the way through which dress "[...] suggests and reshapes our embodied self by influencing and reconfiguring our experience of ourselves" (Findlay, 2016, p. 81). She further proposes that imagination bridges the gap between "[...] present self and imagined future self" (Findlay, 2016, p. 84) and in this regard one brings different connotations to the dress one is to wear by which the context of getting dressed is set. Moreover, she perceives clothes to be as indissoluble from our existence to the extent that our clothes help us experience any sense of transformation in our identity or self-perception. By wearing clothes, one feels the "[...] new way of being in the world" (Findlay, 2016, p. 90) by being different. Bearing in mind dress system of codes, Italian sociologist Patrizia Calefato (2010, p. 344) argues that the dressed body is both the "[...] object and subject of the gaze" since it allows others to look at it and at the same time it looks at other bodies to imitate them. She further stipulates that while dress touches the body, it identifies both its appearance and visibility. Thus, she believes that "[...] through this visibility we interpret a social role or an ethnic identity, for example, we are using clothes as a true vehicle of translation" (Calefato, 2010, p. 344).

Since this study focuses on sartorial codes in the works of Arab women writers in diaspora, it is apt to discuss, albeit briefly, Muslim women's hijab as a conspicuous marker of identity that has come into the spotlight recently. In many Muslim countries the hijab is regarded as a marker of a woman's obedience to God whereas in some Western countries it is perceived as a symbol of women's oppression and subservience and, in some countries like France, USA and UK, few people associate it with terrorism. The frequent incidents involving Arab and Muslim dress codes in Western countries recently, specifically, the prohibition of the hijab as a conspicuous religious symbol in some European countries is of great relevance and significance here. Since the French government is keen to ensure its religious neutrality, "[...] the National Assembly" has voted for the "[...] Law 2004-228" (Judge, 2004, p. 2, Wing and Smith, 2006, p. 754) through which France placed a ban on persons wearing any form of face coverings in public, which includes the burqa and any other religious sign including hijab as well. Even though the hijab is viewed by some Americans as a symbol of "[...] oppression and violence of Islamic beliefs" (Blakeman, 2014, p. 9), no laws have been enacted to ban the hijab in public spaces. Similarly, in the UK there has been no initiative to ban the burqa or prohibit schoolgirls from wearing the hijab.

As stated above, this paper focuses on the critical analysis of the episodes that highlight the socio-political, economic and religious implications of dress in both novels since some thinkers consider dress as an individual's "[...] second skin" (Sontag & Schlater, 1982, p. 2). It also underlines the tight relationship between the protagonists and the dress they wear. Moreover, the paper highlights the political and cultural implications of dress and shows that these authors make a great use of dress to stitch the stories of their protagonists and the stories of the outside world. Since dress, which is intimately tied to one's body, affects and expresses the perception of the self and others' behavior towards the individual, the paper also illustrates the psychological implications of dress in these novels. Thus, the paper foregrounds the association of dress with all of the aspects of one's life while it is the core of one's personal identity.

Dress, Peregrinations and Identity in Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep*

Fadia Faqir was born in August 1956 in Jordan and currently lives in Britain. *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014) is her fourth novel among the three other ones *Nisanit* (1988), *Pillars of Salt* (1996), *My Name Is Salma* (2007). In her novels, Faqir tends to concentrate on socially and politically disenfranchised, marginalized and less-privileged women as she tackles this issue in *My Name Is Salma* and *Pillars of Salt* (Moore, 2011; Awad, 2012). *Willow Trees Don't Weep* counts the story of Najwa's journey to find her father Omar Rahman who walked on her and her mother Raneen. After the death of her mother, Najwa embarks on a quest to find her father and she does not give up until she is clued-up about what happened to Omar Rahman and why he jilted them. In Afghanistan, Najwa discovers that her father got married to an Afghani woman called Gulnar and that she has a half-sister called Amani. Her quest begins in Amman and takes her to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Britain till she finally meets him. During her peregrinations, Najwa dresses up differently: in Amman, she wears her grandmother's yashmak and abaya, in Afghanistan she puts on a chador, and in Britain, she puts on jeans and tops. Najwa, effectively utilizes the dresses she puts on to jog her father's memory when she eventually meets him.

