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**Identity Formation of Muslim Women in a Multi-cultural
Society in Reference to Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* and Leila
Aboulela, *Minaret***

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Requirements for the Degree of Magister in British Commonwealth and American Studies

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my parents, whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity ring in my ears. My sisters, Bouchra and Hiba, and my brothers Mahmoud and Abdallah stand by my side and are very special.

A very special thank to my dear husband, Demmana Amar, for his effective and emotional support.

I dedicate this work to my sweetie son, Mohamed Siradj Eddine.

Thanks for all family members of Zeghoudi, Boukhalkhal and Demmana.

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Abstract

This work deals with the issue of identity renegotiation of Muslim women that has recently become a crucial subject, especially after the attacks of 11th September 2001. Muslim women are subject to different types of harassment as they struggle to define their identity in Britain's multicultural society. Two novels have been tackled to deal with this issue: *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali and *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela. These two novels highlight the challenge that Muslim women faced to negotiate their identity; and thus, they refute the misrepresentations that the West used against them and their religion. This study intends to present female literature that aims at writing back to Western discourse. It draws attention to the complexities of Muslim women's identities and experiences in multi-cultural societies. The protagonists in both novels are women, who seek to redefine their identity by negotiating private and public issues. The research demonstrates differences concerning Muslim women's attachment to their culture in asserting their identity. The protagonist of *Brick Lane* prefers to combine British culture with her Bangladeshi culture to create a modern identity whereas the main character of *Minaret* defines her identity by preserving her culture of origin.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Identity renegotiation of Muslim women is an issue that is tackled by female writers of the post-colonial period. Women, who are oppressed whether by society or the colonizer, get the chance to speak out their rights. The search for one's identity in a multi-cultural society has been one of the discussed points in several postcolonial researches.

Postcolonial female writers started to think about writing in a way that reflects women's oppression and their loss of cultural identity. Even though colonialism is not yet erased, postcolonial literature gives a chance to the colonized to make his/her voice heard. One of the aspects that this literature touches on is the clash between the two opposite cultures, the indigenous and the adopted one. Thus, the search for one's identity and belonging in a different society is the concern for immigrants.

Postcolonial literature aims at writing back to the canon, which is the centre or the West. Hence, the misrepresentation of the East in reference to the West is also one of the main points that the writers of postcolonial period try to correct. English is mainly the language that postcolonial writers use in dealing with their culture and values.

Within this context, Feminist Theory emerged and gave women a chance to speak out their rights; it deals with the issue of women and their misrepresentation. For a long period of time, women suffered from both the patriarchal domination and the experience of being regarded like the persecuted races. The main area of interest of this theory is to question the imperial and patriarchal ideologies.

One of the events that has a great impact on the identity formation of Muslim women is the attacks of 11th September 2001. After that event, Muslims become regarded as a threat to British society. They attempt to define their identity by selecting between the two choices: integrating in British society or being regarded as extremists. Muslim women are

also affected by those attacks because of the veil. As a result of such event, the veil became associated with oppression and persecution. However, Muslim women consider wearing the veil as an indication of their religion and culture. They face obstacles in asserting their identity in a multi-cultural society.

With the aim of exploring how Muslim women faced challenges in their path towards their identity formation in a multi-cultural society, the present study examines the works of Monica Ali and Leila Aboulela. The two postcolonial/female writers write about the situation of Muslim women and the problems they face in British multicultural society. In their works, *Brick Lane* (2004) and *Minaret* (2005), Ali and Aboulela deal with women as main characters and attempt to picture their lives and the struggles that they pass through to assert their identity. In doing so, both writers base their works on issues of identity crisis and religion as two aspects that Muslim women face in Britain. The protagonists of both works took different paths to assert their identity: the protagonist of the first novel asserts her identity with an attempt to assimilate to British society; meanwhile, she remains bound to her religion. While the main character of the second novel sees that religion as the only source that defines her identity.

Muslim women attempt to assert their identity with a purpose of showing the real image of women, who are considered as passive and silent. Wearing the veil is viewed as an obstacle to their situation in Britain; it is considered as a remarkable element for their suffering, especially after the event of September 11th, 2001. The problem of defining one's identity in a multicultural society is the basic point for such a research. A set of questions form the ground for this study: How do Muslim female writers discuss the issue of women identity in their works? What are the challenges Muslim women face in forming their

identity in the literary works of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*? What is the role of Islam in defining Muslim women's identity? Do Muslim women have the same attitude towards their religion in a process of defining themselves in Britain?

The present work is an attempt to have an idea about one of the crucial issues that female writers deal with in the postcolonial period. In analyzing the works of Monica Ali, the importance of this study lays in the presentation of the significant problems that immigrant Muslim women face in a foreign society, especially after the events of 9/11. Furthermore, *Brick Lane* is a work that attempts to challenge the Western misrepresentation about women, who are viewed as pagans, foreigners, and inferior. Concerning the work of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, it is also significant since it puts a focus on the importance of religion in Muslim women's lives. Based on this work, Islam is viewed as the sole source for Muslim women in a multicultural society to renegotiate their identity. However, the present research casts light on the struggles that Muslim women face in British multicultural society. The protagonists of the two works renegotiate their identities differently.

Female identity is a subject that is tackled in postcolonial period by feminist writers to change the stereotypes that were used against Muslim women. As a central idea for such a statement, Muslim women, in both novels, felt proud of their religion; it is regarded as a key component of their identity. Although Muslim women face obstacles and problems in Britain, they regard their religion as something that they cannot live without. For both writers, the search for one's identity is linked to the search for one's religion.

Several studies have been pursued to discuss the issue of Muslim women's identity in Britain. Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn with their book, *Muslim Women in the United*

Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images (2003), tried to portray the experience of women as Muslims in United Kingdom. They outlined the kinds of prejudice that Muslim women face as a reaction to their religion. The visible aspects such as *hijab* evokes the phenomenon of Islamophobia. Hasan, Majed aims at exploring how Islam is depicted and how Muslim identities are constructed in his dissertation, *Islam and Muslim Identities in Four Contemporary British Novels* (2012). The term 'Islamic Postcolonialism' forms the theoretical basis to such a research. It applies the anti-colonial resistant methodology of postcolonialism from a Muslim perspective.

The issue of silence, which is regarded as one of the aspects of Muslim women's representation, has been discussed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985), she spoke about oppressed women, as an example of subjugated women. She asked whether women do have voice or not, and whether their voice is heard or not. She came to conclusion that women do not have voice; and thus, they cannot speak. In discussing the silence of female, Spivak explained that the problem of not having voice comes as a result of others' unwillingness to listen. She added that subaltern cannot speak because their words are not interpreted properly. So, the problem of not having voice is mainly because of the failure of interpretation rather than the failure of articulation.

The issues of Muslim women's misrepresentation and alienation in a multi-cultural society have been discussed by F. Gül Koçsoy and Firouzeh Ameri in their works. F. Gül Koçsoy examines the double alienation of Muslim women in his article Double Alienation in Monica Ali's Novel Brick Lane (2010). In this article, he depicted the lives of the Bangladeshi Muslim women in multi-cultural Britain. Since Nazneen is an immigrant and a woman, she suffered from social and psychological aspects of alienation. Hence, she was

subjected to double alienation after being regarded as an immigrant and as a woman at the same time. Firouzeh Ameri discusses the Western stereotypes in reference to Islam and Muslim women in a thesis with the title *Veiled experiences: re-writing women's identities and experiences in contemporary Muslim fiction in English*. Different works written by female writers in English, have been presented in this thesis. One of the analyzed novels in this thesis is Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). It is a fiction that writes back to the canon. It presents Muslim women's experiences and the tensions they face in affirming their identity in western countries.

The present study relies upon a set of approaches in examining Muslim women's identity formation in Britain's multi-cultural society. The two contemporary literary works have studied this issue to show the different paths that Muslim women follow in defining their identity. The present research starts with a theoretical approach that focuses on postcolonial/feminist theories and their interest in Muslim women's identity with the aim of giving voice to a silenced group. This section presents the link between postcolonial condition and the displacement that Muslim women experienced in a multi-cultural world. In the postcolonial period, Muslim women suffered from religious other rather than racial discrimination, especially after the event of 9/11 as mentioned in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005).

The research also necessitates a descriptive/analytical approach for knowing facts about British multicultural society and its impact on Muslim women's identity renegotiation in a literature by Muslim female writers. This involves a descriptive analysis of the experiences, attitudes, relationships, and actions of those under study. The second chapter

presents *Brick Lane* that examines the protagonist's struggle to define her identity through attempting to combine aspects of the two cultures. Unlike the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, the third chapter analyses *Minaret's* main character, who asserts her identity by practicing only her own culture.

This study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is the theoretical context of the study which presents postcolonial feminist theory and its concerns with the challenges that Muslim women face in their attempt to assert their identity in a multi-cultural society. The second chapter examines the work of Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (2004) which highlights the defiance that Muslim women face in Britain. It presents the obstacles they confront in redefining their identity. The last chapter deals with the novel of Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (2005) that casts light on the experience of a Muslim woman, who becomes aware of her religion after living a life almost devoid of Islamic practices. In Britain, she discovers that Islam is the only thing that relieves her in a different environment wherein she suffers from prejudice and lack of interest.

