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EDUCATION, CLASS, AND FEMALE BODILY AUTONOMY IN AHDAF SOUEIF'S *IN THE EYE OF THE SUN* AND FADIA FAQIR'S *MY NAME IS SALMA*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how education and class intersect to shape female bodily autonomy in two novels by Arab diasporic authors, Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*. Through comparative feminist analysis, it explores how the protagonists' bodies are inscribed with cultural meaning and regulated by social hierarchies. Rather than portraying education or social mobility as inherently liberatory, the novels reveal their limitations in the absence of critical agency and emotional resilience. Asya's intellectual privilege contrasts with Salma's restricted access to formal learning, yet both narratives show how class mediates bodily control and access to selfhood. The article argues that female bodily autonomy in these texts is not achieved through structural advantages alone, but through the protagonists' capacity to narrate, reflect, and contest imposed roles. Drawing on feminist literary and cultural frameworks, the analysis of the two novels challenges reductive views of empowerment, presenting bodily autonomy instead as a process of reclamation forged in tension with patriarchal and class-based constraints.

Keywords: Arab women's literature; education and class; patriarchy; female agency; bodily autonomy

INTRODUCTION

A Muslim woman's fight for dignity and rights is not a Westernized betrayal of her community, but fully consistent with her cultural and religious heritage, a point often misunderstood by patriarchal thinkers (Mernissi, 1991, pp. vii–viii). Such misunderstandings, embedded in conservative readings of religion and reinforced by social norms, operate largely through the control of women's bodies. Martha Nussbaum (2000) conceptualizes bodily autonomy as central to human dignity, emphasizing freedom of movement, security against violence and assault, and the capacity to make meaningful choices regarding sexuality and reproduction (p. 78). More recently, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2021) defines it as the power and agency to make and act on decisions about one's own body free from coercion or violence. In Arab feminist fiction, the female body is not simply a physical entity but a politically inscribed space governed by patriarchal, religious, and sociocultural systems. In Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007), bodily autonomy is depicted not as an inherent or easily claimed right, but as a precarious achievement deeply entangled with issues of education and class. Following body studies, we read autonomy not as a possession but as an embodied practice produced within regimes of discipline and surveillance (Bartky, 1990) and as a locus of social control inscribed on the body (Bordo, 1993). Our analysis will show that the novels depict how education and class function as structuring conditions that scaffold, limit, or penalise women's attempts to act upon and narrate their bodies. These works also suggest that the female body is rendered vulnerable

or empowered depending on the protagonist's access to intellectual resources and social mobility, and it is within this intersectional space that each narrative critiques gender oppression. As protagonists, both Asya and Salma must navigate a terrain in which education and social standing do not simply reflect personal worth, but actively shape what forms of agency are possible and which resistances are punished.

Such a focus on context-specific embodiment aligns with postcolonial feminist insights. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for instance, warns against homogenizing "Third World women" as a monolithic victim category, noting that Western feminist discourse often colonizes the complex realities of women's lives across different classes and cultures (Mohanty, 1984, p. 335). Soueif and Faqir resist such simplifications by showing that Asya's and Salma's struggles are shaped by their distinct social milieus: one an upper-middle-class cosmopolitan Egyptian environment, the other a poor Bedouin village and later an immigrant experience, rather than by any single universal patriarchy. Likewise, Lila Abu-Lughod cautions against facile "saving Muslim women" narratives, urging us to ask instead what women themselves want and how they articulate their desires within their own communities (Abu-Lughod, 1986, p. 40). These differing contexts are vividly rendered in the novels' plots, which illuminate how social location shapes each woman's experience of autonomy.

The complexities of education, class, and bodily autonomy emerge most clearly through the narratives themselves. Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) follows Asya al-Ulama, a young Egyptian woman navigating marriage, education, and desire across Egypt and England. Against a backdrop of political upheaval, the novel portrays how class privilege, intellectual ambition, and cultural displacement intersect to shape her bodily autonomy. Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007) recounts the ordeal of Salma, a Bedouin woman imprisoned and later exiled to England after becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The narrative shows how exile, shame, and marginalization fracture identity and inscribe control on the female body. These narrative contexts foreground the central themes through which both novels interrogate women's bodily autonomy, beginning with the ways patriarchal norms constrain the female body's agency.

Neither novel casts its heroine as a passive victim awaiting rescue; each woman forges autonomy through lived experience, whether in quiet acts of defiance or painful self-reflection. This emphasis on self- articulation engages Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" Soueif and Faqir respond by centering subaltern women's voices on their own terms. As Faqir explains, *My Name Is Salma* "celebrates the life of one of the faceless victims of honour crimes and is a humble attempt to give her a name, a voice and a life" (Faqir, 2008). Furthermore, the emotional texture of these narratives echoes Sara Ahmed's assertion that emotions are profoundly political: feelings like shame and honour are not solely private but function as social forces that attach to bodies and regulate their legibility. Ahmed notes that shame is an "intense and painful feeling" bound up with self-perception (2004, p. 103). In these novels, Asya's guilt and Salma's fear are not merely personal afflictions but part of a broader social order that mobilizes affect as a means of discipline.