In their article *Dressing the Body: Introduction*, Prudence Black and Rosie Findlay (2016) render dress as memory-keeper through which individuals retrieve their previous experiences and/or recall the predominant and concomitant feelings of those experiences. In this sense, Najwa regards these accoutrements in her duffel bag to be a good repository of her family's memories by which she aspires to remind her father of their life before he left them and of his feelings toward her mother and her. In yearther instance, she attires herself with the top of her half-sister Amani to reveal her sense of jealousy and envy and that the one who is perceived with her father is not the real Najwa but the image of her sister Amani. Also, she makes a good use of her father's kept clothes to construct a fictional image of her father during his absence "I climbed up the loft [...] dusted the suitcase and unzipped it. My father's prayer shirt was at the top. With trembling fingers, I held it up and had a sniff [...] I hugged it and wrapped the sleeves around me" (Black & Findlay, 2016, p. 34). She does this so that "[...] anything would help me construct a father" (Black & Findlay, 2016, p. 34). In so doing, Faqir pays a close attention to the psychological connotations of dress in the lives of her main characters, especially Najwa. Remarkably enough, Najwa's experience echoes that of her mother when Najwa was a little girl as it will be discussed later.

In *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Faqir does not use a linear method of narration but the story is told by the flashbacks of Najwa and the missing parts are found in Omar Rahman's diaries. In this way, Faqir wants to "[...] capture the truth" because anyone needs many "[...] perspectives to catch the image" (Chambers, 2011, p. 65). For Majed Hamed Aladylah (2015, p. 224), *Willow Trees Don't Weep* depicts a "[...] contemporary situation of fragmentation, rootlessness, unbelonging, and disorientation in a world where a man/a woman finds himself/herself suspended in a void of meanings". Likewise, Ouahmiche and Sarnou (2016, p. 143) examine the concept of home as an "[...] object of quest" in Faqir's novel. Ouahmiche and Sarnou argue that, through her journey to find her father, Najwa looks for "[...] an emotional home" in which she could be "[...] re-territoriolized" since she feels displaced in all the places she passes through. In an interview with Fadi Zaghmout (2015, p. 3), Fadia Faqir reveals that she wants Najwa "[...] to go on a journey [of exploration] that is so difficult and is going to change [her] into someone who is possibly aware of what is happening in the world".

Before Omar Rahman leaves his home, he starts to experience a drastic change in his personality prioritizing religion above his family. After being a non-strict Muslim who drinks alcohol and does not pray at all, Najwa's father becomes a strict Muslim in different aspects of his personality and life. Consequently, Raneen, "[...] tak[es] off her veil" and secularizes the house (Faqir, 2014, p. 7) as a kind of vengeance from both religion and her husband. By so doing, Raneen imposes on Najwa a sense of estrangement and difference from others who live in downtown Amman: "I knew I was *different*. I was *not allowed to* cover my head, wear a long school uniform or trousers [...] or wear prayer clothes" (Faqir, 2014, p. 9, griffin of the author). Instead, Raneen forces Najwa to wear "[...] western clothes and uncover [her] legs" (Faqir, 2014, p. 9). Consequently, Najwa feels that this restriction on her dress paralyzes her physically: "I stood out *as if I had a birth defect* with my unruly hair, western clothes and uncovered legs" (Faqir, 2014, p. 9, griffin of the author). Even though Raneen forces Najwa to wear western clothes instead of Islamic clothes, she does not allow Najwa to wear "[...] figure-hugging clothes" because, as Raneen explains to Najwa, with "[...] an absent father, people might think you're a harlot" (Faqir, 2014, p. 14).

Using kept clothes as a memoire, Raneen is accustomed to keep her husband's clothes and every now and then she keeps checking them and restores her reminiscences. Once Najwa recalls an incident as a young girl:

> I saw her [Najwa's mother] climb a ladder to the loft, push the suitcase to the edge, pull it down and put it on the floor. She wiped the dust off with her hand, unzipped it and inspected your belongings. She held the prayer beads then pressed them over her heart, sniffed your [Najwa's father] shirts, perfume, comb, and flicked through your books (Faqir, 2014, p. 8).

What Raneen apparently does through keeping her husband's clothes can be studied through the ideas of Banim and Guy (2001), who state that these "[...] no-longer-worn clothes" are acknowledged as "[...] memory joggers" and are also used as an avenue of "[...] maintaining associations with a particular identity linked to a time, place, or person" (Banim & Guy, 2001, p. 206-207).

