

**Muslim Women Empowerment in Leila Aboulela's
*The Translator and Minaret***

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Abstract:

Aboulela's Halal fiction effectively challenges the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims, with a particular focus on women, within the context of postcolonial immigrant narratives. Through her works, such as *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), Aboulela critically examines the portrayal of Muslims in Western societies and the dynamics of self and Other within the Scottish-Sudanese author's perspective. This study delves into the exploration of hybrid identity and its connection to Islamic beliefs through the journeys of Aboulela's protagonists, who find themselves disoriented in the diaspora. It is through embracing their Islamic faith and adhering to its moral principles that these characters are able to rediscover their true identities and attain salvation.

Keywords: diaspora, hijab, Islamic feminism, Halal fiction

تمكين المرأة المسلمة في روايتي ليلي ابوالعلا: "المرجمة" و "المئذنة"

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ملخص البحث باللغة العربية:

تتحدى الأدب الحلال لأبوليلا بفعالية التفسير والتشويه الخاطئ للإسلام والمسلمين، مع التركيز الخاص على النساء، ضمن سياق السرد الهجري ما بعد الاستعمار. من خلال أعمالها، مثل "المرجمة" (١٩٩٩) و"المئذنة" (٢٠٠٥)، تفحص أبوليليا بنقد الصورة المتوارثة للمسلمين في المجتمعات الغربية وديناميات الذات والآخر في وجهة نظر الكاتبة الأسكتلندية السودانية. يتناول هذا الدراسة استكشاف الهوية الهجينة وصلتها بالمعتقدات الإسلامية من خلال رحلات بطلات أبوليليا، اللواتي يشعرن بالضياع في الشتات. إنه من خلال اعتناق إيمانهن الإسلامي والالتزام بمبادئه الأخلاقية يستطعن إعادة اكتشاف هوياتهن الحقيقية وتحقيق الخلاص.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الشتات، الحجاب، النسوية الإسلامية، الأدب الحلال.

Muslim Women Empowerment in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator and Minaret*

Hana Khaled Abd El-Hady El-Zorkany

Leila Aboulela, a writer and novelist originally from Sudan, is known for her postcolonial/Muslim literature. She has gained recognition for her contributions to contemporary literature, particularly within the genre known as "Halal" or "Islamic" fiction. Halal fiction refers to a sub-genre of literature that explores themes and narratives in alignment with Islamic principles and values. Her works delve into the experiences of voiceless Muslim women living in the shadows, tackling themes of Muslim migration, diaspora, assimilation, and the veil. In 1990, Aboulela immigrated to Scotland, UK, which coincided with a period of increasing Islamophobia and media hostility towards veiled women. This transition from her homeland to a diaspora setting fueled her passion to write about colonial discourse and the challenges faced by marginalized Muslim women in diasporic communities. Aboulela's writing places a particular emphasis on women, especially those who wear the veil, as they confront patriarchal sexism and religious racism. Through her stories, she empowers her female characters by strengthening their faith in God and Islam. Aboulela actively challenges stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Muslims, highlighting how patriarchy and colonization oppress, silence, and marginalize women. Her fiction also exposes the distortion and devaluation of the Middle East by the West, which often depicts it as uncivilized, barbaric, and inferior. Many Muslim authors have made concerted efforts, both past and present, to challenge and reverse the negative perception of Islam and Muslims held by many Westerners. Through their writings, these authors aim to present a more accurate and nuanced picture of Islam and its offerings, which often stand in stark contrast to the stereotypes of oppression and violence that prevail in Western narratives. To effectively reach Western readers, these authors deliberately choose to write in English rather than their native languages.

Leila Aboulela is an example of such an author who actively seeks to contradict the misconceptions created by the West about Islam, particularly those that emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Her choice of writing in English allows her to directly engage with Western readers and challenge their preconceived notions. By presenting Islam in a more favorable and authentic light, Aboulela

strives to bridge the gap of understanding and promote dialogue between cultures. Through their writings, these Muslim authors endeavor to foster a deeper appreciation for the richness, diversity, and peaceful aspects of Islam, while dismantling stereotypes and misconceptions that often lead to prejudice and discrimination.