CHAPTER ONE

Muslim Women's Search for Identity in Postcolonial Feminist Texts

Introduction

Muslim women identity crisis is one of the most important issues that have been widely discussed by postcolonial writers. Female voice and women gained attention because of their awareness of the double forms of oppression. From a feminist angle, a set of women writers, such as Monica Ali and Leila Aboulela, get the opportunity to speak about women's experiences in a moment to reconstruct their identity in general and their religious identity in particular.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first one is an overview of postcolonial theory by tackling some of the main names in the field like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha and their views about women's identity. It further explores the role of culture in defining one's identity in a multicultural setting. The second section discusses the emergence of females' voices and their quest for Muslim identity through literature. The last part examines how British Muslim female writers deal with the theme of identity in their writings. It also exposes the reconstruction of Arab/Muslim women religious identity after the event of 9/11.

I-Culture and Identity in Postcolonial Literature

In the postcolonial period, one of the main concerns that Muslim women looked for is to assert their culture, and thus, their identity. Culture and identity can be considered as two central themes in postcolonial literature. The issue of postcolonial cultural identity has given rise to much discussion and debate in the past decades.

1- Women and Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonialism is an after-colonial development. It emerged with the process of decolonization when many colonies got their independence. The term is used 'to describe any kind of resistance, particularly against class, race, and gender oppression.'¹ Moreover, it is concerned with a literature that articulates the identity of the colonized peoples; they attempted to develop their identity by resisting the culture and values of the colonizer. Hence, the duty of the postcolonial theorist is 'to insert the often 'absent' colonized subject into the dominant discourse in a way that resists/subverts the authority of the colonizer.'²

Postcolonialism is not only a critical theory, it deals with the historical analysis of colonization and decolonization by focusing on the question of representation. Postcolonial theorists examined how the colonized peoples were represented by the colonizer. They aim at correcting the misrepresentations and asserting the identity of the decolonized. Women were also marginalized and misrepresented by the colonizer; hence, postcolonial theorists endeavor to let the voice of this silenced group be heard.

Postcolonial theory has been shaped by many thinkers and theorists: Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The psychologist-philosopher Frantz Fanon dealt with the issue of the silenced and misrepresented peoples in Africa and everywhere. He urged them to find a voice and identity through reclaiming the past and structuring the future. In his ground-breaking work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), he focuses on the role of women in resisting colonial oppression. For him, the issue of women and veiling was a symbol of national liberation. In the revolutionary

¹ Raj Kumar, Mishra. "Postcolonial feminism: Looking into within-beyond-to difference." *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4. 4(2013): 130

² Ritu, Tyagi. "Understanding Postcolonial Feminism in relation with Postcolonial and Feminist Theories." *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 1. 2(2014): 45

struggle, the veil was an icon both for women's role in opposing colonial rule and for an identification of women with their nation.

In his essay '*Algeria Unveiled*' (2003), Fanon focused on the importance of veiled women in the war of independence. The colonizer aimed at unveiling women as a way to break national resistance, because 'making women accessible to the eye is part of male colonial ownership and control.'³ In addition, the colonizer claimed that the veil is the most visible marker of women's oppression; therefore, Fanon argued that the purpose of the colonizer is to liberate Muslim women in order to gain control over their men, and to subordinate Algerian society to colonialism. He affirmed that the forced exposure of women is an abuse and persecution not only of women but also of the nation. As a result, Fanon appealed to Muslim women to join the nationalist cause beside men. The veil played a significant role in hiding the weapons and it was 'not only as a symbol of cultural difference but also a protection from and resistance to the colonial-qua-Christian gaze.'⁴

The question of representing Muslim women by the West has also been explained by Edward Said in his influential book, *Orientalism* (1978). Muslim women have been the central point of Western efforts to understand Islam, yet their image was distorted and misrepresented. They described women as passive victims of male dominance while considering the veil an aspect of suppression and backwardness. Said suggested that the Oriental woman in Western discourse has no voice to speak for herself, and it is the man, who represents her and gives her a voice but not an opinion. According to Western

³ Daphne, Grace . *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Pluto Press, 2004, p. 132

⁴ Marnia, Lazreg. *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, 1994. In Daphne Grace. *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Pluto Press.

perspectives, the West is modern and civilized, and it is a place where women have freedom of action unlike the Orient, which is barbaric and primitive. Most importantly, describing Muslim women as primitive and subjugated was mainly a reason to justify the civilizing mission, which is based on the claim of rescuing those oppressed groups.

The postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha was concerned with the construction of Muslim women identity. He has superseded the search for identity with the concept of culture. He regarded that living in a world of diverse cultures affected women's action to assert their identity. The veiling of women creates an in-betweenness state of hybridity, because it is conceptualized as a borderline or a barrier between spaces and identities. In other words, wearing the veil is an ambiguous space since it defines identity and simultaneously removes any identity. According to Eastern perspective, it is a symbol of religious identity; it provides a means of protection against unwanted harassment. In Western discourse, it is an icon of the otherness of Islam and has a connotation with the inferiority of Muslim women.⁵

Having an indeterminate identity in between worlds gives Muslim women an opportunity to negotiate new identity and allows them to look for the possibility of change. 'The suspension of time, space and identity' are the results of being in an in-between state, because women's position will be both at the border of male space or public space and a border of time between past tradition and present modernity; and thus, the sense of identity will be threatened and fluid. Bhabha claims that 'These in-between spaces provide the terrain of elaborating new strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity.'⁶ Moreover, women create for themselves a personal space where they

⁵ Marnia Lazreg, *op.cit.*, 1994, p. 30

⁶ Homi, Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 2

feel free from the male gaze. This 'third space' of agency allows women to express their creativity and their unique identity.⁷

Chakravorty Spivak, in her turn, attempts in her essay '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' (1985) to argue that it is impossible for the woman of the Third World to have an agency or a voice. She adds that 'the figure of 'Third World Women' disappears into a 'pristine nothingness' since her displaced figure is 'caught between tradition and modernization.'⁸ The subaltern woman cannot speak, because her speech is improperly interpreted.

2- Negotiating Culture and Identity in a Multicultural Setting

In a multicultural setting, diverse cultures of the majority and minority communities commingle with one another. Each community retains its cultural distinctiveness and this may include: language, traditions, religion, values, race...etc. The nature of British society encourages new immigrants, which includes women, to hold over their cultural and religious differences, and this was mainly because of British multicultural policy. Caleb Rosado, who professionally specializes in multiculturalism, defines it as

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty, Spivak. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* Ashcroft Bill; Griffiths, Gareth; Tiffin, Helen (eds.). London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society.⁹

The sense of having a distinct culture with specific characteristics has played an important role in the formation of one's identity. Culture has been conceptualized by multiculturalists as being the result of 'an *active* process of creating meaning.'¹⁰ It was viewed differently by many authors; Parekh defines culture in his book, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (2000), as a 'historically created system of meaning and significance [...] in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives.'¹¹ Authors like Will Kymlicka claim that culture is mainly based on national and ethnic background and it equals nation since 'an intergenerational community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and history.'¹² Culture has a role in determining the person's affiliations to a specific group, place, traditions, and norms and it also determines his/her behaviors. Hence, he asserts further that culture 'provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres.'¹³

⁹ Caleb, Rosado. "Toward a Definition of Multiculturalism." Web page. 28 Oct. 1996. 19 Aug. 2015 <http://www.rosado.net/pdf/Def_of_Multiculturalism.pdf>.

¹⁰ Bhikhu, Parekh. *Rethinking multiculturalism. Cultural diversity and political theory*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillian, 2000, p. 153

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 143

¹² Will, Kymlicka. *Multicultural citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University press, 1995, p. 18

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 76

The construction of one's cultural identity in a multicultural setting has been one of the complex issues in the postcolonial world. Stuart Hall divides cultural identity into two aspects: communal perspective and personal perspective. Communal perspective is mainly about locating individuals in a shared culture where they negotiate their identity in accordance with the surrounding society, whereas personal perspective is about differentiating individuals from others around them.¹⁴

In dealing with the postcolonial cultural identity, Hogan splits it into three regions: 'metropolis region', which is the one of the colonizer,' 'indigenous region', which is specific for the colonized; whereas the last one is the 'region of contact.' It is the area where the two cultures interact with each other; and thus, new kinds of contact cultures will be created. The condition of being obliged to live in the region of contact affects to a great extent the person's cultural identity. Hogan argues that 'under colonialism, in the region of contact, the conflicts are so strong and pervasive that they constitute a challenge to one's cultural identity, and thus one's personal identity.'¹⁵

In a multicultural society, one's identity is challenged by other identities and each person responds to those challenges differently. These responses can be classified into stages: orthodoxy, assimilation, syncretism, and alienation. Orthodoxy means that the individual preserves his cultural traditions and integrates them in his identity. Assimilation refers to the embodiment of another culture's tradition into one's identity. Syncretism deals

¹⁴ Laura, Nurminen. *Postcolonial Cultural Identity and the Caribbean White Creole in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea and Phyllis Shand Allfrey's The Orchid House*. Diss. Turku, 2012, p. 7

¹⁵ Patrick Colm, Hogan. *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p.9

with the combination of the two cultures to create a new one. Alienation relates to the situation of being estranged from both cultures and this may lead to the loss of identity.¹⁶

¹⁶ Laura Nurminen, *op.cit.*, 2012, pp. 10-11

II- The Question of Identity in Feminist Literature

Feminist theory is one of the theories that helped those oppressed women to speak out for their rights. In literature, female writers tackled this issue to assert women's sense of identity that has been neglected for centuries.