As her mother lies dying, Najwa conjectures up an image of herself, her mother and her grandmother. What draws Najwa's attention is mainly how the three are dressed: "[...] that was how it was: me in my pink Minnie Mouse pyjamas, my grandmother in her flannel nightie and my mother in her favourite kaftan" (Faqir, 2014, p. 16). In other words, Najwa projects her melancholy on what they wear when her mother is dying; simultaneously, what she ever remembers of this bleak incident is her dress and those feelings of pain. In this context, Guy and Banim (2000, p. 322) purport that "[...] many outfits become invested with meanings from past experiences and relationships"; and so, as one recalls those experiences through dress, he/she lives the same feelings once again. Similarly, Twigg and Buse (2013, p. 329) believe that dress is an important "[...] memory object" which helps evoke the memories of people of dementia since dress, like other "[...] biographical objects", is "[...] entangled in the events of a person's life" and is acknowledged as "[...] a vehicle for selfhood". In this sense, dress is deemed as a powerful item of identity recognition and construction, as a deep repository of memories, and an identification emblem through which one may wish to become or retrieve who he/she has been.

In this way, Faqir depicts how dress plays a significant role in evoking and reliving some memories and experiences which are embedded in these kept articles of dress. So, by shedding light on the psychological aspects of dress, Faqir provides important clues to fathom Najwa's inner world, a world which is ever hard to be reached by others were it not for the use of dress which allows one to infer some useful information and step back to perceive the whole image. Moreover, when Najwa prepares for her journey in search of her father, she carefully picks some belongings of her mother and her family and packs them in a duffel bag which she keeps checking. Najwa brings these things with her to "[...] jog [her] father's memory" (Faqir, 2014, p. 63) and as an "[...] aide-memoire" (Faqir, 2014, p. 68). In this sense, Najwa uses dress to preserve a memory of home, neighbors, and familiar places. Significantly, she keeps checking these items wherever she travels to keep her memory alive.

In their article on the signification of the kept clothes, Banim and Guy (2001, p. 206) argue that "[...] older clothing can be said to have a history, a set of associations so that physically keeping clothes can be

seen as a statement that those memories are too precious to be thrown away". They further propose that these articles of dress "[...] evoke memories" through their presence. That is to say, dress plays a pivotal role as "[...] the creator of a memory about self" and as "[...] a witness to oneself" (Banim and Guy, 2001, p. 207). In this way, dress allows individuals to maintain some connections with their former lives and selves.

According to anthropologist Georg Simmel, there are two main principles that dress tends to demonstrate: the first one is the individual sense of "[...] adaptation to the social group" (Carter, 2003, p. 66) and the second one is one's tendency to "[...] elevation from it" (Kawamura, 2005, p. 13). Similarly, Joanne Entwistle (2000, p. 325, griffin of the author) argues that dress is "[...] an embodied practice, a *situated bodily practice*" which is stitched within the social world. That is to say, certain situations require particular forms of dress: "[...] the dressed body is always situated within a particular context, which sets constraints on to what is and what is not appropriate to wear" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 328). To put it differently, the spaces individuals enter generate multiple facets of the self. She also holds that dress is both "[...] located spatially and temporally"; in other words, when one gets dressed, he/she sticks him/herself to the social norms of that situation one is partaking (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001, p. 45).

In the novel, Najwa sheds on different identities or facets of herself to act suitably in the situations she is exposed to. In fact, during her journey, Najwa almost always tries to show her sense of conformity to the social group she is in contact with in an attempt to achieve her mission. Since the start of her journey, Najwa tends to attire herself with others' dress: her mother's modest shoes, her grandmother's yashmak, and later and her half-sister's shirt or top. Najwa is like an actress who performs different roles. Besides, she is aware of the indicative role that dress plays in diverse countries including Jordan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Britain; thus, she pays close attention to the specificity of each region where in each place she emerges differently.

Her journey begins with the issue of her passport in Amman. To impart a sense of seriousness and formality on the "Identity and Passport Service" employee, her grandmother "[...] insist[s]" that she should wear her "[...] mother's best teaching suit" (Faqir, 2014, p. 51). As a result, she gets her passport without any troubles or suspicions. When she goes to sell the family jewelry to get money for her journey, she puts on her grandmother's abaya and yashmak which she "[...] wore to disguise [herself]" (Faqir, 2014, p. 21). Likewise, Najwa critiques the social exploitation of women who wear abayas and are misunderstood as loose women: "[... s]omeone touched my bum and I leapt forward *silently*. If *I resisted* or shouted, people would find about the violation and *all shame would be mine*" (Faqir, 2014, p. 23, griffin of mine). Moreover, she demonstrates that Islam is also exploited through the misuse of its dress: "A man stopped his car next to me. 'Psst! Psst! Come here!' He thought I was a prostitute in *disguise*. Some wore *Islamic dress* to *hide their identity*" (Faqir, 2014, p. 26, griffin of mine).