This research paper explores the ways in which Leila Aboulela empowers Muslim women in diaspora, examining her work through the lenses of postcolonialism and Islamic feminism. Aboulela actively challenges the misrepresentations of Islam and negative stereotypes surrounding Muslim women that have been perpetuated in the West, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Her fiction delves into the struggles faced by women in exposing patriarchal practices prevalent in both Eastern and Western societies. Aboulela's novels and short stories have been categorized as a sub-genre of literature known as "Halal" or "Islamic" fiction. The study focuses on analyzing Aboulela's works, specifically *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), to examine her portrayal of Muslim women's empowerment in diaspora.

The lack of a comprehensive understanding of religion has led to the propagation of a problematic view of Muslims and women. Eastern and orientalist writers have contributed to this issue by promoting an imperialistic ideology that encourages women, often unknowingly, to conform to Western standards in the pursuit of ultimate freedom. The West often believes that White supremacy can civilize Arabs and provide women with liberation from the perceived oppression imposed on them in the name of religion. Western societies exploit the traumatic experiences of some women in the Middle East to justify their orientalist perspective on Muslim and Arab culture. Leila Aboulela challenges this misrepresentation by presenting Islam as a religion of peace, comfort, and enlightenment. Through her works, she portrays Islam as a source of spiritual guidance for her characters who feel lost in diaspora. Her novels shed light on the double marginalization experienced by Arab Muslim women in the Western context, countering the negative narratives imposed upon them.

Western writers often construct a stereotypical representation of Arabs and Muslims, perpetuating the notion of the "other." In their works of fiction, they present biased and distorted depictions of Arabs and Muslim women, portraying them as oppressed, uneducated, uncivilized, and mistreated in the name of Islam. These portrayals often reinforce the image of the submissive Arab woman who is oppressed by Arab Muslim men, creating a narrative that suggests Arab women require rescue.

Additionally, there is a tendency to confuse social customs and traditions with Islamic principles, leading to the emergence of myths about women in Islam. For example, some believe that women suffer from inequality due to Islamic teachings favoring males over females, thus promoting the idea that they need to be saved or liberated. Some individuals manipulate verses from the Quran to justify violence against women, using religion as a means of rationalizing their actions. It is important to recognize that these representations and myths do not accurately reflect the diversity, complexities, and empowerment present within Arab and Muslim communities.

Islamic feminism, as defined by Margot Badran, refers to a feminist discourse and practice that operates within an Islamic framework. It draws its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice for both women and men in all aspects of their existence. Islamic feminism is not a fixed or rigid identity but rather a contextual and strategic positioning of oneself. This positioning is established through actions, behaviors, and writings that bridge the gap between religion and gender, advocating for freedom of thought, equality, and justice.

Miriam Cooke, in her book *Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies*, highlights the distinctions between Islamic feminists and Islamists. Islamists support political Islam, asserting that the Quran and hadith necessitate an Islamic government. While some Islamists may advocate for women's rights in public, they often fail to address gender inequality in the private sphere. The term "Islamic" serves as a bridge between Muslim and Islamist identities, representing a specific form of self-positioning that guides a person's speech, actions, writings, and way of life. Islamic feminists, while questioning Islamic epistemology, do so as an expansion of their faith rather than a rejection of it. In their speeches, essays, and other forms of expression, an Islamic feminist who has authored a novel or a memoir may adopt alternative perspectives to convey their message effectively.

The selection of specific works of fiction holds significant meaning as they serve as a means of communication between Eastern and Western cultures, aiming to bridge the gap of differences. The primary objective of this study is to explore gender roles and shed light on how male dominance and colonization have led to misinterpretations of the East. The novelist endeavors to dismantle these misconceptions and misrepresentations of Muslims and Arabs. Her intention is to empower women by challenging the stereotypes propagated by Western culture.