1-Feminism and the Feminist theory

Feminism stands to face a number of restrictions and neglects, such as the issue of patriarchy, the view of religion in relation to their birth, restrictions on both physical and educational training. As a way to call for their rights and to assert their identity, women looked for equal and legal protection. In doing so, feminism, as a movement to defend women's rights, has developed through distinctive periods.

First-wave feminists struggled to defend their rights by following the Liberal approach. They advocated a large group to call for their rights, and these may include the right to extend the notion of 'liberal universal' with the inclusion of women. Every individual has the right to decide with total freedom against the restrictions of the government, but Liberalism of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was basically for men and against the liberty of women. As a result of this inequality, first- wave feminism was an attempt to call for some rights that women were deprived of.¹⁷ Based on this point, Chris argues that 'Women were regarded as irrational creatures, were not permitted to vote, own property once married and had little legal control over their children or their bodies.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Boutheina, Amri Chenini. *Feminist/ Womanist Aesthetics and the Quest for Selfhood in the Black American Novel. A Special Reference to Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Zora Neal Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Diss. Biskra, 2012, p. 12

¹⁸ Beasley, Chris. *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. London, 2005. P. 16

Unlike first-wave feminism, second-wave feminism took a more critical stance towards liberal ideas and it was known for being modernist because of its approach. Second-wave feminists depended on using ‘universalist modes of analysis’ to reveal the ‘mechanisms’ of persecution and marginalization in society. Through these modes, they are going to overcome the aspects of power that led to the oppression and subjugation of women and other marginalized groups. Power is a downward and negative force that restrains and limits, and it became recognized as a symbol of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. As a result, second wave feminists’ main target is grounded on the endeavor to ‘invalidate’ men’s power and to insert the notion of the self.¹⁹

Third-wave feminists claimed that the attempts of second-wave feminists to empower social and political status of women failed to reach their goals. They were also known as post-feminists and they agreed that women have their own responsibility concerning their choices, beliefs and status. Moreover, they argued that women are independent enough to the point that they should not hide; and thus, they will not be marginalized. One of the principles of this wave is to encourage women to be responsible for themselves and to solve their problems without blaming society for their position.²⁰ This enforced the idea of individuality or the individual approach of liberalism²¹.

¹⁹ Boutheina Amri Chenini, *op.cit.*, 2012, p. 13

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14

²¹ a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for the protection of political and civil [liberties](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberties); *specifically* : such a philosophy that considers government as a crucial instrument for amelioration of social inequities (as those involving race, gender, or class) in <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberalism>

2- Postcolonial Feminism

One of the main concerns of the feminist writers is the situation of Muslim women in the postcolonial period. Postcolonial feminist theory is mainly concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries and in the West; whereas, its ideas were based on the ones of postcolonial theory that focused on the resistance to colonial power. Young argues that ‘Postcolonial feminism has never operated as a separate entity from postcolonialism; rather it has directly inspired the forms and the force of postcolonial politics.’²² Postcolonial theory aimed at subverting the colonizer’s discourse that attempted to inscribe inferiority on colonized peoples in order to control them. To challenge the colonial authority, postcolonial theory produced literature by colonized peoples with a purpose of asserting their identity and reclaiming their past.

While postcolonial theory was about a struggle against colonial discourse that misrepresented the colonized as inferior, postcolonial feminist theory concentrated most on the issue of women’s double colonization. For a long period of time, women were classified as the second class citizens; and thus, they were regarded as the ‘other’. Moreover, they were also considered alienated and marginalized because of the patriarchal domination. The term patriarchy refers to those systems –political, material and imaginative- which invest power in men and marginalize women. In other words, women were subjected to double colonization, because they suffered both from the patriarchal domination; and at the same time, they shared the experience of being regarded like the other persecuted races. The acceptance of such brutality, which is regarded as a ‘cultural

²² Robert J.C, Young. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. In Raj Kumar Mishra. “Postcolonial feminism: Looking into within-beyond-to difference.” *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4. 4(2013): 130

phenomenon’, led to their inferior position and prevented them from any ‘permissible recourse.’²³

Postcolonial feminism or Third World Feminism was also a response to Western feminism that is famous for its Eurocentric views. Western feminists’ misrepresentation of the third world women led to the emergence of postcolonial feminism. White women from colonizer countries misrepresented their counterparts in colonized locations by imposing silence on them and overlooking cultural, racial and social aspects of third world women. In Western discourses, the term third world feminism is often associated with cultural, social, and economic backwardness. Hence, postcolonial feminism is a discourse that seeks to improve the situation of the marginalized women whose lives, experiences and histories are different from those of Western women.

The questions of language and representation are two interrelated necessities needed in strengthening postcolonial feminism. Third world women writers based their literary texts on these two elements with the aim of asserting their identity and constructing their subjectivity. The use of a new kind of postcolonial feminist writing with more authentic forms of language was mainly a vehicle for challenging patriarchal and imperial powers. Moreover, creating a new language with feminist style, tone and feeling was a tool for women to represent themselves.

3- Identity Assertion in Feminist Literature

The last decade had witnessed an increase of literary works by writers with a multiethnic background. Most of the narratives of female writers tackled issues that aim at

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 115

bringing recognition to their identity. It was often viewed by the West as ‘being different, peculiar, complex, and mosaic.’²⁴

The theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the role of what they name a ‘minor literature’ in the articulation of the marginalized culture. In their essay, “What Is a Minor Literature,” they offer a way of evaluating the immigrants’ writings while respecting the major tradition, because they ‘live today in a language which is not their own.’²⁵ The change from minor to major status was mainly a challenge, and this was through reinventing tradition. For Deleuze and Guattari, minor literature does not have relation with a minor language, but it is ‘rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.’²⁶ Within this context, postcolonial feminist writers, such as Monica Ali and Leila Aboulela are minor literature writers.

Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that minority does not show less value and it is instead a formalization of resistance and subversion with the aim of expressing creativity and innovation. They argue that ‘the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.’²⁷ First, the language of a minority literature writer is defamiliarized through the use of words, ideas, expressions and views of the writer and this will differentiate his or her language from the one of the major culture. Second, the distance between individual concerns and the political status of the minority is

²⁴ Dalal, Sarnou. “Narratives of Arab Anglophone Women and the Articulation of a Major Discourse in a Minor Literature.” *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2014, p. 66

²⁵ Quoted in Ponzanesi, Sandra. *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*. New York: New York press, 2004, p. 17

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18

nearly connected, because ‘the cramped space [of minority literature] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.’²⁸ Third, the concerns of the individual are shared by the minority members since they are under the same social pressure. In other words, the personal becomes collective.

Having a multi-ethnic background has affected the writings of Muslim women writers. They dealt with literature, which is ‘neither Arabic nor English, but is linguistically and culturally hybrid, discursively multidimensional and literally heterogeneous.’²⁹ Using English to represent Muslims was also argued by Amin Malak. He says

Since any narrative reflects, mediates, and even reshapes the ethos of the culture from which it emanates, Muslim narratives in English then represent remarkable achievements of self-actualizing, identity-defining processes. Whatever their political, religious, or aesthetic leanings, these Muslims producing narratives in English affirm, with varying degrees, their affiliation with Islam as a source of spiritual and/or aesthetic inspiration.³⁰

Muslim women writers used Islamic words in their English narratives to reveal their culture. According to Malak, English is an anti-Muslim language with its colonial evocations and connotations; however, it serves as a language of communication for Muslim writers. ‘Words such as *fatwa*, *hajj*, *hijab*, *halal*, *inshallah*, *imam*, *intifadha*, *jihad*, *mecca*, *shari‘a*, and *ummah* have already established themselves in contemporary parlance, notwithstanding the sensational stereotypes associated with each of

²⁸ Layla, Al Maleh. *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*. New York, 2009, p. 68

²⁹ Dalal Sarnou, *op.cit.*, 2014

³⁰ Amin, Malak. *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. Albany: New York Press, 2005, p. 7

them.³¹ As a way to celebrate the values, principles, histories and the culture of Islam, English is used differently by inserting Arab words in a process, which is known as the ‘muslimization of English language.’ This process is ‘spontaneous, structureless cultural process’; and thus, English has been transformed from ‘an Islamophobic to an Islamophile language.’³² To state it clearly, Malak emphasizes that Muslim authors have recently muslimized the language regardless of any literary, religious or institutional authority. In addition, the use of English has helped Muslim writers to deal with subversive topics and issues. The process of using English does not mean that the mother tongue will be lost or fragmented. Amin Malak argues that ‘Using the English language as a tool of literary expression is not meant to denigrate the mother-language or lead to its *appauvrissement*.’³³

For the British Muslim women writers, the use of English is a matter of choice. Ghazol states, for example, that British Muslim women writers have also written works in Arabic and proclaim that the application of English instead of Arabic in Muslim literary works does not mean denial or negation, ‘but a choice offered by the individual writer’s background and sensibility, and reinforced by her study of the language and her familiarity with English literature.’³⁴ In addition, they chose it for the sake of a literary need; while, for some, English is a mother tongue.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

³² *Ibid.*, p. 7-8

³³ *Ibid.*, P. 11

³⁴ Ashour, Ghazoul, and Reda-Mekdashy Hasna. ‘Writers in English’ *Arab Women Writers: a Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999*. The American University in Cairo, 2008: 345-355.