Before Najwa leaves for Afghanistan, she is also advised by her father's friend to "[...] *pretend* to be extremely pious" during her sojourn in Afghanistan (Faqir, 2014, p. 101, griffin of mine). Ironically enough, when Najwa desperately needs to show her sense of piety to the people of Kunduz where her father stays and has a family, her chador slips down to reveal her real identity as a secular girl who is wearing "[...] long top, figure-hugging jeans and trainers" (Faqir, 2014, p. 127). Moreover, she twice goes out unveiled when she is in Kunduz and the first time when she looks for a toilet and the second time when she goes mad with her half-sister Amani. Having violated such restrictive social religious norms, Najwa is told by Ashraf, her sister's secret lover, that she "[...] shouldn't run out like that, without a veil" (Faqir, 2014, p. 151).

Najwa's pursuit of her father takes her eventually to Britain. While on the plane en route to Britain, Najwa "[...] took off [her] veil, folded it in [her] duffle bag" and was thinking of the contradictory effect this act might have on her secular mother and religious father (Faqir, 2014, p. 165). When she arrives at the hotel in London, she puts on "[...] a pair of jeans and a pullover" (Faqir, 2014, p. 175). Significantly, Najwa's sense of confusion when she meets her father in the prison in Durham is highly illustrated in her choice of dress: "My father must be a strict Muslim and wouldn't approve of uncovered hair, make-up, a low-cut top or tight jean. But, my mother's ghost skulking in the room would be offended if I changed my secular appearance and hid my arms" (Faqir, 2014, p. 240). Najwa is caught between her parents' contradictory wishes. She "[...] resent[s] them both" (Faqir, 2014, p. 240). Therefore, she maintains a balance between the secular mother

and the religious father in her dress code; she significantly chooses to compromise "[...] the length of the top and wore one that belonged to [her] late half-sister, Amani" (Faqir, 2014, p. 214) who she thinks is religious and much dearer to her father.

Aware of the cultural and political significance of dress in the daily experiences of the main character and other characters in *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, Fadia Faqir valorizes her character's choice of dresses in Britain, where the identity of a Muslim woman has become glaringly politicized in recent years. Namely, hijab which is a declaration of women faith and a protection from male gaze becomes the epitome of cultural and political ramifications (Bigger 2006; Hasan, 2016). As an illustration, in the aftermath of 9/11 and London transport bombings in 2005, hijab has been heavily burdened with terrorism and radicalization (Rangoonwala & Epinoza, 2011; Lewis, 2015; Hasan, 2016). In addition, it has been closely attached to ahistorical and outdated traditions and backwardness rather than modernity and fashionable style of life; in other words, hijab has come to signify "[...] submission and of cancellation of the women's physicality" (Hansen, 2004, p. 382; Calefato, 2010, p. 352).

In an interview, Reina Lewis states that the fashion industry presumes that religion is "[...] incompatible with fashion" and "[...] threatening to Western modernity" (Elmes, 2015, p. 2). Lewis maintains that the hijab-wearing women or the hijabis, to borrow her term, use style and fashionable types of dress to "[...] challenge stigma: they hope that being visibly fashionable will help non-Muslims recognize them as part of the modern world, and challenge prejudice that British Muslims are "[...] foreign" and "[...] primitive" (Elmes, 2015, p. 3). Lewis believes that Muslim women have found themselves in "[...] a political dichotomy of good, moderate Muslims versus bad, extremist Muslims" (Lewis, 2015, p. 7). As the above argument clearly shows, a Muslim woman's dress has become a site over which religious, cultural, and political discourses converge. Seen from this angle, one may argue that the works of Arab women writers in diaspora critically engage with these discourses by presenting their characters' conscious choice of dress.