This article aims to analyze Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Faqir's *My Name is Salma* in order to demonstrate how the female body is depicted as a contested site shaped by institutional forces through the authors' portrayal of their female protagonists, Asya and Salma. As Crenshaw notes, when systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, interventions based solely on the experiences of women who do not share similar backgrounds are often inadequate (1991, pp. 1245–1246). Crenshaw's insight remains deeply relevant to literary depictions of marginalized women whose bodily autonomy is structured by overlapping forces of education, class, and culture. Likewise, Abu-Lughod in her conceptualization of transnational feminism warns against simplistic binaries such as

"oppressed" versus "liberated," urging sensitivity to how women define justice and freedom in their own terms, definitions that may differ from Western feminist assumptions (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 788). She asks whether we can accept that different women may envision and pursue futures that outsiders cannot imagine (p. 788). Drawing from theories of intersectional feminism, postcolonial critique, and feminist corporeality, this study examines how educational background and class positioning influence each protagonist's capacity to reclaim bodily autonomy, and how Soueif and Faqir represent the limits and possibilities of feminist agency in Arab societies through the two selected novels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education and class decisively shape embodied autonomy in Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, yet criticism often privileges culture over material frames. Scholarship has centered on hybridity, nationalism, and identity negotiation as major themes of the novel. Chambers (2011), for instance, situates Soueif within British Muslim fiction that resists reductive representation, while Circir (2020) in her analysis of the protagonist, emphasises colonial legacies and hybrid selves that complicate binaries of coloniser and colonised, tradition and modernity. Likewise, Ayad (2018) traces narrative strategies in the novel that encode women's resistance against pressures of marriage, sexuality, and reproduction. Extending this trajectory, Mady, Sehsah, and Samir (2025) read Asya's movement through a diasporic lens, arguing that academic privilege enables mobility while heightening dislocation and vulnerability. These accounts highlight pressures on female subjectivity but rarely question how elite schooling and its networks fail to secure bodily autonomy. In practice, Asya's credentials and ambitions enrol her in institutional and marital bargains that regulate the body through reputational economies, respectability norms, and heteronormative expectations. This argument therefore reads education as both a resource for mobility and a disciplinary structure that constrains personal autonomy.

Similarly, criticism on Faqir's *My Name Is Salma* foregrounds patriarchy, exile, and cultural translation, yet the role of education and class has received less attention. Earlier studies counter Orientalist caricature of the Arab female protagonist by centring the treatment of honour, gender control, and veiling (Fernea, 1998; Bullock, 2010). Additionally, Alqahtani (2017) shows how Faqir's portrayal of Salma interrogates Western and local essentialisms, while Hasan (2015) theorises a third-space agency for diasporic Muslim women like Salma. Recent studies extend these lines: Atiyat (2021) situates Salma's resistance to Hamdan's abuse; Mukattash (2022) examines Salma's sense of displacement as a Muslim immigrant, while Adam (2017) conceptualises Salma's migrant melancholia as a political act amid colonial histories and xenophobia. Alhussein (2025) examines memory objects and nostalgia as the means for Salma's sense of belonging, while Canpolat (2015) analyses Salma as an object of racist and sexist gazes. In a similar vein, Awajan, Al-Shetawi and Awad (2018) show how Salma's encounters with Westerners are marked with ambivalence: some enable dignity and others encode exclusion. Yet Salma's lack of formal education and later self-education are rarely discussed as a means of reclaimed autonomy. As these studies show, access and mobility do not translate necessarily into autonomy. Thus, education is both a means of social mobility and regulation: literacy and credentials both open routes from precarity while also binding belonging to reputational norms and conditional acceptance.

Considered together, critical discussions of these two works by Soueif and Faqir show education and class remain under-theorised determinants of bodily autonomy. Building on Hasan's (2015) articulation of agency in the third space and Chambers's (2011) account of Soueif's resistant cross-cultural poetics, this study redirects attention to material

conditions. Schooling is not a backdrop but an institution that confers credentials, shapes aspiration, and filters access to work, mobility, and legal standing. Asya's elite education does not secure autonomy, as the same classed networks discipline her into conformity, while Salma's deprivation of formal education compels a reclamation of autonomy through self-education. As Akkawi and Maqableh (2025) note, intercultural relationships such as those initiated by Asya and Salma open precarious yet alternative spaces of resistance and negotiation. Weaving these perspectives with existing scholarship shows how material conditions, context, and reflective agency produce, limit, and enable embodied autonomy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article reads Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Faqir's *My Name Is Salma* through education, class, and embodiment as forces shaping women's autonomy. Both novels show formal learning and social position inscribed on women's bodies as regulation, aspiration, and risk in concrete ways. To explain this pattern, the study adopts a postcolonial feminist framework where agency is locally defined and historically situated. Mohanty (1984) critiques the homogenising of "Third World women" in mainstream Western feminism and anchors commitment to specificity, while Abu-Lughod (2013) argues for contextualised accounts of freedom that arise from within communities. Ahmed (1992) grounds Arab contexts historically by showing how control of female sexuality underwrites patriarchal authority. Intersectionality, following Crenshaw (1991), refines analysis by tracing how gendered constraint is mediated by class location and educational access. Thus, the question is how education and class organise autonomy's conditions, clarifying Asya's constrained self-determination and Salma's early vulnerability.