III- Muslim Women's Identity in Postcolonial Literature

Islamic religion became one of the newly tackled issues in postcolonial literature. Muslim women attempted to assert their Muslim identity, which has been misrepresented by the West after the event of 9/11 through writing back to the canon. They did this in a new form of postcolonialism, which is Islamic postcolonialism³⁵, where Muslim women identity is a central theme.

1- Islam and Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism seems to have some common points with Islam. The writings of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said dealt with themes and ideas that Islam calls for. Frantz Fanon aimed at fighting racism and colonialism in his works. He says in his *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism does not only oppress people in the present, but it also distorts their past; hence, 'the struggle for national liberty has been accompanied by a cultural phenomenon known by the name of the awakening of Islam.'³⁶ Furthermore, he emphasizes the psychological aspects of colonialism on the colonized people. Edward Said, on the other hand, wrote about Islam with an emphasis on the cultural side against colonialism. The psychological facet of Fanon and the cultural aspect of Said were two points that aimed at freeing the colonized people from inside; therefore, they attempted to help them think independently. This inside freedom and independence are two main targets of Islam, because it fought Western Christianity in the past and it does the same with secularism in the present.

³⁵ Hassan, Majed. "Islam and Muslim Identities in Four Contemporary British Novels." Doctoral thesis. Sunderland, 2012, p. 1

³⁶ Frantz, Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1968, p. 117

The agreement between Muslims and Postcolonialism ideas changed, especially after the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. As a postcolonial writer, Rushdie attacked Islam in his book in a way that made it unacceptable for Muslims. Moreover, Said supported Rushdie's idea about Islam and criticized Muslims for their reactions. Before the publication of this book, Said and Rushdie used to be defenders of Islam. Hence, Muslim writers, such as Amin Malak, Anouar Majid, and Wail Hassan attacked postcolonial theory and its supporters.

The above-mentioned Muslim writers examined the reasons behind the complicated contemporary link between Islam's ideas and Postcolonialism. Malak referred to the 'oddness' of the relationship. In *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, he claimed that it is odd for postcolonial theory not to deal with 'the activism of Islam.' He supported his point by referring to the work of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which is regarded as one of the prominent texts that are against the colonial representations of Islam.³⁷ He further added that postcolonial theory ignores Islam because of its secular standing. Anwar Majid preferred the alternatives of Islam rather than that of Postcolonial Theory. He wrote an article, "Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak? Orientalism and the Rushdie Affair", to discuss postcolonial theory's limitations and restrictions to Islam. The support of Postcolonial Theory to the publication of Rushdie's book was also a source of motivation to write his article. In addition, Majid affirmed that 'Postcolonial theory transforms itself into a discursive gesture that is simultaneously informed and co-opted but the very assumptions of western humanism it questions in the beginning.'³⁸

³⁷ Amin Malak, *op.cit.*, 2005, p. 17

³⁸ Majid, Anouar. "The Politics of Feminism in Islam", *Gender, Politics and Islam*. Howard, Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2002, p. 11

Wail Hassan wrote an article, “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application”, wherein he spoke about the limitations of Postcolonialism as a Western theory. To emphasize this point, he claimed that ‘Postcolonial theory has developed out of four European traditions of thought: Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Poststructuralism, and Feminism’³⁹. As a European theory, Postcolonial Theory has faced a risk of being affected by Neo-colonialism and Eurocentrism. According to Hassan, one of the aspects of being influenced by Neo-colonialism is the language of the colonizer that is still being used by postcolonial women writers. For Hassan, the concerns of the postcolonial theory are limited in dealing with Islam and Muslim women issues.

The aforementioned writers provided insights into the stance of postcolonial theory towards Islam, which is mainly based on ignorance because of the Western secular perspective. Although postcolonialism origins are Western, Muslim women writers attempted to combine Islamic perspectives with those of postcolonial theory. The latter theory is a literary theory that is open to criticism and development and these motivated Muslim writers to incorporate Islamic texts within its dimensions. Instead of criticizing postcolonialism and its secular writers, Muslim women writers practiced a new form of postcolonialism, which is Islamic postcolonialism. In doing so, they focused on Islam, as the main component of their identity, in their postcolonial writings. This new form of postcolonialism provides Muslim women writers with a space to challenge the colonial assumptions about Islam and Muslim women; therefore, they will be able to change the image of Islam and Muslim women in the contemporary world.

³⁹ Hassan, Wail. “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 33. 1 (2002): 46.

As a way to deal with both Islam and postcolonialism at the same time, Islamic postcolonialism is a term that combines them all together. The word Islamic refers to the religion of Islam while the concept postcolonialism is a challenge to the colonial discourse. Postcolonialism as a cultural theory is essential 'to help the colonized people to free themselves from the colonial stereotypical images that justify colonialism.'⁴⁰

2- Religious Identity and Muslim Women Role after 9/11

Because of their secular and materialist interest, postcolonial literature and criticism did not address the theme of religious identity.⁴¹ Mishra and Hodge explained that there is a distinction between the 'secular and the religious, where the latter is seen as a primarily personal affair, while the great passions of modernity are played out the secular domain.'⁴² The marker of Muslim identity, which is religion, has been marginalized in postcolonial literature. Mishra and Hodge recognized the gravity of the problem of not having religious aspects in postcolonial literature, and suggested that postcolonialism could not survive without dealing with religion. In other words, Mishra and Hodge sought for postcolonialism to 'let newer, generally subaltern, postcolonial atrocities surface, replete with those life-practices or forms ... that [have] hitherto been consigned to what we may call a nonrational nativism'⁴³

A little attention to religion in postcolonial literary works does not mean that religion has no significance. In fact, it was and is still regarded as a key element in people's lives since it is one of the essential components of Muslims' identity formation. Mark R.

⁴⁰ Majed Hasan, *op.cit.*, 2012, p. 70

⁴¹ Gauri, Viswanathan. *Outside the fold: conversion, modernity, and belief*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 14

⁴² Mishra, Vijay, and Hodge Bob. "What was postcolonialism?" *New Literary History* 36.3(2005) : 375-402.

⁴³ Mishra, V. and B. Hodge, *op.cit.*, 2005, pp. 375-402.

Woodward declared that ‘even in the most modern societies religion does not disappear.’⁴⁴ Bruce Baum also tackled the importance of religion and religious identity by claiming that ‘it is a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for agents who enact them.’⁴⁵ In addition, Amin Malak argued that Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Describing oneself as a Muslim became viewed as an identity marker that the person chooses to adopt and no one can refuse or take it away from him.⁴⁶

Being Muslims, women have suffered from the mistreatment and exploitation of the Western nations. Britain is famous for its multicultural policy, which is based on the acceptance of diversity and Islam as well. This policy has changed through time, especially after eleventh of September, 2001.. Moreover, the presence of Muslims after such an event seemed to be perceived as a cultural and terrorist threat; thus, Muslims suddenly became targets of suspicion. As a result, Muslim community was in fear of retaliation.

In *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin stated that contemporary terrorism in fiction and film led the West to be psychologized and Muslims to be pathologized. Muslims’ religious, social and political systems have been affected by violence.⁴⁷ As a result, Muslim women were the most affected group by such an event because of their ‘religious visibility’ that was related to

⁴⁴ M. R. Woodward. *Moderntiy and the disenchantment of life: a Muslim-Christian contrast*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 82

⁴⁵ Bruce, Baum. "Feminist politics of recognition." *Signs* 29.4 (2004): 1073-1102.

⁴⁶ Amin Malak, *op.cit.*, 2005, p. 5

⁴⁷ Peter, Morey and Amina Yaqin. *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press , 2011, p. 156

wearing the veil. It was a symbol of ‘both anti-western and anti-feminism views.’⁴⁸ The position of Muslim women was crucial; they suffered in their attempt to improve their position and to correct the false ideas. Their image is often misrepresented by the West and even their voice is unheard and not authorized in the Western context.