Faqir's novel pinpoints the political and cultural image of Muslim women in Britain in at least two ways. On the one hand, she depicts Najwa as a conformist to the British cultural and political codes of dress. Najwa's conformity is greatly facilitated by the fact that she was raised in a secular house with a secular mother. On the other hand, Faqir accentuates the homogenized image of 'hijabed' Muslim women in Britain in two episodes in the novel. The first episode takes place in a café while the other occurs on a train. In the first episode, Najwa is just an observer who does not take part in the scuffle:

> A group of *veiled women* flocked into the café, arm in arm, chatting and laughing. This was supposed to be a secular country! [...] A scruffy young man standing outside the café shouted, '*Oi! Scarecrows! Camel heads! Go home!*' The women seemed accustomed to this. Unperturbed by the abuse, they continued chatting (Faqir, 2014, p. 185, griffin of mine).

Surely, the dress code has triggered this sort of verbal abuse and hostility. The fact that the women do not respond to the man's words indicates that they have been through this situation a number of times. Nevertheless, this hostility of "[...] Islamophobic prejudice" is poured on any woman who veils "[...] regardless of her actual ethnic or religious identity" (Lewis, 2015, p. 20). Unlike Najwa, these veiled women have maintained their religious identity through deviating from the normative system of dress and violating the situated practice of dress in such a non-Muslim country.

The second episode that Faqir brings to light in her novel takes place on a train where Najwa sits next to a veiled woman while she is unveiled. Najwa ponders: "Would I look suspicious sitting next to her? If I got up and sat at the front [...] They might think I was trying to avoid her because of *her different dress code*" (Faqir, 2014, p. 217, griffin of mine). Najwa is unable to decide what to do. In the above situation, the hijab is a cause of suspicion and a mark of cultural difference. One may argue that cultural difference is not problematic, but what is challenging, as Janice Miller (2011, p. 112) argues, is "[...] when cultural difference is stereotyped". Faqir's novel vividly depicts the relationship between dress and cultural identity; this is not a coincidence if we take into account the frequent incidents of the prohibition of the veil as a conspicuous religious symbol in some European countries. Ultimately, Najwa's choice of what to wear during her peregrinations in search of her father is not governed by fashion but rather it is ruled by self-perception and cultural positioning.

Dress, the Nation and Identity in Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley*

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer who was born in Cairo in 1964 and raised up in Khartoum. She published four novels including: *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2011), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), and a collection of short stories (*Coloured Lights*, 2001). *Lyrics Alley* is "[...] a historical novel" that portrays Sudan during the years leading up to independence from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (Awad, 2014, p. 4). It tells the story of the affluent Sudanese family of Abuzeid. Mahmoud Bey is the family's patriarch whose lavish choices of dress speak volumes for his dynamic and powerful character. He is married to two women; he is polygamous: Sudanese Hajjah Waheeba and Egyptian Nabilah. The two women's choices of clothes cannot be more different. Soraya Abuzeid, Mahmoud Bey's niece, is one of the central characters in this novel; she lives with her conservative father Idris Abuzeid who is exactly the opposite of his brother Mahmoud Bey. Soraya's eagerness to modernize herself is reflected in her choices of dress. Her strong relationship with her school uniform strikingly foreshadows her high aspiration to pursue her university education and get free from the restrictive Sudanese social norms by marrying Western-educated Fuad.

Since its publication in 2010, *Lyrics Alley* has received remarkable critical acclaim. Yousef Awad (2014) argues that Aboulela populates her novel with characters of diverse socio-political backgrounds who define, delineate and configure the nation in infinite ways. In the process, Awad maintains, each character "[...] anatomizes his/her relationship with the emergent nation, gradually exposing and revealing its crudeness and complexity" (Awad, 2014, p. 70). Seen from this perspective, one may look at each character's choice of clothes as a part of this ongoing process of defining the nascent nation. The novel abounds with examples that highlight the significance of dress codes in the overall discussion of independence, freedom, and progress. In this sense, dress and politics intersect in Aboulela's novel: the ways in which Mahmoud Bey, Nabilah, Soraya, Ustaz Badr and other characters dress up parallel their positions on the circulating nationalist, cultural and socio-political discourses on the eve of the nation's independence.

Like Faqir, Aboulela uses dress to highlight the gap between modernity and traditions. Hence, she sets the differences between Mahmoud Bey and Idris and Nabilah and Hajjah Waheeba. Here, one is reminded of Calefato's view on traditional costume and fashionable dresses. According to Calefato, costume maintains "[...] a close relation between the individual and the community to which he/she belongs" whereas fashionable dress "[...] has a cosmopolitan status" (Calefato, 2004, p. 9). In the novel, Mahmoud Bey wears expensive modern dress while Idris, for example, in a first-time meeting with Mr. Harrison the manager of Barclays Bank in Umdurman, wears slippers (Calefato, 2004, p. 12). Mahmoud Bey reproaches Idris because he is worried about the impression he will make on Mr. Harrison when the two bothers meet him for the first time: "[... o]n a day like this! Slippers, in front of Mr. Harrison?" to which Idris answers: "[... i]s he going to listen to me or look at my feet?" (Calefato, 2004, p. 48) While Mahmoud Bey represents modernity, the latter stands for traditions: "Unlike Idris, who was in a jellabiya, he [Mahmoud Bey] was wearing his best suit, purchased from Bond Street, and his Bally shoes" (Calefato, 2004, p. 49).