For example, in the two novels being examined, Leila Aboulela portrays a journey between two worlds in search of freedom and security. The protagonists discover solace in religion as they embrace their faith and beliefs, offering them a sense of salvation. Through her fiction, Aboulela challenges prevailing narratives and seeks to empower women by presenting alternative perspectives and countering the stereotypes perpetuated by Western society.

In an interview with Clarie Chamber (2012) Aboulela speaks about when she first started writing *Minaret*. She adds:

I imagined it as a Muslim feminist fiction. The female heroine is let down by the men in her life: her father, then her brother, she gets highly disillusioned with her partner Anwar, and even Tamer, who is portrayed sympathetically because he is devout like her, disappoints her due to his immaturity. Finally, she leans on God and her faith. That's how my reasoning went. And I assumed that if this were a secular feminist fiction, she would eventually rely on her profession and possibly her friends after her failure with men.

In the two works, Aboulela uses female figures to support and rescue other women in order to resist stereotyping and to prove that women do not need a male figure or the West to save them. The current study reveals not only the social, political issues, but also the psychological and spiritual conflict the protagonists endure throughout their journey of self-discovery. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (2012) states that “the minority that resists totalization”. She discusses the struggle of Muslim women in a foreign land through a feminist lens. The two novels depict the journey of two Muslim female protagonist who share the same experience of displacement in western setting. They find power through embracing Islam and holding on to Hijab as a part of their identity. The two young Sudanese protagonists share the quest of self-discovery in exile in addition to their search for their real home.

Both Sammar and Najwa share an experience of disconnectedness and self-imposed exile in Europe. Their sense of alienation is shaped by Post-colonial culture effect; as a hybrid living in two places, Sammar experiences geographical and emotional exile and do not grow a sense of belonging to either. Sammar alternates between the gap between the collectivistic society (Sudan) and migrating to an Individualistic society (England). Even though she lives independently in a place where individuals are responsible only for their actions; she still is influenced

by the collectivistic mentality as she thinks of the consequences of loving Rae that may not only affect her life, but her son, the family and community as well and thus she feels torn between the two places. In England, she feels disconnected from the people there where the setting's winter would bring her darkness and depression. In the foreign land of Aberdeen, her feeling of loss includes who she is or what she wants. She did not personalize her place in Aberdeen because it was only an escape for her not a real home after her husband's death. However, she feels displaced in Sudan as it constantly reminds her of her husband's loss; she idealized and defended her native land. Sammar expresses her feelings towards Sudan: "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white "(p.48). She mentions that in the novel saying; "To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, and she had walked every day after school him and Hanan... To go to where everything happened, her aunt's house; laughter on their wedding, fire when she brought Tarig's body home " (p.49).

Moreover, Aboulela intentionally empowers Sammar on many levels, not only to overcome wrong stereotypical representations of Muslims in contemporary Britain, but also to break free from grief and mourning. She succeeded in breaking the barriers through investing in Islamic faith, rituals and beliefs. She believes that her only salvation for peace and stability is resonating to God which is reflected in the following extract;

The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes.

Days in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers...without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night. (p.16)

Sammar portrays a multi-alienated female protagonist who endures a longtime grieving her husband's death in addition to her loss of identity, self and motherhood. Sharia's mourning period for a widow is Four months and ten days, a woman must wait this period of time until she can get married or beautify herself. However, "Sammar had not worn make-up or perfume since Tarig died four years ago (p.69). Her thoughts about this specific time that it is "not too short and not too long" she adds that "Allah's sharia was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves" (p.69). Sammar represent an example of an independent Muslim woman who is willingly accept and follow

sharia where she is in a secular European space. Thus, it deconstructs misconceptions about Sharia being a social or an authoritative governmental law enforced on individuals. However, it is a divine counsel that is concerned with personal affairs and helps individuals to grow close to God. Aboulela pinpoint this point in all of her writings saying:

Islam isn't just part of the culture in my fiction, it's not a social norm or something like that, it's to do with the individual and their faith and their own belief and what they want to do. I think that this has been central to my writing, and maybe this is what makes my writing different from that of other writers, who see the sharia solely as part of society and part of culture, rather than belonging to the individual herself. It's highlighted in my work, because my characters are largely based in Britain, which is not a Muslim country, and yet they as individuals want to practice Islam (p.111)

Aboulela portrays how women suffer from depression and mental struggle through Sammar's alienation from her own son and homeland. The author believes that "modern life can be quick to categorize sadness, grief, and sheer exhaustion as mental illness" (p.111). She speaks in "And My Fate Was Scotland": about the transcending from Muslim-majority culture to a secular culture in Scotland as a 'trauma that no amount of time could cure, an eternal culture shock' (p.180). Similar to Sammar's dilemma, Aboulela herself experienced feelings of loss; she further elaborates saying:

I moved from heat to cold, from the Third World to the First- I adjusted, got used to the change over time. But in coming to Scotland, I also moved from a religious Muslim culture to a secular one and that move was the most disturbing of all, the trauma that no amount of could cure, an eternal cultural shock (p.189)

Homi Bhabha discusses what he calls 'melancholic revolt' which is concerned with colonial subjects. He writes that these subjects; "must not be taken 'at face value for its apparent victimage and passivity'; however, as a 'mental constellation of revolt' in the deconstructionist vein of 'narrative metonymy . . . outside the sentence, bit by bit [through] its insistent self-exposure' (as cited in in Adam,2018).

By the same token, Sammar felt alienated from Rae at some point despite their deep connection because she "wondered how Rae would feel if he ever saw her praying. Would he feel alienated from her, the

difference between them accentuated, underlined...?"(p.76). The feeling deepens as she "felt separate from him, exiled while he was in his homeland, fasting while he was eating turkey and drinking wine. They lived in worlds divided by simple facts- religion, country of origin, race- data that fills forms" (p.34).

The catharsis of Sammar's alienation is represented in her homecoming; where she comes back to her son and family. In Sudan, the colors were vivid and bright, nature looks different and more attractive where she really belongs. She understands that she belongs where her son does. She found herself and thus, she had to forget about Rae as "the sun and dust would erode her feelings for him" (p.160) The moment of her self-identification and di-alienation is described as follow:

Her homesickness was cured, her eyes cooled by what she saw, the colours and how the sky was so much bigger than the world below, transparent. She heard the sound of a bell as the single, silly light of a bicycle lamp jerked down the pitted road. A cat cried out like a baby and everything without a wind had a smell; sand and jasmine bushes, torn eucalyptus leaves (p.144-45)

Aboulela's subverts and combats orientalist masculinity through Rae's illness representation in addition to one of his dreams and Sammar's discomfort and confrontation with Rae about his status as an Orientalist. Orientalist masculinity is represented in Rae's European Western privilege, whiteness, intellectuality and academic pursuit. Rae is regarded as well-respected scholar in his field while his opinions on Middle Eastern issues are pursued by many media outlets in addition to his book "*The Illusion of an Islamic Threat*" (p.5) Sammar mentions in the novel how Rae adds to her knowledge through teaching her new information about Islam that she is unaware of (p.93).

However, the novel challenges these representations with Rae's initial need for a translator to help him understand. This enlightenment refers to both; the understanding of the Arabic language in addition to grasping Islam correctly (Chambers, p. 93). Sammar's job as a translator is viewed as a "moulding Arabic into English, trying to be transparent like a pane of glass not obscuring the meaning of any word" (Aboulela, p.167). Sammar is offered agency through her capability to change Rae's perspective about the world which resulted in his conversion to Islam. Rae's uncle converted to Islam after living in the Middle East which gave hope to Sammar they he would also say the Shahada (Islamic Oath).