Postcolonial feminism suits the novels' Arab and diasporic settings, linking colonial legacies and state modernisation to everyday gendered governance across family, school, work, and migration. To trace how female bodily autonomy is shaped and reclaimed, this framework incorporates other critical tools that complement the postcolonial feminist problem. Butler's account of gender performativity (1990), for example, clarifies how femininity is scripted through reiterated acts, while her formulation of the regulatory frame highlights constraint of the female body (2004). Likewise, Bordo (1993) and Bartky (1990) conceptualise the body as a locus of social control and internalised self-surveillance. The analysis also draws on Ahmed's discussion of how effects such as shame and fear circulate to secure compliance in the female body (2004). Furthermore, Bourdieu's *habitus* (1977) shows how classed dispositions and capital sediment in bodily comportment, voice, and aspiration. Additionally, Bhabha's Third Space helps interpret hybrid negotiations in mobility and exile (1994). Finally, the argument builds upon Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism, a "feminism of negotiation" and "no-ego feminism" that privileges bargaining and relational accountability over confrontation (2004), such as in situations where Asya and Salma negotiate with family and institutions to preserve dignity and safety.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis of Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Faqir's *My Name is Salma* in this section traces how honour and familial surveillance organise embodied conduct and intimate life; how schooling and class location condition the practicable scope of agency; and how cross-border movement, together with an economy of shame, fractures embodiment while allowing limited forms of reflective repair. The section concludes with a comparative account that treats autonomy as a context-bound practice of reinterpretation and self-authorship rather than a fixed possession.

Patriarchal Scripts Constrain the Female Bodily Autonomy

The female body in both Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Faqir's *My Name is Salma* is a terrain of patriarchal inscription, constantly regulated by cultural, familial, and religious ideologies that suppress female agency and reassert control. In this context, "patriarchal scripts" refers to the normative codes and cultural narratives that prescribe how women should embody femininity, sexuality, and respectability, regulating their conduct in ways that make patriarchal norms appear natural. In Soueif's novel, Asya al-Ulama's body is not her own. Despite her academic brilliance and cosmopolitan exposure, she remains subject to bodily surveillance and suffused with guilt. Her first sexual experience is framed not as liberation but as trauma. In an early scene, during her first marital intimacy with her husband Saif, Asya tenses and stiffens "like a statue." She initially tries to appear willing, but soon pleads to "get it done" and falls silent when she hears someone in the next room (Soueif, 1999, p. 258). The implication is clear: Asya is not an agent of desire but a body acted upon, one silenced by shame, expectation, and internalised fear. This moment reveals not only her physical suffering but also her psychological alienation. She retreats inward, overwhelmed by pain and by a lifelong conditioning that equates female submission with virtue. This dynamic resonates with Judith Butler's argument that gender and its bodily performances operate within a "rigid regulatory frame" that inscribes norms onto the subject and limits her possibilities of embodiment (Butler, 1990, p. 71). Even in London, far from her family in Cairo, Asya's body remains colonized by her past, by her upbringing, her mother's cautionary words, and a culture that fuses female respectability with restraint. Ironically, her education, supposedly a vehicle for emancipation, fails to empower her to claim her own body. She thinks and reasons with the intellect of a modern educated woman, yet loves and fears with the anxiety of someone under constant watch. In this sense, the novel exposes how patriarchal control endures not only through external enforcement but through its internalisation within the woman's psyche.

Similarly, in Faqir's *My Name Is Salma*, the protagonist's body becomes the site where a brutal patriarchy is made literal. Salma, a Bedouin woman from an unnamed Levantine country, is imprisoned and forced to flee to England after becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The threat to her life is not abstract, rooted in tribal honour codes that cast her body as the repository of family reputation. Her sexuality is policed by violence and shame. In a harrowing moment, her mother declares, "You smeared our name with tar. Your brother will shoot you between the eyes" (Faqir, 2007, p. 8). This warning foreshadows the danger Salma faces and condenses the lethal logic of an honour-based society, where a woman's body is not her own but the vessel of collective honour. The image of smearing with tar signifies indelible disgrace, while threat of fratricide reveals how deeply internalised the violence is, since women's supposed transgressions are punished by their own kin. Salma's body thus becomes a contested site where personal autonomy is overwritten by patriarchal codes. The erasure of her name and identity in exile, where she is renamed Sally, symbolises the extent of bodily dispossession these systems enforce. Faqir's portrayal shows a regime in action: her body becomes a battleground for cultural preservation and annihilation. Flight appears as agency yet is primarily a desperate bid to stay alive within a structure that would rather see her dead than free. Even after escape, the forces persist, haunting memory, dream, shame, and guilt.

