

“You Arrive at *a* Truth, Not *the* Truth”: An Interview with Fadia Faqir

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Fadia Faqir, alongside Leila Aboulela, Ahdaf Soueif and Robin Yassin-Kassab, is producing an emergent contemporary British Arab fictional canon. Born in Amman, Jordan, in 1956, Faqir worked as a journalist before coming to the UK to complete an MA and PhD. Her first novel, *Nisanit* (1988), focuses on the first Palestinian intifada. *Pillars of Salt* (1996), a novel that uses a hostile interloper to frame the stories of two women disenfranchised on the cusp of Jordanian independence, established her as a writer centrally concerned with the Anglo-Arab encounter. *My Name is Salma* (2007, published in the US as *The Cry of the Dove*) features a young woman persecuted as a result of “honour crimes” in an unnamed Levantine country and forced into exile in Britain. Faqir recently completed her fourth novel, *At the Midnight Kitchen*. Additionally, she has produced incisive scholarship on intra-family femicide (Faqir 2001) and on women’s rights and democracy in Arab and Islamic contexts (Faqir 1997, 2000). She was the general editor of the *Arab Women Writers* series (Garnet), featuring *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (Faqir 1998) and translated novels by Hoda Barakat, Hamida Naana, Salwa Bakr, Liana Badr and Alia Mamdouh. Faqir is currently a Writing Fellow at Saint Aidan’s College, Durham University, UK. In this interview, which took place in February 2010, I began by asking if there were any aspects of her life that had particularly influenced her emergence as a writer.

FF: When I was young, I lived next to an English club—a remnant of the British Mandate—that Jordanians were not allowed to enter. East Amman was the place to be then (the late 1950s). I remember that colonial exclusive space very clearly. It reconfigures itself in my writing again and again. Salma, for example, [in *My Name is Salma*] is always looking into other people’s gardens in England; she’s always on the outside.

Another influential factor was that I was forced to wear the veil by my father, a reluctant tyrant. He imposed things on us like praying five times a day, a 7 p.m. curfew... all kinds of things that made me react against institutional religion. Some of my siblings and I felt like we were in a camp, a confined space, an army, and that our father treated us like cadets. My dad was, is, an admirer of Germany. He thought the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was a tragedy and he allied himself with the Germans who sided with the Ottomans. My

position is very different from my father's on a number of things, including religion. For him, the demise of the Ottoman Empire was a tragedy because Islam was defeated; for me, it marked the beginning of the suffering of Palestinians.

My mother is a totally different story—the most liberal woman, in her own unique way [...] She blindly supported us [...] She always says: “Out of my love for you, I don't want you to come back [to Jordan] because you are flourishing and achieving things that you wouldn't be able to achieve here. It would be a restrictive environment for you.”

The third thing, and the biggest fracture in my life, was losing custody of my son. My father insisted on my marriage, but then pulled me out of it when it turned out to be a disastrous match: he hired a lawyer, which you didn't do in Jordan at that time, in the 1970s. It took eight months in the courts and I lost custody of my son as a condition of the divorce. I broke down after that, after they took away my son. He was 13 months old. I went to university but if people spoke to me, I would consider myself as not worthy of their greeting [...] I felt such a failure; I was riddled with guilt. I started writing because it was the only way out of this... verging on the edge of madness. And it was perhaps a way to talk to my son. Perhaps it's a long letter to him, all of it.

These are the three main things in my life that you might see echoes of in my writing. When you start writing, you don't think about why the book is being written—the process is a mystery. Afterwards, when I look back, I see how personal and political some of my work is. If you look at *Nisanit*... it was driven perhaps by an attempt to empower myself, but also by my anger at the Palestinian situation in the 1980s.

LM: Do you have a specific relationship to Palestine, or is the Palestinian crisis something that Arab intellectuals feel compelled to confront?

FF: I was brought up in Jordan, I'm not Palestinian and I didn't know much about Palestine... but then I became a journalist and I interviewed Palestinian ex-prisoners who were released in an exchange in 1983. The interviews shocked me, opened my eyes to the injustice across the [R]iver [Jordan]. I went and researched Israeli prisons and started educating myself about the Palestinian issue. And then I married a Palestinian GP and my son is Palestinian, so there is that link as well.

LM: Has *Nisanit* been published in Israel?

FF: No. It was published only as a [UK] Penguin and as a [US] King Penguin. [...] A prominent Israeli publisher made an offer for *My Name is Salma* but I couldn't do business with the Israelis while Gaza was regularly being bombed back to the Middle Ages.