They form a highly diverse and complex group and assumptions about them are often ill-conceived, mis-informed and grossly misrepresented. This is often reflected in images of them, particularly in the west, as oppressed, powerless and victimized. The voices of Muslim women, striving to keep their religious identity in western contexts, are seriously under-represented in academic research.⁴⁹

As an aspect of identifying Muslim women, wearing a headscarf increased fear among the Western people. Wearing the veil is a kind of ‘modesty, privacy and protection, are rarely understood by non-Muslims.’⁵⁰ In the West, Muslim women faced difficulties after putting on the veil as a badge of honor. Islamophobia widened the gap between Muslim women’s perceptions of who they are and how they are viewed by the host society. In accordance with the writer Leila, Western societies see the veil differently. They view it as ‘the most visible marker of the differences and inferiority of Islamic societies [...] a symbol now of both the oppression of women [...] and the backwardness of Islam.’⁵¹

3-Reconstruction of Muslim Women’s Identity in Literature

From the nineteenth century to the present day, Muslim women came to be misrepresented in the same way with no significant shift. They were regarded as ‘helpless

⁴⁸ Jawad and Tansin Benn. *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden; Boston : Brill, 2003, n.p

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.14

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁵¹ Leila, Ahmed. *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 152

repressed victims, odalisques, still without agency, and in need of rescue from their misogynist cultures.⁵² Moreover, the veil is often associated with negative aspects; it ‘gave rise to the creation of colonists’ various fantasies about Muslim women.’⁵³ As a consequence, Muslim women writers started to write back with an attempt to ‘deconstruct stereotypical notions that depict’ them ‘as homogeneous and alien.’⁵⁴ Monica Ali and Leila Aboulela are two examples of Muslim women writers, who proved their ability to speak for themselves and for women in general. The nature of their writings was challenging because of their pride vis a vis Islam and their rejection of both patriarchal practices and Western feminism. Thus, their discourses are mainly ‘a definitive answer to the biased stereotypical images that we continually come across about the backwardness and enslavement of Muslim women.’⁵⁵

In an attempt to write back to the canon, Muslim women writers examine the importance of the main components that shape Muslim women’s lives in their process towards identity formation in the West. Their lives are based on private and public spheres, which are necessary for the construction of their identity. First, private sphere is mainly ‘a specific segment of societal life in which an individual experiences a measure of authority, unimpeded by intrusions from governmental or other institutions.’⁵⁶ As an aspect of private sphere, the family is an essential part of Muslims in the West since it is associated with a sense of solidarity. In Muslim communities, dignity and integrity of the family are worthy in comparison with individuals’ interests; hence, the duty of women is not to create a sense

⁵² Firouzeh, Ameri. “Veiled experiences: re-writing women's identities and experiences in contemporary Muslim fiction in English”. Diss. Tahrán, 2012, p. 57

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 57

⁵⁴ Haideh, Moghissi. *Gender, Culture and Identity*. USA & Canada: Routledge, 2006, p. 24

⁵⁵ Amin Malak, *op.cit.*, 2005, p. 13

⁵⁶ Salima Walji, Murji. “The Identity of Two Generations of Muslim Women Living In Leicester, UK.” Diss. Leicester, 2014, p. 66

of self, but to preserve those values. In order to construct their cultural identity, Muslim women have to preserve their family unit since the home is a place where culture, religion, language and an essence of identity are taught by women to their children. The private space of the home is often regarded as women's domain and it is claimed that 'feminine space is the space of the home.'⁵⁷

Another element of the private sphere, which is religion, is the most dominant factor in creating one's identity and his/her sense of belonging. Rahman distinguishes between two types of Islam: 'folk Islam and modernist Islam'. The former is 'traditionalist/conservative Islam, in that it is bound by traditional customs, inflexible and unchanging.'⁵⁸ Muslims, who follow such type, do not want change; and thus, they prefer to maintain the status quo. Living in the conditions of modernity and globalization, traditionalists were 'in fear of losing their Islamic identity.'⁵⁹ So, the traditionalists follow the pre-modern era in which the attachment to one's religion or 'the dominance of religious belief' existed. In this case, individualization is absent since 'people were more likely to follow religious authority figures.'⁶⁰ Hence, no change is accepted, and it is preferable to keep everything as it is.

Second, modernist Islam is a type that accepts change and modification. The conditions of modern society made it difficult for Muslims to practice their traditions as they do in their countries; and thus, they attempted to reform or modify some of those traditional aspects in accordance with the current modern situation. Walji Murji illustrates that this type

⁵⁷ Robina, Mohammad. "Marginalisation, Islamism and the Production of the 'other's' 'other'", *Gender, Place and Culture*, 6.3(1999): 30. In Salima Walji Murji . "The Identity of Two Generations of Muslim Women Living In Leicester, UK." Diss. Leicester, 2014.

⁵⁸ Salima Walji Murji, *op.cit.*, 2014, p. 75

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75

is more ‘intellectual’ as knowledge-gain is a very important part of this worldview, and open to change and modification which can be achieved by using general religious principles from the Quran applying them with the social conditions of the time.⁶¹

One of the aspects of a challenge to Islamic practices in literature that women called for is ‘the separation of culture and religion.’⁶² They dealt with Islamic texts as a basis for their defy against practices, such as marriage arrangements. Ramji disagreed with the idea that Muslim women do not have freedom of selecting their rights or they are not able ‘to make choices in their lives.’ They are rather able to assert their identity religiously by regarding religion ‘as a form of a precious cultural capital.’⁶³ Doing study on how to construct female’s identity, Ramji claims that ‘Muslim women seemed to occupy conflicting positions. They have been viewed by non-Muslims as both exotic and attractive, and at the same, as passive, subjugated victims of their patriarchal cultures.’⁶⁴

Muslim women tried to reconstruct their identity not only in the private sphere, but they did so even in the public sphere. Education is the basic component of this sphere which helped Muslim women to enhance their situation and to reconstruct their identity. Bulbeck showed the importance of education, saying that education is a necessary step ‘for enhancing the access of women to the economic sector, to reproductive choices and healthier lifestyles, to understand their legal rights, and to a richer cultural life.’⁶⁵ In attending schools, Muslim women will interact with different identities; therefore, the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 78

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 79- 80

⁶⁴ Hasmita, Ramji. “Dynamics of Religion and Gender amongst Young British Muslims”, *Sociology*, 41.6 (2007): 1171-1189.

⁶⁵ Salima Walji Murji, *op.cit.*, 2014, p. 84

tension between the Muslims and the British will be minimized. Even though Muslim women got the opportunity of education, still other traditional roles, such as ‘motherhood’ and ‘marriage’, are regarded as necessary principles for them. Afshar states that ‘Nevertheless all the women interviewed saw themselves as the moral and cultural anchor of the family and all saw marriage and child-bearing as an unavoidable and desirable stage in their lives.’⁶⁶

Education is important for Muslim women to reconstruct their identity. Being exposed to the outer world may threaten one’s identity through losing some of the parental culture like speaking their mother tongue due to learning English in schools. Afshar argues that the young ‘prefer to speak English. They find they have little use for the language of their parents, except when dealing with elders.’⁶⁷ Despite their disapproval with the host society where education took place, mothers recognized the benefit of education for the future path of their daughters. As a result, Muslim girls proved that they are

passive receivers, but active participants in their own educational choices. They are able to navigate and manage different identities within their own social worlds, whilst recognising the relative importance of each group in their lives.⁶⁸

To meet religion with identity is an area where religion as a private sphere plays an important role in defining the public sphere. Muslim women are the ones, who cause ‘the interface between public and private spheres.’⁶⁹ Religion is classified in the private sphere

⁶⁶ Haleh, Afshar. “Education: hopes, expectations and achievements of Muslim Women in West Yorkshire.” *Gender and Education*. 1.3(1989): 261-272

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265

⁶⁸ Tehmina N., Basit. *Eastern Values, Western Milieu: Identities and Aspirations of Adolescent British Muslim Girls*, 1994. In Salima Walji Murji . “The Identity of Two Generations of Muslim Women Living In Leicester, UK.” Diss. Leicester, 2014.

⁶⁹ Salima Walji Murji, *op.cit.*, 2014, p. 97

and to make identity known, it is needed to present it in public. In doing so, Muslim women did this through the veil first and then ‘the hybridization of religious and British identities.’⁷⁰ Ahmad explains that ‘the veil may also be an expression of a feminist position, supporting female autonomy and equality in a diverse way from those of the west’.⁷¹ Dwyer emphasizes that ‘clothing works to represent Muslim women’s identity dependent on the type of clothing they wear.’⁷² He adds that wearing English clothes is a sign of modernity, whereas Muslim clothes may refer to ‘morality and ethnic integrity.’⁷³

Conclusion

This chapter presents the attempt of Muslim women writers in writing back to the canon (the West) before having a detailed analysis of the two novels of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005) and their feminist postcolonial rewritings. They are highly influenced by postcolonial and feminist theories in dealing with the issue of Muslim women’s identity formation in a multicultural society. Muslim women have been misrepresented by the west for a long period of time; and thus, Muslim women writers tried to reconstruct the identity of Muslim women in a hybrid literature that is based on using English with the embodiment of Islamic words and subjects in order to reveal Islamic culture. Therefore, Muslim women were presented positively in their struggle to assert their identity.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96

⁷¹ Leila Ahmed, *op.cit.*, 1992

⁷² Claire, Dwyer. ‘The geographies of veiling: Muslim women in Britain’, *Geography* 93.3 (2008): 98. In Salima Walji Murji . “The Identity of Two Generations of Muslim Women Living In Leicester, UK.” Diss. Leicester, 2014.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 144

CHAPTER TWO

Muslim Women's Identity between Tradition and Modernity in
Brick Lane

Introduction

Monica Ali, as a Muslim female writer, gave voice to the bitter experiences of dislocation, immigration and identity renegotiation that Muslim women face in a multicultural society. The life and experiences of women, who were born and raised in Bangladesh, are different from the women of the West since the problems and issues that they face in the West are different from the ones of the East.