What unites both narratives is their depiction of the female body as a site of ongoing colonization, whether through emotional dependency and internalised guilt in Asya's case, or through outright physical violence and enforced exile in Salma's. Both women are trapped in what Homi Bhabha calls "the interstices," the overlapping, displaced cultural spaces

where identity and gender are negotiated under pressure (1994, p. 2). For Asya, sexuality is never disentangled from duty or dread, while Salma must struggle with a body made shameful by others. Even as they attempt to reclaim some agency, their bodies remain tethered to narratives imposed from outside. This supports Bordo's observation that "the body… becomes a direct locus of social control" (1993, p. 141). Neither woman achieves anything like full emancipation without grappling with the deep traumas of patriarchal inscription. Both texts refuse simplistic resolutions; instead, they show how embedded structures of control turn bodily autonomy into a fragile, contingent pursuit. The struggle to reclaim the female body is not a fight against individual men or isolated traditions, but against a broader cultural logic that situates women's bodies at the core of social order, rendering them perennially subject to possession, policing, and punishment.

Education and Class Set the Conditions for Bodily Autonomy

In *In the Eye of the Sun*, education is not an automatic path to freedom but a double-edged sword, especially for a woman like Asya who lives within overlapping patriarchal and postcolonial frameworks. Asya's academic success is undeniable, she is a brilliant doctoral student in English literature in Britain, but her intellectual advancement does not shield her from bodily disempowerment. Her education equips her with critical analytical tools, yet it fails to give her the insight or courage to resist her own subjugation. She can write incisive essays on Woolf and Eliot, yet she remains painfully unaware of how her own body has been absorbed into a system of gendered expectations that demanded modesty, sexual restraint, and the fulfilment of marital duty as markers of family honour. This contradiction mirrors Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, a system of dispositions "inscribed in the body schema and in the schemes of thought" that unconsciously shapes one's practices (1977, p. 15). Asya's embodied habitus, formed by years of cultural conditioning, continues to govern her sense of self and "appropriate" conduct even in settings where she appears intellectually empowered. There is a historical irony here: early twentieth-century Middle Eastern reformers promoted women's education as a marker of modernity, but often without dismantling traditional gender hierarchies. Asya's highly cultivated intellect is thus limited by its disconnection from affective and embodied knowledge. She can articulate abstract feminist ideas, but she cannot apply them to her relationship with her husband, Saif, or to her later entanglement with Gerald. The Western-style education she receives prizes cognitive achievement while neglecting emotional and bodily autonomy, ultimately reinforcing the very structures it promised to challenge. Asya's education, lacking roots in her own cultural context or any true cultivation of personal agency, leaves her intellectually accomplished but emotionally and physically estranged from herself.

Class likewise functions as a mechanism of control in Asya's life, offering her social privilege yet imposing psychological constraints. Raised in a respected academic family in Cairo, Asya was groomed to embody a model of modern Arab femininity: educated, eloquent, respectable, and sexually restrained. This middle- class identity, while outwardly progressive, carries conservative expectations that quietly police women's bodies. Her sexuality is regulated not by law but by powerful unspoken codes: those whispers and familial expectations that make her feel impure or selfish for seeking intimacy or independence. In one revealing moment, Asya reflects that she hadn't felt she was deceiving her husband by sleeping with another man, "because all she had wanted was to sleep with him and her husband hadn't wanted to sleep with her" (Soueif, 1999, p. 603). Immediately after this rationalization, she feels sick with shame. Her guilt is not the result of any legal or religious transgression but of lifelong conditioning that frames female desire itself as suspect. What appears as self-punishment is in fact the effect of internalised social norms that transform her yearning into shame. This internalised guilt, rooted in class-specific ideals of feminine honour and restraint, suggests that social

mobility does not liberate the female body so much as refine the tools of its regulation. Asya's class privilege does not protect her from patriarchy; it merely cloaks patriarchal control in genteel language about civility, decorum, and self-discipline. In fact, it renders her even more isolated. She lacks a vocabulary of rebellion compatible with her elite upbringing. Trapped by the expectation of being a "good daughter" of her class, Asya cannot voice desire or anger without undermining the very identity that grants her social legitimacy.

In contrast, *My Name is Salma* begins with its protagonist in a starkly different class and educational position. Born into a poor Bedouin family, Salma is denied even basic literacy. Her body, like her future, is effectively owned by her tribe, and her fate is sealed when she conceives a child out of wedlock. Her brother is ordered to kill her not because any court found her guilty of a crime, but because of a cultural mandate to cleanse the family honor after she has "tarnished the honor of the tribe" (Faqir, 2007, p. 325). The violence she faces is not an isolated incident but an expression of a broader patriarchal structure in which female sexuality is tightly regulated and brutally policed. Historian Leila Ahmed (1992) notes that in such systems, control over female sexuality was vested in men, effectively rendering women's sexuality a form of male property (p. 12). Salma's body is thus punished not just for violating social norms, but is treated as a possession through which tribal honour and male dominance are enforced. Her illiteracy further compounds her vulnerability, leaving her without a voice or any defense against these forces. When she is imprisoned and later exiled, the rupture she experiences is not only spatial but existential. She is stripped of her past, her language, and even her name, becoming "Sally" in the United Kingdom, a symbolic erasure reflecting the broader dispossession of her identity. Salma's early life exemplifies how patriarchy, class hierarchy, and institutionalized honour codes converge to render the female body both an object of control and a locus of cultural shame.