The way Mr. Harrison is dressed for the meeting is equally telling. Writing a historical novel, Aboulela accentuates the exploitative colonial affairs of the Anglo-Egyptian Administration of Sudan through the meticulous description of the dress code of Mr. Harrison who is the main representative of the British Empire in the novel and he highly reflects his power, authority and self-assertion through his extremely elegant dress. In fact, Mr. Harrison comes to the meeting clad in his comfortable cotton suit. The omniscient narrator enters Mr. Harrison's mind as he associates his position as a powerful man with the clothes he wears: "[...] his cotton slightly, only slightly, crumpled and his attractive modesty, because modesty in *those with power* and position was especially attractive" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 51, griffin of mine). Mr. Harrison's appearance indicates that he is powerful and is in command of the situation. In this sense, Aboulela utilizes dress codes of the main characters of her book to highlight on its cultural and political significations.

On the private level, Mahmoud Bey's opposing co-wives embody the other clash between modernity and traditions. In an interview, Aboulela states that "[...] the biggest clash between modernity and backwardness

is reflected in the conflict between Mahmoud's two wives" (Chambers, 2011, p. 101). Apparently, the clash manifests itself in the way each of them is dressed up. Mahmoud Bey associates Hajjah Waheeba with "[…] *decay* and *ignorance* […] the *stagnant past* and [. . .] *crudeness*", whereas he sees in Nabilah "[…] the *glitter of the future* [. . .] and *sophistication*" (Chambers, 2011, p. 45, griffin of mine). When Hajjah Waheeba travels to Alexandria to see her son Nur at the hospital, she naturally wears a *tobe*, the national dress for women in Sudan. The style of *tobe* that is selected by the woman is governed by the age of the female, and the type of occasion she is wearing the *tobe* to. Thus, in the novel, the narrator informs the reader that Hajjah Waheeba "[…] came straight from the train station, her tobe *incongruous* in this most cosmopolitan of cities" (Chambers, 2011,p. 105, griffin of mine). Hajjah Waheeba looks out of place in cosmopolitan Alexandria; her dress renders her an outsider in Alexandria just as Nabilah's dress code, conversely, reveals her otherness in Umdurman.

Throughout the whole novel, Nabilah's relationship with her dress is highly conspicuous. In fact, the first time the reader encounters Nabilah, she is busy adoring herself in front of the mirror:

> Nabilah put on her navy blue dotted dress and combed her hair, fixing the waves with a touch of cream. She put on her lipstick and used a tiny black brush to smooth her broad eyebrows, then she studied her reflection in the mirror and felt that something was missing. A handbag (Aboulela, 2010, p. 30).

Nabilah is conscious of her superiority over other Sudanese women and of her modernity and acute knowledge of fashion; thus, she is aware of her sense of alienation from the Sudanese society through her dress. Through the representation of the ways in which Nabilah is dressed, Aboulela gives hints about this woman's inner thoughts and feelings. Aboulela maintains an effective control over the cues, namely the psychological ones that can be inferred from the selection of dress of the main characters.

Soraya is fascinated by Nabilah's dress code. Soraya sees in Nabilah an icon of modernity. According to the principle of dress as an "[…] adaptation to the social group", individuals tend to imitate those who are in a higher social rank in order to become a member of that group (Carter, 2003, p. 66; Kawamura, 2005, p. 13). Soraya tries to imitate Nabilah's style of dress because she is "[…] everything that Soraya considered *modern*" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 9, griffin of mine). Naturally, Soraya prefers "Nabilah's elegant clothes [that] were modelled on the latest European fashions" to the traditional Sudanese tobe. For Soraya, the sartorial choice is not merely a personal taste; rather it is an opportunity to wear the clothes that she thinks suit her identity as a modern Sudanese girl. Soraya's aspirations of progress, freedom, and emancipation are strongly tied to her ability to take off the traditional tobe and replace it with modern attires (Aboulela, 2010, p. 245). Thus, one may claim that in Soraya's case, changing clothes stands for the transformation of her identity. Since the novel is set on the eve of Sudan's independence, one may think of dress codes in the novel on the macro rather than the micro level. That is to say, the discourses that surround dress codes in the novel are inseparable from the discourses of progress and advancement that independence is expected to bring to the nation. Aware of the significance of her dress as a "[…] *situated bodily practice*", to use Entwistle's (2000, p. 4-5) words once more, Soraya recognizes that being in Cairo requires wearing "[…] modern dresses and skirts". In this sense, Soraya is deeply apprehensive about the indicative role of her dress in the creation and accomplishment of her inspiring future.