LM: And yet you are even-handed in your treatment of different characters, notably the Israeli interrogator, whose terrible work brings him to the edge of nervous collapse.

FF: I think that's why the novel did not please anyone. It showed the Israeli point of view and is critical of their jails and of how they treated Palestinian prisoners; it also featured a tactical blunder by the Palestinians, so there is an implied criticism of the Palestinian leadership; and Eman's narrative, set in an Arab country, exposes violations of human rights there: random arrests, summary justice. Nobody, whether Arab, Palestinian or Israeli, is exempt from blame.

I think the truth needs to be told from many different perspectives. You arrive at *a* truth, not *the* truth. If you create a multi-layered narrative and you have different perspectives or points of view, then you more fairly represent the issue you're dealing with. My fictional strategy is partly a reaction to journalism. I felt the constraints of being a journalist, so moved away from reportage to multi-layered, multi-perspectival, hopefully more complex strategies of representation.

LM: You've joked at public events about being an "ex-patriarch." Can you explain?

FF: I left Jordan because of my father—he wanted me to be someone I was not: a pious Muslim. My father [also] wanted to realise his dreams through us. He sent us to the West to be educated and wanted us to go back and take on his battles. But the process changed us. We chose other ways for ourselves.

During the [second] Gulf War, watching Baghdad being blown to smithereens, I was angry with my father because I felt that if it were not for him, I wouldn't be [in the UK], among people who had different ideas from mine, and I wouldn't have to explain myself all the time. But we reconciled... I was doing an article for *The Guardian* (Faqr 2007), who said they would not publish without my father's permission (as it is about our relationship and I quote him there). So I had to translate everything I'd written against him, to him and [...] he apologized, and we became father and daughter at last.

What's wrong in the Arab world is the structure of the family—it is an oppressive structure, overtly or covertly. The Arab family has to be scrutinized if the Arab world is going to change. The family is a structure with a figurehead, a patriarch who makes all the important decisions and treats everyone as infants. You see that structure multiplied everywhere in the Arab world. The state functions that way as well: it is undemocratic and repressive.

LM: Hisham Sharabi (1988) talks about "neo-patriarchy," suggesting that patriarchal structures have been reinforced since the 1967 defeat [of united Arab nations by Israel]; in other words, as a response to a crisis of identity in the Arab world.

FF: I agree. Whenever the Arab world is under pressure from external forces, its conservative structures become stronger. Since the invasion of Iraq [in 2003], Arab women have lost many of the gains made earlier, because the Arab Muslim male is under attack. When you're insecure, you try to control your surroundings and that starts with your family. So, there is now regression in Iraq and in most parts of the Arab world. There is also a glorification of radical Islam ... it's visible now in the streets of the Arab world.

But there are important variables within each country. You need to look at socio-economic factors and all the different hegemonies of the Arab world; each environment has its own dynamic. What's happening in Amman is different from what's happening in Beirut or Baghdad, and the countryside is very different from the cities, and so on. But I'm not going to generalize. Now I'm an observer. I go back quite often, of course, and I keep in touch with the Arab world, but I don't want to speak on its behalf from the outside.

LM: I suspect you might agree with Inderpal Grewal's and Caren Kaplan's notion of "scattered hegemonies" (1994), which tries to account for intersections of gender and class, sexuality, etc., in relations of power and subordination.

FF: Yes, I see realities as complex, influenced by factors ranging from politics to religion to socio-economics. Every human being [is] disempowered somehow. My characters tend to be caught in a web. They are victims of history, geography and politics in *Nisanit*. Salma [in *My Name is Salma*] has done something she's not supposed to do although it is in harmony with her nature. She just happened to be born in a village where the rules are strict, so she has to be punished. And then you have Liz [also in *My Name is Salma*], who's English – again, she's a victim of a long history; she was not allowed to get married to the Indian man she was in love with. Another power structure pertains in that case—a class structure.

LM: Your novels, as you've said, interweave multiple perspectives; they also have non-linear temporal frameworks. In what ways does narrative form underline your themes?

FF: Salma [in *My Name is Salma*] has a duality of vision. The narrative keeps jumping between the past and the present. She is shackled by her past. The human mind works randomly; it free-associates. If you want to represent thought process, your form can never be entirely linear.

LM: Salma's past constantly interrupts her present as traumatic memory.