Struggling to discover one's identity in Britain's multicultural society is the main aim for analyzing Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). It is one of the novels that mirrored the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain. Muslim women are viewed as a direct representation of their culture. The issue of identity renegotiation is one of the problems that they face in multicultural Britain. To assert their identity in Britain, they practice their traditions and religion to remain in touch with their home. The experience of immigration enlarges Muslim women's view about their native culture with the foreign culture of the host society. In an attempt to adapt to the alien society, some Muslim women construct new and modern identity by practicing some aspects of their culture and adding habits of the new culture within their own.

I- *Brick Lane* in Context

Living in a multi-cultural environment is considered an obstacle to Muslim women. It is hard for them to assert their identity in a place where they would be marginalized and isolated. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali pictures the lives and challenges of Muslim women in Britain's multicultural society.

1- Muslim Women in Britain

Brick lane is a novel about a Bangladeshi Muslim woman's struggle between tradition and modernity to assert her identity. A woman with traditional thoughts faces in a Western country, London, new environment that influenced her. Women status is one of the obvious differences between the Third World countries and the Western countries. In the patriarchal societies of the third world, women are dependent and subservient to men and the issue of women's independence is regarded as a problem for many years. Momsen asserts that '[...] female and male roles are neither equal nor fixed. They differ from place and this spatial variation is most marked in the Third World.'⁷⁴ Muslim women are often described as poor, uneducated, victims, family-oriented...etc. Moreover, Bahri adds that 'there are no women in the third world.'⁷⁵

Being deeply affected by traditional aspects, Nazneen, the subaltern protagonist, accepts her life instead of changing it. She is an example of a subordinated woman; she is obedient to her father before marriage and obedient to her husband after marriage. Moreover, she does not have a job and she even cannot communicate with the outside world. Her environment allows her to see this fact as a cultural practice and as something normal. This is a common phenomenon in the third world. She has a principle of life that 'since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne and fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow.'⁷⁶ Hence, her life is devoid of the awareness of determination.

⁷⁴ Janet Henshall, Momsen. *Women and Development in the Third World*. London and New York. Routledge, 1996.

⁷⁵ Deepika, Bahri. *Feminism in/and postcolonialism*. From Neil Lazarus. *The Cambridge companion to postcolonial literary studies*. Cambridge. UP, 2004

⁷⁶ Monica, Ali. *Brick Lane*. Great Britain: Black Swan, 2003, p. 14

On the other hand, modernity has been defined as ‘the age of migration on a worldwide scale’ whereas the migrant is ‘a kind of modern Everyman.’⁷⁷ Monica Ali attempts to relieve Muslim women from the female invisibility by concentrating on the plight of the female migrant. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen immigrates to London as a result of an arranged marriage to an expatriate Chanu. The Western idea of personal liberty has a great influence over the old traditional notion of women’s dependence. At the beginning, she lives a miserable life, but she thinks that it is her fate and she has to accept it. Darlymple illustrates the situation of Muslim women in Britain

They grow up in what can only be called a totalitarian environment. They are not allowed out of the house except under escort, and sometimes not even then; they are allowed no mail or use of the telephone; they are not allowed to contradict a male member of the household, and are automatically subject to his wishes; it is regarded as quite legitimate to beat them if they disobey in the slightest. Their brothers are often quite willing to attack anyone who speaks to the women in any informal context. They are forced to wear modes of dress that they do not wish to wear. Their schooling is quite often deliberately interrupted, so that they are not infected by Western ideas of personal liberty; ambitious for a career, they are kept at home as prisoners and domestic slaves.⁷⁸

Domestic violence is common for the Bengali young women in Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets is considered as the second place which has the highest number of domestic violence towards women in which they suffer physically and mentally. As a result of such violence, women become badly affected by depression, anxiety, eating disorders and sexual dysfunction. It may also affect their reproductive health states.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Hanif, Kureishi. *Borderline*. London. Methuen, 1981, p.4

⁷⁸ Theodore, Dalrymple. “*Wrong from Head to Toe*.” National Review March 28, 2005

⁷⁹ Ansar Ahmed, Ullah. Women in Bangladesh Diaspora: an overview of Bengali women in the UK. Presented at BASUG’s Discussion on “Women: Future of Bangladesh” on 28th April 2007 in The Hague. P. 6

Immigration to London offers Nazneen possibilities to redefine her identity. She faces an identity renegotiation not only as an immigrant but also as a woman. She feels as alien, insecure and different in a foreign society. Ali depicts her experience as being lost by ‘hobbling and halting began to be aware of herself. Without coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination.’ (Ali, 52) The first resistance that she passes through and the people whom she interacts with help her to be an independent person. As a consequence, she goes along a process of negotiation and self-questioning. In addition, Liz Bondi claims that there is a direct link between identity and space, because the question ‘who am I?’ has a relation to the question of ‘where am I?’⁸⁰ Being exposed to a multicultural setting allow Nazneen to question her identity and this happens at the end of the novel when Nazneen fulfills her dream of ice-skating.

It has been difficult and long for Nazneen to get financial independence. Unemployment is an issue that Bengalis suffer from. In comparison with other ethnic minorities, Bangladeshi women have the lowest rate of participation in the labor market. In addition to this, social complications are regarded also as an obstacle for Bangladeshi women to get a job in relation to the white British women. Social exclusion is the result of being marginalized from such a domain and this was attached to different reasons: racism, sexism and anti-Muslim prejudice and workforce culture, i.e. the British way.⁸¹

In accordance with the report, *Moving on Up: Ethnic Minority Women at Work*, women found difficulty in getting a job. Hence, policy makers were warned by the Equal Opportunities Commission that they will not build strong community since the skilled and ambitious African and Asian women were not given well-paid jobs. The only solution that

⁸⁰ Liz, Bondi. *Locating Identity Politics. Place and Politics of Identity*. London: Routledge, 2003. 84-101.

⁸¹ Ansar Ahmed, Ullah. *Women in Bangladesh Diaspora: an overview of Bengali women in the UK*. Presented at BASUG’s Discussion on “Women: Future of Bangladesh” on 28th April 2007 in The Hague. P. 7

these Bangladeshi households resorted to is self-employment; they relied on what they earned from self-employment. In the novel, Nazneen thought about work and money after the burden of life. 'Some of the women are doing sewing at home, said Nazneen. Razia can get work for me.'⁸² Her husband bought a sewing machine for her and she spent most of the time sewing. In doing so, Nazneen became financially independent.

Many persons have contributed to Nazneen's independence. Her family, her lover and her friend play an important role in changing Nazneen's principle of life. The miserable stories of women that her daughter uses to tell her motivate her to control her life. At last, as an immigrant Muslim woman, Nazneen has a hybrid identity. On one hand, she still holds her root culture of Bangladesh since she dresses in the same way as the Bangladeshi women do. On the other hand, she becomes independent and modern; she can depend on herself rather than being in need of men.

2- Monica Ali as a Bengali Immigrant Writer:

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), is an autobiographical work. Although Monica Ali does not write about her own experience, 'yet there is something there'. She claims that the story is mainly an experience that she passes through. She also says that she gets more ideas from her father, who provides her with different stories of the villages in Bangladesh, and she mentions this in her essay "Where I'm Coming From" by stating that

The stories that my father used to tell about village life. A book of case studies about Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and the East End of London, desperate lives drawn together by the common goal of self-empowerment.⁸³

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 184

⁸³ Monica, Ali. "Where I'm Coming From." *The Guardian* 17 Jun. 2003. 27Apr. 2007 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,,979007,00.html>>.

As an autobiographical work, the story of Nazneen is the story of Ali's mother. She lives away from her home because she is English and her husband is Bangladeshi. They meet in London and after they get married. Then, they move to Bangladesh to start a family and in this situation the mother of Ali feels a sense of isolation since she cannot interact with the people who have a different language. Ali emphasizes that 'it was not only her seeing a new world but also being seen as something other.'⁸⁴As a child, Ali listens to stories from her mother, that are basically about social and cultural dislocation, and these play a great role in directing Ali's thoughts.