In their article, on the relationship between women and their clothes, Guy and Banim argue that women's clothes affect the process of self-representation and that their relationship with their clothes can be classified according to three views: "[…] the woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be, and the woman I am most of the time" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 316-323). In addition, they claim that there are some social constraints but these women through their clothes attempt to resist, subvert and rise above these constraints. In the first group, "[…] the woman I want to be" relate their success in life to their clothes and contend that their success is achieved when they feel positive because they "[…] looked good" and because they reflect this image through "[…] the correct choice of clothing" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 316). Through their dress, these women reflect a good impression of their desired identity; hence, they try to establish "[…] a degree of distinctiveness" so as to appear "[…] confident and in control", and so, they "[…] project qualities about themselves" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 316). In this vein, "[…] the woman I want to be is someone who is

projecting aspects of herself through clothing that suits/enhances her and who believes her image is being favourably received by others" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 318).

On the other hand, "[...] the woman I fear I could be" is dissatisfied with her choice of clothes, wears articles of dress which produce unexpected and negative impressions about its wearer, and is "[...] physically realized as the woman I don't want to be, the woman I want to hide from others" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 319). The last group "[...] the woman I am most of the time" considers dress differently; her relationship to clothes "[...] stretches beyond current or future images" in a way that they keep no-longer-worn clothes because they are strongly tied into former experiences and history (Entwistle, 2000, p. 322). In this regard, Guy and Banim believe that it is not only clothes that travel in the wardrobe from the foreground to the background, but also the women's identities travel as they keep refining their types of dresses.

Seen from the above angle, Soraya's relationship with her clothes renders her psychological thoughts as 'the woman I want to be' and as 'the woman I fear I could be'. By a way of illustration, Soraya perceives her dress as a vital expression of her self-representation. Soraya enjoys every single detail in her school even her school uniform which she dons believing it is a veritable instrument of belonging to the world of academia and modernity: "She could, every day except Friday and Sunday, wear her beloved uniform, which suited her so well" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 4). In the case of 'the woman I want to be', Soraya as other members of this group builds a good impression of her chosen identity through her choices and preferences of dresses. Therefore, she attempts to create 'a degree of distinctiveness' so as to give the impression of being 'confident and in control' of her ambitions and desires. Accordingly, she reveals good qualities of herself by being modern and accomplished. At the university, Soraya's father forces her to wear a white tobe so as not to "[...] put an end to this university business" because he does not want her to pursue her university study. Soraya wears this white tobe under duress because it makes her so traditional and reveals the undesirable image of "[...] the woman I fear I could be"; yet, she experiences a sense of distinctiveness from her sisters: "[...] she saw herself in a dress and a white coat, stethoscope around her neck, moving forwards, away from Halima and Fatma, separating from them" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 239). As "[...] the woman I want to be", Soraya attempts to resist, subvert and rise above the social constraints she encounters in her life through the seemly choices of her dresses. In this context, in her article, Diana Crane (1999, p. 1) argues that dress can be seen as a "[...] form of non-verbal resistance to the dominant culture" which she calls "[...] the alternative style".