Yet it is precisely through education, albeit informal, belated, and hard-won, that Salma begins to reclaim her voice and some ownership of her body. Her journey in exile is arduous, marked by marginalization, economic hardship, and racist hostility, but it eventually affords her access to literacy and structured learning. Choosing to enroll in a part-time university course (Faqir, 2007, p. 176) is a conscious step toward authoring her own life. This choice is significant not for any diploma it may yield, but because it signifies Salma's refusal to remain voiceless. Her agency emerges not from academic credentials but from the pursuit of knowledge as an act of survival and self-definition. Although the novel does not show her formally writing her life story, Salma's very narrative stands as an articulation of her resistance. As bell hooks writes, education as the practice of freedom requires the courage to transgress boundaries (1994, p. 13), and Salma's pursuit of learning in exile does exactly that. Gaining literacy and learning English enable her to confront trauma, resist erasure, and assert her identity in a society that would otherwise render her invisible. Unlike Asya, whose prestigious education ironically distances her from her own embodied needs, Salma's hard-won learning becomes a bridge to understanding, dignity, and self-possession. She gains knowledge not through privilege but through resilience and determination, revealing that empowerment grows more from critical consciousness than from diplomas.

Ultimately, these contrasting narratives converge to expose a deeper truth: education and class are neither purely liberatory nor inherently oppressive in themselves. Their impact on female bodily autonomy is conditional, shaped by context, cultural meaning, and psychological internalisation. Asya's elite background grants her access to knowledge but not to emotional or embodied freedom; her intellectualism lacks rootedness in the body and

in lived experiences of resistance. Salma, by contrast, starts with no privileges at all, but through struggle and self-education she learns to narrate her pain and to reinhabit her body. Both stories affirm that bodily autonomy is not a static possession but a dynamic process, a continual becoming within social matrices that simultaneously constrain and enable (Butler, 2004, p. 3). Education, therefore, is not merely the transmission of information but the cultivation of critical awareness and self-worth. Class is not only an economic category but also a moral and cultural framework defining what a woman can and cannot do with her body. When class and education intersect with critical consciousness, they can become instruments of liberation; without that consciousness, they risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they ought to dismantle.

Displacement and Shame Fragment the Female Body

Displacement in both *In the Eye of the Sun* and *My Name is Salma* is not merely geographical exile but also cultural and psychological estrangement, profoundly embodied in the female protagonists. Their forced removal from homelands is mirrored by dismemberment that unsettles self, as women whose bodies become hyper visible or erased in new environments. In *My Name is Salma*, exile is punitive from the outset: Salma is plucked from her village, thrown into prison, and smuggled to England. This uprooting ruptures her name, culture, and even her child, splintering identity. Her body becomes a site of shame, not only for sexual transgression but because society codes her very flesh as sinful and polluted. She imagines that through prayer, fasting, and silence she could "slip slowly out of [her] body" and cease to be Salma at all (Faqir, 2007, p. 59). The internalised condemnation shows how exile deepens bodily disconnection and self-estrangement. Even in England, torment persists; she remains isolated, haunted by the past. She is in a new country while inhabiting a fractured self – shaped by exile, shame, and loss. Displacement intensifies a deeper rupture, a dislocation from history, identity, and the body that carries her. In this fragmentation, Salma turns to ritual and relic as anchors. She stitches her mother's letter to a lock of hair and seals them in a leather pouch worn as an amulet (Faqir, 2007, p. 59). The talisman fuses flesh, ink, and memory, a portable shrine to an erased past and an assertion of identity against assimilation or oblivion. Her body becomes a vessel of contradictions, with memory and guilt, still haunted by what cannot be reclaimed.