FF: I wanted to emphasize the rupture, the loss of her daughter and the tug of her past. I wanted the reader to immerse him or herself in her immigrant experience, but simultaneously to recognize the past trauma seeping through the present narrative.

LM: Salma is a specific type of migrant. You don't glorify the diaspora experience.

FF: I spent hours in the kitchens of restaurants in this country, because my brother worked as a chef; people I knew held down very modest jobs in difficult circumstances. That is my *milieu* and what feeds my writing. I love that aspect of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)—her focus on the underworld of the USA and on immigrants sometimes marginalizing and mistreating other immigrants. That struck a chord with me.

LM: Fadia, how pertinent is the framework of women's writing for your work?

FF: In the introduction to *In the House of Silence*, I say that Arab women writers use particular narrative techniques and address specific themes. There's a subculture that is specific to women in the Arab world (and perhaps in the Western world). There is something distinct about women's writing: we occupy, to some extent, a common space. [...] But western feminism has had little space for women of colour. I find the womanism of African-American women authors more representative of my experience, because I come from an ethnic minority and empowering that minority is part and parcel of the egalitarian project. It's about more than patriarchy. Feminism is being taken to the Arab world and changed, mutated. Arab women are running away with it: its basic values of equality and equal opportunity are being translated in many different ways all over the Arab world, in secular and in religious ways: hence the existence of Islamic feminism. In an immigrant context, one is always [also] aware of being a minority, part of an ethnic group. So that is part of the struggle. Of course I believe in women's rights, but I also feel so sorry for Muslim men when I see them at airports being frisked. Feminism is part of the struggle for human rights. It's part of the same project.

LM: There has been some suggestion that Arab women writers are currently finding it easier to get published and translated than their male colleagues. Could you comment?

FF: I edited the [Garnet] Arab Women Writers series because I wanted to foreground the voices of Arab women who are not deemed stars in their countries. Many people were critical, asking why I focused only on women writers. Arab women's writing sells more—that's a fact! [...] But the [Garnet] series was not started for commercial reasons; it is an attempt to redress the balance by exposing Anglophone readers to quality literary texts by Arab women. I wanted to showcase their diverse voices.

LM: What drives the demand for Arab women's stories in the West?

FF: Preconceived ideas about Arab women: they're oppressed; they're all veiled against their will. It's intriguing; it's mysterious, [the desire to] lift the veil, both literally and metaphorically. Historically, when the Arab Muslim world was powerful, there were representations of powerful and articulate Muslim women. [Women] lose [their voice] when the Arab world is declining: they become weak, oppressed and in need of "liberation" by the masculine West. These Orientalist, exoticizing ideas are still relevant today, even though they're being challenged.

All my books have a veiled woman on the cover. I don't see all of them before they get published and I don't approve them. The only editions of *Salma* without a veil are in Indonesia, France and India. *Nisanit* in the States has a totally veiled woman on the cover. The women in my books are not usually veiled: they either reject the veil or don't think about it. Other issues concern them. Yet the reduction continues.

LM: But Salma wears a headscarf.

FF: She has to take it off in Britain because her friend Parvin keeps saying "you'll never get a job with that on." It is painful for her, taking it off, the hardest thing she has ever done. She feels as if she were severing herself from her language, culture and clan.

LM: Can you talk about your use of speech and silence in fiction?

FF: Different modes of speech contribute to constructing a multifaceted vision of truth—hence I juxtapose letters, newspaper articles, reportage, conversations, and so on. And resistance comes partly through silence. Silence is paradoxical. When Salma is in prison, she stops talking for a long time and they call her "the mute." If you can't express yourself, then you implode and you start punishing yourself, and the only option is to go silent. But also it's a type of depression. Salma could not express herself, so she stopped talking.

LM: An extreme example of this is found in *Nisanit*. The Palestinian prisoner resists his interrogators by maintaining silence. But because he can't speak any version of the truth that won't either be exploited or ignored by the Israeli authorities, he goes mad.

FF: He's totally disempowered, therefore what you see is a stream of fractured consciousness. He becomes introverted; his relationship with the outside world is no longer healthy or possible. [...] When expression and self-actualization is not possible, madness is the only way out.

LM: Could you comment on the incorporation of oral forms in your novels? I'm thinking especially of *Pillars of Salt*.

FF: One of the things I wanted to do with *Pillars* was to push the narrative and the English as far as possible, to Arabize it... to create something similar to what Indian authors have achieved—a hybrid English. Therefore I used the oral tradition and the Qur'an and the *Arabian Nights* in the storyteller's section. As an injection of Arab sensibility, if you like.