Aboulela empowers her female protagonist by giving her power and authority to confront Rae and express her shame towards his objectivity and passivity. She tells him, "Don't you realize how much you hurt me staying objective and detached, like you are above all of this, above me, looking down" (Aboulela, p.128). In Brendan Smyth's "To Love the Orientalist: Masculinity in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*," Rae is identified as a "redeemed" Orientalist (2010,p.170) as he attempts to remain unprejudiced and detached to transcend the "misinformed writings".Aboulela stresses on how Rae's academic detachment is just an "illusion". Hence, he could not remain apart from socio-cultural contexts. Another technique used to subvert western notions is highlighting Rae's illness; Aboulela combats the stereotypical representation of the orientalist as being powerful, strong and authoritative. The western concept of intellectual superior activities is connected to an image of the masculine with a separated mind. Moreover, John Stotesbury (2004) states that; Rae's physical weakness and being hospitalized allow "Sammar to approach him about Rae's illness, depicting the inherent contradictions associated with the notion of Orientalist masculinity. While Rae may claim to be objective, rational, and unbound, the emphatic proclamation of his body actually exposes these Orientalist notions as illusory. Rae's illness then, is thus a symbol for a specific hegemonic notion of masculinity in crisis. Furthermore, Rae detaches himself from the Orientalist masculinity which enables him to become objective. He remains objective about sociocultural context through his logical perception about knowledge and claims. However, his attempts to stay objective through logic replicates how orientalists justify the Western representation of the Other. Aboulela explains further on the concept of masculinity in crisis through Rae's dreams recounting. He explains his dream to Sammar saying;

I was in a big house with many rooms. It was almost like a mansion. I was hiding because outside the house I had been followed, chased for days. I carried a sword in my hand and there was blood on it, my enemies' blood, but I myself, my clothes and my hands were clean and I was proud of that (p.95).

Aboulela disrupts hegemonic narratives of Orientalist masculinity in her depictions of Rae. I wish now to turn to the way in which Aboulela's characters, rather than capitulating to the dominant competing discourses of Orientalism and what Nash identifies as "Islamism," negotiate a new vision by rejecting the imposition of over-determined Orientalist

subjectivities. As we have seen, the novel carefully undermines the authority invested in Orientalist masculinity and knowledge/power. She challenges traditional symbols of male power and confronts the crisis of masculinity by depicting the breaking of a sword in one of Rae's dreams. This symbolic act represents the dismantling of orientalist notions of masculine dominance. Aboulela sees prevailing forms of masculinity as reflections of aggression, bloodshed, and violence. Rae will no longer be able to permit truth claims about the Other. He elaborates;

I went into a room full of smoke, a lot of smoke but when I checked there was no fire. When I left the room, the handle of my sword broke. I held it broken in my hands and knew that it could never be mended, it could never be reliable again. This was a terrible loss, I don't know why, but I had this feeling of deep loss because I had to go on without the sword. (p.95)

The author employs the use of dreams to challenge and disrupt the dominant Orientalist masculinity that Rae once embodied. The dream sequences, characterized by images of loss, battle, and swords, symbolize Rae's internal struggle with his conversion to Islam. The loss of the sword in the dream serves as a foreshadowing of Rae's growing conflict between his academic pursuits and his newfound religious beliefs. Through his conversion, Rae's objectivity and detached approach to academia are shattered, as he embarks on a journey of deepening his understanding of Islam with complete subjectivity. This transformation breaks the dominance of the Orientalist masculinity that once defined him. Furthermore, Rae's conversion also serves to deconstruct the Western narrative that claims to liberate Islamic societies from perceived oppression. Unlike other characters who may have been swayed by notions of democracy and freedom in the West, Sammar and Rae find their salvation in Islam.