Just as Salma's exile forcibly tears her from her physical and cultural grounding, Asya's self-imposed displacement unsettles her sense of identity, though under different circumstances. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, displacement is initially elective; Asya travels to the UK to pursue her doctorate. Yet her psychological consequences mirror Salma's violent exile. Although she inhabits elite academic spaces, she often experiences her body as divided and alienated from both her desires and her cultural roots. Her sexuality, rather than becoming a source of pleasure or autonomy in a liberal environment, turns into another battleground of shame, misunderstanding, and silence. In moments of intimacy, her consent feels hollow and her responses are marked by dissonance and emotional absence. After one clandestine encounter with Gerald, she wakes expecting "the weight of the rock of doom," anticipating a suffocating mass of guilt and fear to descend on her, but instead finds "there is nothing" (Soueif, 1999, p. 540). This emotional void is not relief but a symptom of dissociation, revealing how cultural contradictions and exhaustion estrange her even from her own shame. Her involvement with Gerald deepens disorientation; she loses confidence in her emotional clarity and grows ashamed of how she has acted and what she has become. Asya never fully owns experience because everything is filtered through conflicting value systems: Egyptian ideals of modesty and virtue, British individualism and sexual freedom, the detachment of academic intellectualism, and her longing for love and approval. Caught between these roles, she

feels fragmented. Significantly, displacement to England does not produce liberation. Rather, it divides her into incompatible identities, the dutiful Arab wife, the ambitious scholar, and the romantically and sexually unfulfilled woman.

This internal fragmentation finds a powerful articulation in Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity, which frames identity not as fixed but as continually negotiated in the in-between spaces of culture (p. 2). Asya's body becomes such a hybrid zone, a living site where the psychological costs of cultural displacement manifest somatically. Her movements, desires, and decisions are filtered through overlapping yet contradictory cultural codes. She is at once subject and object, Arab and Westernised, observant and disoriented. While she walks the streets of London and inhabits prestigious academic spaces, her inner world remains shaped by the residual imprints of Cairo, her mother's admonitions, her society's expectations, and her own fractured longing for coherence. The novel does not romanticize hybridity as liberation; instead, it exposes its painful negotiations, where identity is not resolved but stretched thin across incompatible demands. This embodied hybridity leads not to a new synthesis but to a sustained experience of fracture and fatigue. Displacement is not merely spatial or intellectual. It is visceral, lived through the female body's continual adaptation and internal conflict. The narrative shows how hybridity is inscribed not in celebratory pluralism but in aching compromise, making Asya's cross-cultural journey one of subtle erosion rather than emancipation.

Compounding the effects of displacement is the insidious force of shame, which acts as a disciplinary mechanism that further fractures the protagonists' sense of bodily control. Shame is not merely an internal feeling; it carries cultural and political inscriptions about purity, obedience, and belonging. As Sara Ahmed observes, "the expression of shame is a political action" (2004, p. 120), showing how it works publicly to regulate bodies and enforce conformity. In Salma's case, shame is weaponized through religious and tribal discourse that marks her as unclean. Even in exile, this shame continues to inhabit her body, dictating how she moves, speaks, and relates to others. She covers herself excessively, avoids eye contact, and remains silent when she might otherwise speak in her own defense. Her fragmented embodiment reflects her inability to reconcile past and present, voice and body. Sandra Bartky observes that such discipline turns women into self-policing subjects, "committed to a relentless self-surveillance" (1990, p. 81). We see this clearly in Salma's instinctive self-monitoring: terror and cultural conditioning have trained her to constantly watch and correct herself. The imagined gaze of her community, even an ocean away, continues to wound her and instill a sense of distance. Her shame is not simply a memory; it is a daily, physical reality, turning her exile into an extension of the punishment she faced at home. Salma's silence and self-effacement reveal the enduring wounds inflicted by a society that uses shame to control women, ensuring that the female body remains a site of obedience even across borders. Ahmed (2004) similarly notes that shame induces a painful crisis in one's relation to oneself (p. 103). Indeed, Salma's plight shows how the foreignness of exile comes to reside within, as she carries the stigma and pain of her past wherever she goes.

Building upon this, in both novels, shame intertwines with displacement to produce a deeply fragmented sense of bodily autonomy. The protagonists are neither entirely "here" nor wholly "there," not fully present in their new lives, yet unable to escape the pull of their origins. This in-betweenness leaves them perpetually unstable. Yet fragmentation is not portrayed as the end of agency; it becomes the ground from which a new form of self can emerge, one that is fluid, reflective, and resilient. In Asya's case, this potential glimmers through critical introspection; in Salma's, it is realized through the act of storytelling.

Though fractured in many ways, their bodies begin to carry narratives of survival instead of merely stories of shame. The process of re-embodiment is slow and incomplete, but it suggests the possibility of transformation. As Judith Butler (1988) writes, "the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body" (p. 521). In this light, bodily fragmentation does not signal failure; it marks a transitional phase in reclaiming agency. Both novels thus offer a nuanced understanding of how displacement and shame fracture women's sense of bodily control while simultaneously gesturing toward the reparative potential within those ruptures. The cracks in the self become sites where light enters, allowing Asya to finally ask herself what she truly wants, and Salma to begin imagining a life on her own terms.