But I also wanted to say something about how the Arab world is perceived. The *Arabian Nights* was studied by Orientalists and is seen by some as representative [of Arab culture], but it is not. So I created a narrator who paints a picture of Arabs that's not true. [...] The *Arabian Nights* is held in such esteem in the West but it's rarely read in the Arab world. What you do have there is a strong oral culture—it has its own fairytales and stories—that's alive, related to the everyday life and dynamic, not fossilized. It's the language of the people, the grassroots.

LM: When you talk about *Pillars* as “a feminist vision of Orientalism,” then, do you mean it is counter-Orientalist?

FF: That was how the late Angela Carter, who examined my PhD thesis, described *Pillars of Salt*. I see the storyteller as an Orientalist in cahoots with both the colonial forces and indigenous patriarchy—the three work hand-in-hand. That's what the women are trying to resist through their simple narratives.

LM: Al Adjnabi, the name of the storyteller, means “stranger” in Arabic...

FF: Yes, he's a foreigner familiar with Arab ways. The women's stories are at the heart of *Pillars*: the lower voice, the simpler voice, is supposed to challenge his bombastic voice that perpetuates myths, illusions and lies. I read travelogues from Lawrence to Burton to Doughty and they informed that character [of the narrator]. The narrative of the storyteller dramatizes how Orientalists fabricated our history in their romantic yet vacuous narratives. It's like that Orientalist painting—Gérôme's *The Guard of the Harem* [1859]—with a black guard and with a padlocked door behind him. That for me crystallizes how much Orientalists wanted to get in, but they were never allowed, so they imagined what lay behind that guarded door. Their narratives were a shabby representation of the complex reality of the Arab world. Similarly, the storyteller in *Pillars* is confined to the outskirts, the margins. [...] In *Pillars*, the two narratives overlap only once. Sami Al Adjnabi is not allowed access to the indigenous culture and Maha doesn't know that he exists: he's mentioned only once in her narrative as “that liar.”

LM: In both *Nisanit* and *Pillars*, you emphasize the politics of space. I've argued that your work posits a structural homology between prisons, asylums and the home, as spaces of entrapment and marginality (Moore 2008). Is that a valid interpretation?

FF: Definitely. For much of my childhood, I felt that I was living in a prison, and likewise when I got married. And my father's political views and his desire for change landed him in prison in 1969. You see imprisonment, metaphorical and literal, everywhere in my work. I based part of *Nisanit* on my father's experience. My mother never allowed us to visit our father because she didn't want to expose us to that kind of experience. But I imagined that space; it became part of my mental landscape.

LM: Your novels thus far have ended badly for your female protagonists. Why?

FF: With *Nisanit*, it wasn't possible to have a happy ending: the Palestinian tragedy persists. Similarly with *Pillars*: the subordination of Arab women is an ongoing problem. As for *Salma*, I initially had a happy ending but then it hit me that I was writing a book about honour crimes, partly. [...] Because honour crimes persist, it would not be politically accurate for Salma to walk free into the sunset. [...] And there was the unresolved issue of having left her daughter behind. Actually, I approached my son after I finished the novel. Over the years I had tried again and again to reconcile with him. I decided once again to go back for him, to reclaim him as my flesh and blood, and this time it worked. [...] Fiction teaches you lessons. Salma couldn't *not* go back; she didn't have that option.

LM: Salma thinks her body marks her as an outsider, once in the UK, so she spends hours beautifying herself, then puts herself in quite dangerous situations trying to attract men. Could you explain?

FF: I wanted to show that Arab women are oppressed in a certain way, but Western women are [too...] Parvin says to Salma: "Groom yourself! Beautify yourself! Sell yourself! You are in the West now." So that is the idea behind her trying to follow in the steps of a Western woman, to hold a mirror up to contemporary British society. Both environments are oppressive, but in different ways. In each case, there are penalties for not conforming. Salma also dresses skimpily and puts herself in dangerous situations because she has no self-esteem or respect. She wants to be punished, killed even.

LM: Mark Stein's *Black British Literature* (2004) maps two phases of migrant and/or minority fiction: Bildungsromane, followed by "novels of transformation" that deconstruct Englishness and transform the national topography. In what ways does Salma attempt to remap British space?

FF: *Salma* is my first attempt to engage with British society, almost twenty years after I arrived here, and it reflects a rite of passage and survival. But my latest novel, *At the Midnight Kitchen*, is a post-arrival novel about Britain today. That trajectory reflects my own experience:

I was not born here; I came when I was 25. My first two novels are set in the Arab world, the third is [partly] set in Exeter, and the most recent is set in London. So the movement is towards re-creating a significant kind of Arab immigrant experience here.