Ali represents the character of Shahana, daughter of Nazneen, as a rebellious teenager. She behaves in the same way as Shahana does when she is a teenage girl. Both Ali and Shahana live in an environment, which is composed of two different cultures wherein they try to adopt and to form their identity by taking pieces from each of them. Moreover, both of them do not speak their language as it is stated in the novel about Shahana and her hatred for everything that has relation to Bangladesh:

Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them. If she could choose between baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned she pulled a face. She did not know and would not learn that Tagore was more than poet and Nobel Laureate, and no less than the true father of her nation. Shahana did not care. Shahana did not want to go back home. (Ali, 180)

The title of the novel reveals the main place wherein Bangladeshi communities settle; Brick Lane is a non-fictional street in the borough Tower Hamlets in London's East End. Brick Lane is also known as Banglatown, because it is the heart of Bangladeshi community. Its name came from the brick and tile makers who used to live in the area.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Many views have been taken by persons who experienced the life in Brick Lane: Momin Ahmed was born in Birmingham and grew up in Bangladesh, but he returned back to the UK and worked in Brick Lane in 1990. He stated that Brick Lane *'is the blood centre of the Bengalis' and is 'a historical place' where the Bengalis built mosques and develop political organizations.*⁸⁵

Second, Jakia Chowdhury has lived in Tower Hamlets in 1987. She described Brick Lane as a Bangladeshi space wherein most of Bengalis settle and practice their culture: to him, *'Brick Lane represents the whole of Bengalis in the UK. Bengali restaurants, sweetmeats, bookshops, Bangla literature, Bangladeshi cultural practices – they're all in Brick Lane. There is the space and opportunity to organise events here... Brick Lane is the centre for all types of meetings.'*⁸⁶

Third, Amjad Ali went to Britain in 1973 and grew up in Brick Lane. He even considered Brick Lane as a capital city of the UK; he illustrates that *'Tower Hamlets means Brick Lane. And everything starts from Brick Lane. You can say it is the capital city of the Bengali community. All people need a capital city – London is the capital city of the UK. Likewise, Brick Lane is the capital city of the Bengali community...'*⁸⁷

Brick Lane is a place that Ali used to describe the injustices and dissatisfactions of the community there. Nazneen is one of them, who felt lonely and passive. The technique of defamiliarization is used by the writer to show how strange the place was for Nazneen; and thus, it is useful to put into light the experience of the new immigrants. The Bangladeshi

⁸⁵ Ahmed, Momin. "The importance of Brick Lane." Web page. 2009. Accessed in 27Apr. 2015 <<http://www.banglasteries.org/about-the-project/the-locations/tower-hamlets.html> >.

⁸⁶ Jakia, Chowdhury. Brick Lane as a Bangladeshi space. Web page. 2009. 27Apr. 2015 <<http://www.banglasteries.org/about-the-project/the-locations/tower-hamlets.html> >.

⁸⁷ Amjad, Ali. Brick Lane as the capital city of British Bengalis. Web page. 2009. 27Apr. 2015 <<http://www.banglasteries.org/about-the-project/the-locations/tower-hamlets.html> >.

community lived a miserable life in comparison with the Westerners whose life is so fresh and luxurious. In a passage, Nazneen described the sense of separation that she witnessed in an environment which existed only less than a mile from the place where she lived, Tower Hamlets. She recognized that the place and the people are different from where she lives and who she is. She described a building as she passed through ‘It was constructed almost entirely of glass, with a few thin rivets of steel holding it together. The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out [. . .] The building was without end.’ The same for the people there, she was amazed at their appearance ‘Men in dark suits trotted briskly up and down the steps in pairs or in threes. They barked to each other and nodded sombrely [. . .] Every person who brushed past her on the pavement, every back she saw, was on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan [. . .].’ Hence, she became aware of her difference.

II- Traditional Culture, Religion and Muslim Women's Identity in *Brick Lane*

In Britain's multicultural society, Muslim women immigrants find difficulties in asserting themselves since they are exposed to multiple aspects of alienation and marginalization. A sense of homesickness overcomes them; and thus, some of them prefer to go back to their homelands. Nazneen is one of the women, who stays in Britain and practices their culture and religion. Maintaining their traditions in an alien society is like being attached and close to their native countries.

1-The Representation of Muslim Women in *Brick Lane*

In *Brick Lane*, Ali attempts to present a group of Bangladeshi women, who are rarely presented in British fiction, through the main character, Nazneen. She also puts a great focus on women's silent suffering as Alistair Cormack argues that *Brick Lane* 'is particularly of interest as an examination of the double bind that female migrants face, treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men in their own Communities.'⁸⁸ Hence, Ali created a binary opposition between the West and the East by showing that the West is the site of liberation; while the East is the place of suffocation.⁸⁹

In patriarchal traditional societies, Muslim women have special duties in Bangladesh. They are wives, mothers and they also do traditional gender roles, such as raising children, cooking, cleaning or to do other jobs which are appropriate for women as sewing, knitting,

⁸⁸ Alistair, Cormack. "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*." *Contemporary Literature*, XLVII.4 (2006): 700

⁸⁹ Noufal N., Mohamed. RE-ORIENTALISING THE ORIENT: A CRITIQUE OF MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*. Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Hyderabad India , 2014

teaching...etc. In accordance with the Indian Bangladeshi social economist Kabeer, Nazneen represents the Bangladeshi woman who 'brought up from childhood to believe that she exists only as a daughter, wife and mother to some men, her whole existence is oriented to serve and please men.'⁹⁰ Moreover, Gelles added that the Asian families 'are rigidly patriarchal. Men are the wage earners, decision makers, and disciplinarians. Women are expected to stay at home and care for the children.'⁹¹

Ali presents the Muslim women as backward and narrow-minded, but the question is whether this representation is the accurate one for such a group? The West has misrepresented the East; and thus, the East suffered a lot from 'genealogy and logic specific to the Western narrative; a narrative which has emerged from developments in western representations of gender, of the self and of the foreign Other.'⁹² These representations are based on 'conventions of representing alien women (pagans, foreigners, Old Testament figures) which were already formed in Western texts before the advent of Islam.'⁹³ The reconstruction of Muslim women identity is presented in *Brick Lane* as a reaction to Western narratives and representations.

Monica Ali attempts to clarify the image of Muslim women and helps them to assert their identity by liberating them from the Western notion of otherness. She westernizes that Other through the process of assimilation that the main character in *Brick Lane* goes through. Hasina is unlike her sister and she is mainly 'a representation of the stereotypical Muslim woman', who frees herself from the control of men. In reading this novel, two

⁹⁰ Naila, Kabeer. *The Power to Choose. Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*. London: Verso, 2000, p. 38

⁹¹ Richard J., Gelles. *Contemporary Families. A Social View*. California: Sage Publications, 1995, P.154

⁹² Mohja, Kahf. *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. Texas: Texas UP, 1999. P. 2

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4

kinds of women are presented. Both girls look for independence in different paths. The path that Hasina selects is much crueler than the one of Nazneen.

In addition, the oppression of women in Bangladesh is mainly pictured in the character of Hasina. One of the misrepresentations that Monica Ali mentions in reference to Hasina specifically and to women generally is through Chanu who regards women as peasants and men as kings. When Nazneen asks him to help her in finding her sister and bringing her to London, he replies ‘All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within.’ (Ali, 63)

2-The Role of Traditions in Defining Women’s Identity in a Multicultural Society

Immigrating to a new land created the unfastened personality that urges the immigrants to hang on to the few pieces of roots they have in that land. Because of this urge, the characters keep their customs and traditions to remain in touch with their homeland. Thus, they dream of returning back to their country and only a few, who adapt to the new society by having an independent personality. ‘Exiles, emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urges to reclaim to look back at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.’⁹⁴ In the novel, Nazneen faces the harsh reality of immigration and the clash between the two cultures.

To be connected to her native culture, Nazneen does not act on the taboo norms in London. The Bangladeshi culture affects Nazneen’s view in reference to the Western

⁹⁴ Khan Pritoma, Mashira. “Exile Literature: Identity formation of Diaspora.” Diss. Bangladesh, 2013

culture. She is amazed by the behavior of women in England, who slim themselves down. They do it with the aim of following fashion; while in Bangladesh, to be slim is a sign of poverty. Moreover, self-reliance and liberal freedom are two things that Nazneen admires in British culture. The Western women there deal with their own business without commenting on others' work; whereas in Bengali culture, there is no such freedom. Women are supposed to share their personal and family life in a unified way that keeps them close to their home. Mrs. Islam manipulates Nazneen by showing her how to raise her newborn baby, Raqib. In Bangladeshi community, the notions of privacy and individual space are not mentioned and if a woman speaks English, works with men, wears English clothes, she will spread false rumors about her family. Hence, she will be ignored and isolated by the members of her community. Razia is the example of a woman, who speaks English and wears English clothes. As a result, her community isolates her and regards her as a bad woman.

Living in a different society and adopting some of the norms of its culture, to fit in the modern world, is something forbidden and is regarded as a taboo in Bangladesh. According to Bangladeshi traditions, women are not allowed to follow another culture, because their tradition will suffer since they are viewed as bearers of culture. Being limited to her duty as an obedient Bengali woman beside to the fear of losing her culture, Nazneen finds difficulty in realizing her self-consciousness.