Comparative Synthesis: From Regulation to Self-Authorship

Juxtaposing *In the Eye of the Sun* and *My Name is Salma* highlights how female bodily autonomy is shaped by the interwoven dynamics of class, education, and displacement. On the surface, Asya and Salma seem very different: one is a privileged Egyptian woman studying abroad in the 1970s; the other is a marginalized Bedouin woman fleeing honour-based violence in the 1980s. Yet their experiences reveal striking parallels in how patriarchal systems discipline the female body across divergent cultural and socio-economic contexts. Asya, with all her intellectual training, and Salma, with virtually none at the start, both confront a profound fragmentation of their bodily integrity, albeit from opposite entry points. This comparison demonstrates that privilege in the form of class or education does not guarantee bodily autonomy unless it is accompanied by critical self-awareness and cultural negotiation. Asya is intellectually accomplished yet emotionally disoriented; Salma begins her story unlettered yet eventually finds empowerment through literacy and reflection. Their trajectories suggest that autonomy is less about structural advantage and more about the ability to narrate, reinterpret, and resist imposed norms. Significantly, each author reinforces these themes through narrative form. Soueif's novel unfolds in a linear, omniscient mode that immerses us in Asya's gradual, almost imperceptible entrapment, whereas Faqir's novel is told in Salma's fragmented first-person voice, shifting back and forth in time and place. The fractured structure of *My Name is Salma*, oscillating between Salma's past in her village and her present in Exeter, mirrors her split existence, while the expansive realism of *In the Eye of the Sun* shows how Asya's oppression is woven into the ordinary fabric of her daily life. Thus, each novel's form echoes its protagonist's reality.

Both novels portray education as a potentially transformative force, yet with vastly different implications. For Asya, a Western education becomes a space of alienation as it distances her from the affective knowledge needed to navigate her own body and relationships. Her elite British schooling trains her in literary theory but fails to equip her with emotional literacy: the capacity to recognize coercion or assert her own desire. Consequently, her bodily experiences, whether painful sexual encounters or taboo desires, remain disconnected from her intellectual identity. The very analytical tools that allow her to critique society do not help her to analyze her own life. By contrast, Salma's "education" begins from nothing and occurs informally, yet it becomes the foundation of her self-reclamation. Her path isn't about acquiring prestigious credentials, but about claiming the power of language itself. When she begins to write, when she tells her story, she in effect begins to possess her body. Salma's writing becomes her battlefield, staking a claim to her experiences and refusing to be defined solely by what others have done to her. This contrast underscores that while education can deepen alienation in one context, it can catalyze resistance in another, depending on how it intersects with class and lived experience. It challenges any one-size-fits-all notion of empowerment through education. A Western-style education without critical context leaves a woman like Asya adrift, while

basic literacy coupled with insight helps a woman like Salma transform her life.

Similarly, class operates as both a barrier and a mask in these narratives. Asya's middle-class respectability demands an appearance of modesty, obedience, and intellectual decorum. Her body becomes something to manage and hide behind the veil of academic success. Even her sexual encounters, which one might assume could be sites of personal liberation, given her education, are fraught with guilt and passivity. Salma, by contrast, comes from a lower-class background that makes her body a target for control in a more overt and violently repressive manner. The ever-present threat of an "honour killing" and her subsequent exile reveal how women's bodies carry communal shame, especially in contexts where poverty and lack of state protection intensify patriarchal authority. Yet once in exile, Salma attains a tentative form of class mobility through labor and education, slowly enabling her to reclaim her voice. The novels thus show that class does not shield women from bodily control; it merely changes its methods and metaphors. In both stories, the female body remains a text to be read, judged, and punished, whether in the elite circles of Cairo or the tribal outskirts of Hima. This underscores Mohanty's point that women's oppression must be understood in context: Asya's body is policed by bourgeois social norms, while Salma's is policed by village customs and material desperation. In each case, the body bears the inscription of "honour" as defined by others.

Displacement, both literal and metaphorical, further accentuates the crisis of embodiment. Asya's move to London fractures her identity between cultures, leaving her body suspended between inherited shame and the promises of Western sexual liberalism. Her inability to reconcile these opposing forces results in numbness and confusion. She often feels dissociated during sex or emotionally paralyzed when trying to make decisions, symptoms of a self caught in transit. Similarly, Salma's exile to the UK is not a tidy resolution but an extension of trauma by other means. She remains haunted by the child she left behind, by the name she was forced to change, and by the new language she struggles to master. Both protagonists carry their shame with them across borders and languages, making the female body a vessel of unresolved memory. And yet, through introspection in Asya's case and narration in Salma's, both women gradually craft a sense of embodied presence that pushes back against erasure. As Judith Butler observes, "the body has its invariably public dimension" (Butler, 2004, p. 21). It is in the act of publicly voicing their pain, Asya through candid self-reflection, Salma through storytelling, that both begin to reassert control over their lives. This comparative perspective reveals that while the routes to autonomy differ, the destination is shared: a body reclaimed through narrative, reflection, and critical defiance.