As the debates on topics such as the veil, gender discrimination and freedom of expression show, even when it comes to curbing the visibility of Islam, there is still an area of contact in which Europe is trying to step out of its hegemonic fears of Islam and Muslims to understand Islam and Muslims, who now inhabit European spaces. In other words, as Islam re-centers in public debates, Europe will be decentered, which will make it possible to think "beyond" Europe (679), thus challenging the binaries through a reversal. Before September 11, however, the position of Islam in the public sphere and its appropriation

by Muslim individuals in Europe and the US was quite similar to what Rae, the Professor of Islamic Studies, said in Aboulela's *The Translator* Rae says:

No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted that Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon, 36 who I have always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North Africans he wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism. When the Iranian revolution broke out, it took everyone here by surprise. Who were these people? What was making them tick? Then there was a rush of writing, most of it misinformed. (p.109)

Rae and Sammar agreed how Islam is a religion of justice and liberation for women, slaves and oppressed people; it gives agency and voice for the marginalized. Rae confesses his regret telling Sammar; "What I regret most ... is that I used to write things like 'Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives,' as if I didn't need dignity myself" (p.200). Iranian scholar Ali Shari'ati argues that unlike Western ideologies that privilege the elite, Islam serves social justice for all people. He further explains that: Islam is the first school of social thought that recognizes the masses as the basis, the fundamental and consensus factor in determining history – not the elect as Nietzsche thought, not the aristocracy and nobility as Plato claimed, not great personalities as Carlyle and Emerson believed, not those of pure blood as Alexis Carrel imagined, not the priests or the intellectuals, but the masses. (Shari'ati as cited in Smyth)

According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) the West justifies its terror and war on third world countries for the sake of saving women and minorities. She analyzes Spivak's argument and adds on how Muslim women are still being portrayed in the media for supporting the war in Afghanistan in order to save or free Afghans, as well as the larger "War on Terrorism" On resisting western authority over Arab women, Aboulela subverts the idea of white men saving brown women especially Arabs. In a traditional orientalist romance, Rae would save Sammar and liberate her from her backwardness and primitive background. However, in the novel, Sammar, the brown Muslim female is the one who rejects the hegemonic discourse and saves Rae. Aboulela rejects the discourses provided by the Orientalists and terrorist groups. For instance, Sammar and Rae are against the claim made by a young terrorist saying that; "Western men worship money and women. Some of them see the world

through dollar bills, some of them see the world through the thighs of a woman” (p.159).

According to Stephan Guth (2003 “The majority of Western reviewers relate the novel to an extra-literary context, which in most cases is Islamic extremism. They praise Aboulela’s ‘seriousness’ and ‘moderation’ in contrast to the discourse of ‘fundamentalist’ radicals” (14). However, he believed that the novel challenged Western discursive and literary traditions while remaining detached from being identified as what Western reviewers would call “Islamic fundamentalism.”

Sammar becomes in control of her own life, feelings and decisions. She returns back to her homeland and fulfill her role as a mother as she would carry her son the same way Hanan would carry hers. Her regret for abandoning her son has helped her to become a better mother, she would pick a game to play with her son where she " pretended Amir was a baby again and she had to carry him," and she builds a bond with her baby (162). She finally becomes de-alienated as she enjoyed her life, she adjusted to her new lifestyle as she started a new job, used to teach, linked faces to names in addition to Picking Amir and Dalia up from school.