I would also say this is a quantitative issue – for the second phase, you’d need a number of Arab authors looking at Britain and fictionally remapping it; you need a critical mass.

LM: Stein’s book focuses on writers from African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds.

FF: Indeed, Andrea Levy, etc., came to mind instantly ... second and third-generation British ethnic minority writers... The ethnic category “Arab” is not even on the census, although it will be included in the next one. Slowly we are being quantified and recognised. So much creative energy and originality is coming from writers of Arab descent such as Rabih Alameddine, Laila Lalami, Leila Aboulela, Khaled Muttawa. I’m reading *Cockroach*, by Rawi Hage. Here is a Lebanese who migrated to Canada and has written a book that sets fire to everything we know: it’s Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* taken to new heights. Our troubled histories, difficult lives, the way we get brutalized, the serious issues which burden us, are now being reflected in literature. Arab-American and British-Arab authors are creating a unique fiction that hopefully will be studied seriously. I’m honoured to be part of that evolving trend.

LM: I want to ask you about the “ethnicity” category that is privileged in postcolonial studies. Do you agree with Amin Malak’s observation that faith and religious identity are just as salient determinants of one’s identity (2005)?

FF: Islam is becoming more than a religion. Previously I did not feel Muslim or connected to the Muslim Asian minority in Britain; but post-9/11, I feel increasingly that I belong to an ethnic community called “Muslim” rather than “Arab.” Discrimination brings Muslims closer together, turns them into a “nation” of Islam. Some of us are less religious than others, yet we see ourselves as part of an Islamic whole [...] I explored religion in [my latest novel] because it’s an important force and part of my cultural identity. I don’t pray five times a day, I am not a practicing Muslim, but the Qur’an as a text is important to me; symbols, rituals and practices that are specifically Islamic are familiar to me. It is part of my vocabulary whether I am practicing or not. If I had to, I would classify myself as a secular Muslim. They do exist, you know!

Because I’m a secular Muslim, I [imaginatively] belong to Granada. How tragic it was for that civilization to disappear [in the fifteenth century], with its open-mindedness, beauty and liberalism [...] Granada, a community of polyglots who represented different ethnicities and religions but developed in peace, is a vision I hold on to in these difficult times. It was a moment in history when colonizers

and colonized, travellers and settlers, co-existed and interacted, even within asymmetrical relations of power. Granada is a ripe pomegranate I carry in my suitcase wherever I go. My mother says: “One seed out of the six hundred will lead you back to paradise.”

LM: Can you speak about your decision to write in English and about your anticipated audience?

FF: I didn’t choose to write in English. [...] I had to submit my MA in English, so I tried to translate some of my experience into what was a second language to me. Perhaps even now I’m almost bilingual, not 100%. If I were bilingual, I’d be writing poetry – I’m trying and it’s not easy, because [usually] you have to be born within a language to excel in it.

After my MA, I went back to Jordan to study and write in Arabic. I really wanted to do it—it was an important political decision— but things were not good in Jordan: journalists were leaving, it was a bad period in the country and it was not possible to write. Also, I felt that my personal freedom was taken away from me. I dried up completely until one of my friends sent my novel to [the University of] East Anglia and applied for a PhD for me, and they said yes. [...] So, again I was writing in English.

When there is a conflict, for example the Gulf War... then I question my decision and feel like cutting out my forked tongue. Chinua Achebe talks about conducting our business within the English language, including the business of throwing off colonialism. We master the English language and we write back in English; in other words, we carve a space for ourselves within it. But of course that creates problems, because sometimes I want to include Arabic words [...] I would love to be able to include Arabic, rather than transliterations. I see fiction thirty years down the line as a mosaic made up of different languages, truly transnational, translingual and transcultural.

LM: Novelists writing in English as their second or third language are glossing far less for international audiences than they used to.

FF: In *Cockroach* (2009), Rawi Hage combines French, Quebecois, Arabic and English without any explanation. And we, the readers, cope. [...] Perhaps there is a constituency out there that is bilingual or trilingual and interested in different parts of the world. But you don’t try to find an audience; you just sit and write in isolation, trying to capture the inexpressible.

LM: Has *My Name is Salma* been translated into Arabic?