Neither novel offers a "happily ever after" of total emancipation. Instead, each emphasizes the processual nature of autonomy. Educational and class privilege alone is insufficient, Asya's story shows that without emotional insight, these advantages can reinforce inner bondage. Conversely, oppression is not absolute, Salma's journey shows that with creativity and will, even a voiceless woman can gain agency. The subtlety of these narratives invites us to reconsider common definitions of empowerment. In many Western feminist paradigms, empowerment is equated with assertive independence or dramatic rebellion. However, these novels present agency in quieter, contextually grounded forms. Asya's acts of resistance are mostly internal: small refusals, private realizations, and ultimately her decision to leave a toxic marriage. Salma's acts of resistance begin as acts of survival, running away, keeping silent to stay alive, but gradually become acts of expression, culminating in her resolve to return home to find her daughter and tell her story. Such actions may not fit the mold of grand feminist revolt, but they are deeply meaningful in context. They evoke what Nnaemeka calls "nego-

feminism," a feminism of negotiation and "no ego," whereby women seek to change their circumstances through compromise, adaptation, and pragmatic resistance rather than frontal opposition (2004, p. 360). Asya's careful navigation of social expectations and Salma's patient rebuilding of a new life each exemplify a form of negotiated agency often overlooked by more confrontational models of feminism. Both women bend patriarchal norms: Asya by pursuing intellectual work and even an illicit romance under the radar of respectability; Salma by reinventing herself in a new culture, without openly shattering those norms. Such strategies, the novels suggest, are no less valid or courageous; they are responses forged in situations where direct rebellion could mean ruin or death.

The experience of displacement further complicates Asya's and Salma's relationship with their bodies and identities. Removal from familiar environments forces both women to reflect on their inherited values and to confront the dissonance between those values and their lived experiences. Exile is not a cure or a simple escape; rather, it provides a painful opening in which they can reexamine the narratives that once silenced them. Migration becomes a reckoning not only with a new geography but with self-perception. In England, Asya and Salma are outsiders looking back at their own cultures with new eyes, even as they are viewed by others who know nothing of their pasts. This dual gaze allows them to reconsider their roles, identities, and worth beyond the rigid definitions imposed by their original societies. Reclaiming their bodies thus becomes a process of memory, reflection, and critical revision. Autonomy in this context is not defined by total independence from social norms, but by the ability to reframe one's story and live within complexity with awareness and strength. Neither novel ends with perfect liberation. Instead, both affirm the dignity of imperfection and the value of ongoing struggle. Asya's story ends on an ambiguous note, she leaves her marriage and returns to Egypt, facing uncertainty but armed with new insight. Salma's story ends with a courageous but tragic return to her homeland to confront her past, a final act that underscores how costly and complex the pursuit of freedom can be. Such endings insist that empowerment is a layered journey, shaped by pain, reflection, and quiet resilience rather than by triumphant declaration.

In the Eye of the Sun and *My Name is Salma* ultimately compel us to rethink what freedom means in context. Here, freedom is not an abstract ideal or a complete break from the past, but something shaped by social belonging, cultural memory, and personal struggle. For Asya and Salma, liberation is not found in rejecting their heritage or severing ties with their past, but in interpreting, critiquing, and making choices within the frameworks of their lived reality. It involves speaking in their own voices and writing new chapters while acknowledging the marks of all that came before. Soueif and Faqir present a nuanced transnational feminism attuned to Arab women's specific experiences. They demonstrate that bodily autonomy is not a singular achievement but a continuous negotiation, an ongoing dialogue with history, community, and the self. Empowerment in these narratives is neither bestowed from above nor defined by dramatic rebellion; it is slowly and deliberately claimed through the act of inhabiting one's body and story with awareness and agency. By framing autonomy as a lived, evolving process, these novels show that liberation, like identity, is never static.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that education and class, often celebrated as liberating forces, are deeply entangled with the same patriarchal systems that regulate female bodies and identities. Whether through institutional structures, cultural codes, or internalised norms, both Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Faqir's *My Name is Salma* reveal that access to

education or upward mobility alone does not guarantee bodily autonomy. Asya, despite her elite academic background, remains emotionally and physically estranged from herself, caught between conflicting values that leave her intellectually equipped but affectively paralysed. Salma, by contrast, begins with no institutional access at all, but gradually reclaims voice and agency through experience, informal learning, and narrative articulation. The two characters' divergent paths converge in their shared struggle to navigate shame, displacement, and class-based expectations that inscribe meaning onto their bodies. What emerges is a nuanced view of agency, not as a state granted by modernity or merit, but as an act of resilience forged in contradiction.

The article argues that these novels reject simplistic binaries between victimhood and emancipation, or between tradition and modernity. Instead, they offer a feminist vision rooted in specificity, where autonomy is not a final destination but a shifting process of reclaiming the body, the self, and the story. Both Soueif and Faqir foreground the body as a political and narrative site, shaped by history yet capable of generating meaning beyond subjugation. Asya's moments of introspection and Salma's act of storytelling exemplify how fragmented selves can resist silence not through confrontation alone, but through critical awareness and creative narration. The body becomes not only a terrain of control but also a vessel of memory, agency, and ethical redefinition. In showing how class, education, and displacement complicate the pursuit of autonomy, the article challenges universalist narratives of empowerment and insists on the importance of context, voice, and the slow, deliberate work of becoming.

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