The author empowers Najwa, the protagonist in *Minaret*, through various means, allowing her to navigate the challenges of her life with strength and resilience. Firstly, Aboulela portrays Najwa's journey of self-discovery and personal growth, empowering her to find her own voice and agency. Najwa's pursuit of education and her determination to become independent demonstrate her strength and determination. Additionally, Aboulela showcases Najwa's financial independence as she works as a nanny, granting her the ability to make choices that align with her own aspirations and desires. Najwa's resistance to traditional gender roles and her questioning of oppressive practices further empower her, challenging societal norms and paving the way for her own liberation. Moreover, Aboulela portrays Najwa's inner strength and resilience in the face of adversity, highlighting her ability to overcome challenges and persevere. Finally, Najwa's embrace of her faith in Islam becomes a source of empowerment, providing her with spiritual strength, guidance, and a sense of purpose. Through these various elements, Aboulela empowers Najwa, allowing her to navigate her own path, break free from societal constraints, and carve out a better life for herself

Minaret depict how the protagonist, Najwa, undergoes a journey of self-discovery and personal growth. Through her experiences, she finds her

own voice and agency, breaking free from societal expectations and patriarchal constraints. The novel portrays the Westernized, secular life of Najwa in Sudan which belongs to a privileged family of a Sudanese minister. Her elite life gradually deteriorates as the Leftist coup in Sudan removes her father from power and exposes his corruption and embezzlement of the government's money which ends with his imprisonment and execution. Thus, the family moves to London seeking political asylum before airports closes. In exile Najwa faces deterioration in her life after her father's execution and mother's disintegration of health. She experiences the life of a domestic servant to a wealthy Arab family. However, Najwa takes up employment as a nanny, which grants her financial independence and the ability to support herself. This empowers her to make choices that align with her own goals and values. Ironically, while living in Sudan, Najwa and her family lived an elite westernized life which included parties at Khartoum American 32 club and frequent holidays to London. In this period of her life, Najwa and her family practice some Islamic rituals as a part of social and tradition norms such as participating in charitable works, fasting in Ramadan to enjoy the vibes. However, none of them used to pray regularly nor women wore hijab. Through her flashbacks, Najwa identifies herself as secular while living in Sudan, a supposedly Arab and Islamic space. Unlike the expected representation of a female Arab woman, Najwa felt different from girls in her university as she wore mini-skirts while they used to dress differently from her, wearing hijab, modest dresses and praying regularly. She experienced feelings of alienation, estrangement and the in-betweenness as she could not establish a solid self-identification in addition to her lifestyle that is distant from her own people and religion. She identifies religious and conservative values as an obstacle to modernization. In her narration she refers to the "misspent past," where she felt unease and discomfort when she wore revealing clothes as strange men appraise her body. She adds that the scene of the servants of the house waking up early to pray in the morning troubled her because she and her family do not pray even when they are wide awake. Najwa in Khartoum viewed devout students as unsophisticated and old-fashioned ("They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason why we were not friends" (14). She inaccurately associated religious people with lower-class status because of their lack of western education privilege, financial gain and social growth. Similar to Najwa, Randa her friend portrays the secular-elite social status as an opposed way of religion because for them, religion is

seen as the social growth blocking: "We're supposed to go forward, not go back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything?" (29).

in *Minaret* the novelist reverses the stereotypical representations of Islam held by many westerners. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks, Najwa exhibits resilience and strength. She overcomes adversity, demonstrating her inner power and determination to carve out a better life for herself. Najwa endured a journey towards embracing her faith in Islam becomes a source of empowerment. It provides her with spiritual strength, guidance, and a sense of purpose, enabling her to navigate the complexities of her life with resilience and grace. The symbols used in the novel are hijab (veil) and the mosque. She intentionally portrays Najwa and the other women in the Muslim community as well educated and highly intellectual women in a way that defeats the approach western ideologies portray Muslim women as inferior, uncivilized and barbaric.