Soraya's high aspirations seem to come true through her betrothal to her cousin Nur, Mahmoud Bey's younger son who, by virtue of his education at the prestigious Victoria College in Cairo, represents modernity and future advancement. Accompanied by Nur, in Alexandria Soraya wears her "[...] new blue dress" and wishes to stay there forever and to "[...] be a modern couple" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 69-72). Unfortunately, a traumatic accident happens to Nur and leaves him quadriplegic and in need of help. Yet, despite this setback, Soraya remains resolute and refuses to accept normal standards of behavior and dress imposed on her by her father and by the traditional social norms. As compelling evidence of Soraya's capability to resist such a restrictive tradition, she continues to wear her spectacles which Nur had brought her secretly (Aboulela, 2010, p. 13). After graduating from Kitchener's School of Medicine, Soraya experiences an obvious change in her identity (Aboulela, 2010, p. 238). She shows herself to be a "[...] ladylike" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 159) through wearing new dresses, speaking English and reading books in different aspects of knowledge such as novels and poetry (Aboulela, 2010, p. 241). After Nur's accident, Soraya even tries to impose her high requirements on her future husband: "I want to have short hair and smoke cigarettes. *I want to wear trousers*" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 245, griffin of mine). Soraya resists the traditions of the Sudanese society by wearing a European white bridal dress (Aboulela, 2010, p. 271). She proudly tells Nabilah when she visits her in Cairo that "[... she] wore a white dress on one of the evenings, the first girl in the family to do so, maybe even the first girl in Umdurman!" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 284). Nabilah is fully impressed by Soraya's new lavish appearance: "Nabilah couldn't get over the clothes" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 284).

The final main character whose dress code hints at his inner thoughts and feelings is Nur's Egyptian teacher, Ustaz Badr. Living in Sudan, Ustaz Badr and his family experience a sense of displacement and

alienation which is strongly represented through their dress. The narrator contrasts Ustaz Badr's threadbare dress at the beginning of novel with that of the Abuzeid's patriarch Mahmoud Bey when the former visits the latter during his illness. Due to his humble appearance "[...] with his crumpled suit, his ink-stained fingernails and his haggard face", Ustaz Badr sees himself as being "[...] unnoticed" and unimportant among the "[...] country's most important men" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 18). The juxtaposition of the image of Mahmoud Bey and that of Ustaz Badr further enhances Ustaz Badr's sense of unhomeliness and alienation; Mahmoud Bey wears "[...] a wine-coloured silk dressing gown" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 19). Ironically, the crumples of Ustaz Badr's suit are starkly contrasted to the smoothness of Mahmoud Bey's silk gown in an attempt to accentuate the socioeconomic gap between the two.

Markedly, Ustaz Badr's family, his wife Hanniyah and his kids, through their dress code disclose their sense of restlessness, alienation and unhomeliness in Sudan. Hanniyah chooses to highlight her difference from the Umdurman's society through her choice of dress: "[... i]n her black outdoor abaya she *looked formal and foreign*. The Sudanese milling around her were in their colourful patterned tobes with bangles on their arms" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 294, griffin of mine). yearther key instance that sheds light on Ustaz Badr's family's restlessness and unhomeliness in Sudan is that his children who are always undressed because of the heat; they are always "[...] stripped to their underwear –they only w[ear] clothes when they [go] out" because of the heat and dust storms of the Sudanese weather (Aboulela, 2010, p. 61; p. 123).

Conclusion

Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* provide a pyearramic picture of the main characters' quotidian experiences which are highly influenced by the sociological, political, cultural, religious, and psychological circumstances and conditions. These experiences are vividly represented through the conscious choices of their dress. Hence, through their dress, the main characters express their resistance to the oppressive social norms of their societies, voice out their aspirations and future, and declare their connectedness to or alienation from the societies they live in. Underscoring the use of dress, this paper has shown that Faqir and Aboulela have placed a great amount of attention on/to the sartorial selections of their characters in order to unearth some significant cues that reveal the tight relationship between the main characters and their dresses on one hand and the main characters of the different cultures where they find themselves.

Drawing on different interdisciplinary theories of dress, this research renders dress as a means of communication through which one can send messages that are decoded by gazers who might interpret or misinterpret these messages depending on the different sociological, cultural, political, religious, and psychological backgrounds of both the wearer of dress and the gazer. The authors of these novels skillfully represent their characters' dress as a site over which aesthetic and thematic ends meet. They also establish dress as a site over which sociological, religious, political, cultural, and psychological affairs converge. In this respect, they show how dress is a potential tool through which significant and indicative issues can be tackled. Further, these authors explore the ability of dress to mirror one's identity and the slight or drastic changes one may undergo. Hence, dress plays a pivotal role by which it highlights the point where the private life of a character intersects with the public one. And thus, one may think of dress codes in these novels on the macro rather than the micro level where the boundaries between the private and the public are blurred. Seen from this angle, Faqir and Aboulela identify dress as a meaningful aspect of the construction of identity and an evocative metaphor of sociological, political, cultural, and psychological web of codes.

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