FF: Yes, recently, and it has had a few good reviews by male critics! I expected uproar because of the way it portrays some aspects of the culture. It was released more than a year ago and all the reviews so far

are quite positive. That means that the Arab world is becoming more self-evaluating and self-critical. There will be no reform without that.

LM: Could you tell us about your new novel, *At the Midnight Kitchen*?

FF: The Prologue has been published as “Al-Qaeda’s Kitchen” by Weber Studies—it’s online—and won Dr. Neila C. Seshachari’s Fiction Award for 2009. The novel is about a group of people living in a block of flats in London. The whole thing started with a newspaper article saying that Abu Hamza lived in a council house in Hammersmith. I said to my husband I had to find that house, for some reason. We spent days walking the streets and eventually we found it, but then I saw another building perhaps full of immigrants. I took photos of it. I’d just read Alaa Al Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) and Manil Suri’s *The Death of Vishnu* (2002)... my novel was born. I wanted to imagine the lives of a group of Arab immigrants in that building, their histories and interactions in a postcolonial, multi-ethnic diverse London.

LM: Something like Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Only in London* (2002)?

FF: The difference is that my characters are very low on the social scale... down-and-outs... I haven’t got any characters that are middle class, rich or privileged. That strata or segment of society does not hold my attention. In *At the Midnight Kitchen*, the group of immigrants work around the clock to make ends meet. And they all have a dark secret – they are a bunch of perpetrators/victims living bang in the middle of London. But who stabbed to death the shady figure in flat number two? The novel features love, violence, self-hate and guilt, the pursuit of redemption, compassion, humour and forgiveness. There is a potential Al-Qaeda recruit. But things are not what they seem and there are many surprises along the way. Perhaps the building, where multicultural Britain is conversing, is a microcosm.

LM: Is it a post-9/11 novel?

FF: I get asked about Al-Qaeda and 9/11 and this novel is my answer. [...] There are three men in the novel and two women, and one of the women finds the West liberating and the other finds the West oppressive. One actualizes herself and the other reverts back: she was very secular, even anti-Arab and Muslim, but the way she’s treated in the West Islamicizes her; she rediscovers her faith [whilst] in London. Her immigrant experience is so horrendous that she moves in the opposite direction.

I’ve got a Muslim who comes across as extremely radical and strict, but he’s the one who turns out to be our Luther King. And then the one who comes across as Mandela – the one who comes from Algeria and is really liberal – is the one who gets radicalized by his home and immigrant experiences. [...] If I didn’t have *both*, then my novel would be diminished, one-sided [...] The novel tries to capture

humanity in all its contradictions. It shows diversity and complexity, I hope. It took a while to understand [9/11], to absorb and react to it. Hopefully the novel will show how when people get brutalized and their human rights violated, they become vulnerable and recruitable.

LM: So the radical politicization of Islam has roots both in specific Arab contexts and in discrimination towards Muslims in the West?

FF: The roots lie in the colonial experience and the kinds of regime that were left behind. The way [the Middle East] was divided up [after World War Two] was a recipe for disaster and our modern history testifies to that. That's why I put the Algerian FLN in my novel. I've tried, without overloading the narrative, to bring in as much of the "backstory" as possible. You might just see an immigrant with an accent, but their personal narrative is what makes them who they are. We need to retune our ears to hear them. The novel is an attempt to contextualize the so-called "war on terror" and to make the invisible visible.

LM: Is there anything you'd like to conclude with, Fadia?

FF: While I was writing *At the Midnight Kitchen*, my brother was attacked, walking back home in Oxford. He didn't see his attacker—he was hit from behind. He ended up with a smashed right arm, stitches around his eye and inside his mouth, a broken nose, blurred vision and problems with his balance. He lay there on the pavement for hours until somebody took him to the hospital. He then suffered the most severe of depressions—he couldn't speak or eat. The journey of recovery took years and years and he's still not 100%. That happened while I was writing my last novel... it's definitely dark, about a murder and full of violence. I realised when I finished it that this incident deeply influenced the book. [...] It was an unprovoked, racially motivated attack.

LM: A sombre note to end on, but one that echoes things we've been discussing – writing to bear witness, the difficulties of the immigrant experience...

FF: Ironically, the incident made me feel more British [...]; there was a huge amount of sympathy and support, some of it from unexpected quarters. This is now the only country I know well [...] In order to belong to a group of people, you have to experience major events together, to share their sadness and happiness, to attend their funerals and weddings. I have done so much of that and perhaps earned the right to be British, but my Arab identity also remains very close to my heart.

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