Najwa feels alienated and in a desperate need to find a home in the new unfamiliar setting of exile. She keeps holding on to people who would feel like Sudan until she grows resilient and religious. For example, she accepts Anwar's humiliating and abusive relationship in London because he reminds her of home. She grows closer to Tamer because of their mutual feeling of loss and their desire to find their true identity through practicing Islam. In addition, Tamer is a source of the pity she has always craved; "There was a time when I had craved pity, needed it but never got it. And there are nights when I want nothing else but someone to stroke my hair and feel sorry for me "(32). Afterwards, she resonates to religion and God as she finds identifies herself within the Muslim community. In the mosque, she finds a place of home where she gets a sense of belonging and a companionship. She explains her feelings saying; "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room "(30). She expresses her feelings when she entered the mosque as "the words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it."31

Minaret begins as a novel about migration that typically depicts identity crisis and culture clashes; it might as well fall into a category of romance fiction as Najwa and Tamer's friendship grows intimately. However, the novel walks the reader through a spiritual journey of

regaining self-identification and sense of belonging as opposed to other chaotic and fragmented narratives of migrants in exile. The protagonist resonates to Islam as a coping mechanism, thus, she reconnects with herself and her emotions to reconstruct her past. Najwa sums up her final spiritual thoughts and her full trust in God: "Not well today. Not well today means that tomorrow I will be better. It is a realistic prediction, a reassuring one. I just have to wait" (273).

Aboulela sheds light on the importance of education and knowledge for women especially immigrants in diaspora. For instance, education helped Sammar to learn about the rules, laws and regulation of Scotland. Lack of education would have made her feel helpless like the Nigerian woman of three children that Yasmin mentioned before, the woman lived seven years in Aberdeen without knowing her eligibility for benefits for children. Even though illiteracy rate in Sudan is 60% or 32% according to Sammar's narration; she acknowledges the value of education. She mentions how Sudan's government does not invest in educating the Sudanese. she points out how education is not a priority for the government as they do not help students to learn or even attend school. In addition, she criticizes the 'Erasing literacy' classes she would teach in Sudan for the shortage of books and resources in addition to the government's limited syllabus. She describes the books as "humiliating to learn from"(43). On the contrary, Najwa suffered in England to find a proper job because she did not continue her education and did not have a college degree. In the end of the novel, she decides to learn again and finish her degree.

In conclusion, this paper delves into two examples of contemporary Anglophone fiction by Leila Aboulela, wherein she reflects her own experiences as an immigrant Muslim woman through the journeys of her protagonists towards spiritual growth. As a devout Muslim, Aboulela introduces Islam to the Western audience in a positive light. She employs Islam as a metaphorical minaret, guiding characters like Sammar and Najwa on the path to self-discovery and the reclamation of their core identities. These characters not only face spiritual struggles but also overcome social, traumatic, and political hardships. Aboulela actively combats Islamophobia and patriarchal ideologies that arise from extremism and secularism. She challenges the notion of invisibility, oppression, and backwardness associated with the hijab by using it as a symbol of visibility for her characters in public spaces. The author explores the dynamic between religion and location, illustrating how some individuals only adhere to religious rituals within Muslim-majority

environments but abandon these beliefs in secular societies. Aboulela emphasizes the significance of location in relation to religious practices, as her characters continue to observe Islamic rituals such as prayer and fasting while living in European settings. In the two novels, Leila Aboulela places a significant emphasis on Islam as a refuge and source of solace for Muslims, providing relief and safety from the challenges faced by individuals living in the Western world. Through her narratives, she offers a more realistic and nuanced portrayal of Islam by highlighting the distinction between practicing Muslims and those who are non-practicing. Aboulela's novels demonstrate how Islam serves as a cornerstone in the lives of certain characters. It is not merely a religious belief but a way of life that enlightens and governs their actions. Islam becomes a *modus vivendi*, shaping their values, choices, and interactions with the world around them. By highlighting the role of Islam in the lives of her characters, Aboulela provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted aspects of the faith and its significance in shaping individual identities. Through her portrayal, she aims to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions while presenting a more authentic and lived experience of Islam. Throughout their journeys, both women ultimately reach a stage of acceptance and forgiveness towards themselves and the world around them. They embrace the physical, mental, and emotional changes that come with their survival journey in Britain, symbolizing their personal growth and resilience.

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