Believing in fate is another element that defines the lives of Muslim women in Britain's multicultural society. They have 'the idea that a superior power—fate—shapes the course

of their lives and determines what becomes of them helps people to interpret their experiences and adjust themselves to their circumstances.⁹⁵ Michael Gorra summarizes the aim of the novel in reference to fate into one question: ‘Do we, can we, control our own lives? That question propels Ali’s book.’⁹⁶

At the beginning of the novel, fate plays an important role in defining Nazneen’s life since person’s spirit is makes up of his fate; and thus, a little chance is for the free will. Her mother, Rupban, is always saying ‘We must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.’ (Ali, 14) Hence, the life of Nazneen is based on this belief with which she lives. More importantly, Nazneen is taught to believe in fate at an early age. Nazneen is a stillborn baby in her birth and they think that she is dead; this fact makes it clear that Nazneen is left to her fate instead of being taken to the hospital. Mumtaz

took hold of Nazneen, who was still dangling by the ankle, and felt the small, slick torso slide through her fingers to plop with a yowl onto the bloodstained mattress. A yowl! A cry! Rupban scooped her up and named her before she could die nameless again. (Ali, 13)

Although women are not given the right to do an action or agency to face fate, some do. Nazneen is an example of a subjected woman, who is directed by fate, but when she goes away from her native land, she faces the potency of action. According to Monica Ali, the central dilemma of Nazneen is mainly about the question of what she can control and

⁹⁵ Dalya, Cohen-Mor. *A Matter of Fate: The Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature*. New York. Oxford UP, 2001, p. 16

⁹⁶ Michael, Gorra. “East Enders” Rev. of Brick Lane by Monica Ali. New York Times (7 sept.2003)<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C01E6DB1E39F934A3575AC0A9659C8B63>

when it is appropriate to accept things. Lena Dominelli defines the process of an agency, which is regarded as an opposition to fate. She states that

Agency is the capacity to take action as a subject, determining the direction of life and making decisions about it. Its enactment involves an interactive process whereby an individual is configured as a subject of action rather than an object that is at the receiving end of another behaviour, and is linked to empowerment that promotes egalitarian power relations.⁹⁷

Nazneen grows up hearing about the stories of 'How You Were Left to Your Fate' and 'fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes or perhaps most times it can be fatal.' (Ali, 15) She also remembers from time to time her mother's pieces of advice to 'Just wait and see, that's all we can do.' (Ali, 46) In patriarchal society of Bangladesh, women have to suffer in silence as Rupban claims: 'If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men.' (Ali, 80) She said also that 'We are women. What can we do?' (Ali, 434)

3- Religion as a Marker of Identity in Britain's Multicultural Society

Nazneen grows up in a religious society wherein she is used to different religious aspects that provided her with a sense of home. For example, Nazneen keeps attached to her religion in Britain by reading Quran, doing her prayers, and wearing Hijab. Reading Quran calms her and makes her feel powerful and peaceful. One of the stressful situations wherein Nazneen resorts to reading Quran is the invitation of Dr. Azad to dinner. She is afraid that she will ruin the meal; hence, she starts reading some verses from Quran that calm her stomach and make her convinced that the only one whom she has to be afraid of is Allah. Even though Nazneen sometimes does not know the meaning of the verses, she

⁹⁷ Lena, Dominelli. *Women and Community Action*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2006, p. 46

likes their sound. Ali states that ‘she did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her.’(Ali, 21) In other words, ‘Ali’s heroine, Nazneen, cherishes the Book and seeks in its verses comfort and guidance that are both genuine and provocative.’

⁹⁸After reading loudly the following verses, she is convinced that no one will bother her except for Allah if He wants to.

To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. We exhort you, as we have exhorted those to whom the Book was given before you, to fear God. If you deny Him, know that to God belongs all that the heavens and earth contain. God is self-sufficient and worthy of praise. (Ali, 19-20)

Besides to reading Quran, praying is another aspect of religion that the main character resorts to in moments of need. She finds in her prayers a relief from restless thoughts that annoy her from time to time. Cleaning and cooking are not enough for her to forget about these issues. Furthermore, Nazneen is not so careful about her religion in Bangladesh; but in London, she finds that her religion and its practices are the only things that remind her of her homeland. With an attempt to define one’s identity, Nazneen starts to practice her religion: ‘She began to pray five times each day, rolling out her prayer mat in the sitting room to face east. She was pleased with the order it gave to her day.’ (Ali, 41) After the death of Nazneen’s son, Raqib, she resorts to religion and to prayer specifically that keep her standing such difficult situation. The life after Raqib’s death is not easy for Nazneen. She stops thinking of him, because of the troubles within her family between her husband and her daughters, Shahana and Bibi. As a result, she ‘squeezed Raqib from her mind. That way lay the abyss. So she swallowed hard and prayed hard, and she used prayer, in defiance of her vows, to dull her senses and dull her pain.’ (Ali, 206)

⁹⁸ Mustafa, Shakir. “DEFENDING THE FAITH: ISLAM IN POST 9/11A NGLOPHONE FICTION.” *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 41. 2 (summer 2009): 285

Islamic clothing is another feature of holding Bangladeshi culture in foreign society. Nazneen and some Muslim girls wear Islamic clothes that validate their Muslimness. To be unified and regarded as one group, the girls in the meeting of Muslims are wearing burkhas. Whereas, there are some women, who prefer to wear Western clothes and follow the Western modes of life. Nazneen often regards them with suspicion and describes them as being manly in style. Mrs. Azad is one of the women, who follow the path of the westerners. She regards wearing the veil as a marker of ‘Otherness’ since it turns the body of Muslim women into the target of western gaze and it exposes them to racist attacks. Thus, she wants to make her cultural background invisible. Mrs. Islam also assimilates many aspects of Western culture and clothing is one of them: ‘I am not old-fashioned,’ said Mrs. Islam. ‘I don’t wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind [...] Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That’s how it is.’(Ali, 29) For some, it is a symbol of female’s oppression. Aleya’s husband lets her work with the condition of wearing burkha. Burkha becomes a tool of resistance against anti-Islamic discourses.

At a more global level, their *burkhas* represent an act of defiance *vis-à-vis* Western dominance and ethnic–religious racism, as well as a sign of female political activism. For these women the adoption of the *burkha* is not only about giving visibility to the Muslim community in general, but also — and perhaps more tellingly — about giving visibility to Muslim women, thereby destabilizing the paradigm that has traditionally associated Muslim women’s clothing with the notion of invisibility.⁹⁹

Being attached to their culture and religion, Muslim women face problems in defining their identities. Wearing the *hijab* is one of the visible icons of Muslim identity and it

⁹⁹ Emma, Tarlo. *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*. Oxford: Berg, 2010, p. 211

allows Muslim women to be targets of racist attacks. Khalifa argues that ‘It is the single-most important identity marker and the most attacked in similar measure. The *hijab* appears in the narrative as a giver of identity and in the same measure attracts racism.’¹⁰⁰

Clothing has a great impact on the way of dealing with others. The veiled women are treated differently in comparison to the unveiled ones. Hussain comments on this point by stating that

The appearance of traditional dress, the attraction to brotherhood and sisterhood cannot be understood by only looking for internal causes. They are the obvious consequences of inter-ethnic relations and symbols of separatism which serve to distinguish the “us” from “them”.¹⁰¹

After 9/11, Muslim women are targets of religious and racial tensions. Radical positions have been created as a result of these tensions; they manifestly emerge in the novel’s references to *hijab*.¹⁰² In the novel, there are instances where women characters experience harassment because of their appearance; they even bear the brunt of the attacks

A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa’s daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razi wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on. (Ali, 400)

Ali attempted to put into light the issue of identity for Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. She also wants to show the dilemma of Muslims all over the world, who are identified by their religion rather than by their nationality. Characters’ attitudes to

¹⁰⁰ Mahmoud Abdel-Hamid Mahmoud Ahmad Khalifa. *Muslim Women Write Back: Hybridity, Islam and the Quest for Identity*. Egypt: Cairo University, 2011, p. 91

¹⁰¹ Yousouf, Hussain. *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, p. 103

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 103

such an event are mainly based on rage and anger towards the Westerners' actions because they are treated as killers instead of victims. In comparison with the other Muslims all over the world, the suffering of Muslim immigrants is worse

Now they see smoke: a pillar of smoke, collapsing. Nazneen and Chanu rise. They stay on their feet as they watch it a second, a third time. The image is at once mesmerizing and impenetrable; the more it plays, the more obscure it becomes, until Nazneen feels she must shake herself out of a trance. Chanu limbers up his shoulders, holds out his arms and circles them. He blows hard. He says nothing. (Ali, 366)

In a multi-cultural society, the immigrant Muslim women face the problem of identity crisis. They find themselves trapped between two cultures: native culture and alien culture. Therefore, they experience a sense of loss, alienation, homeliness and quest for identity because of racial discrimination, linguistics differences, and socio-cultural dissimilarities. Some of Muslim women keep their identities by practicing their traditions and religion to feel close to their homelands.

III- Muslim Women Self-identification in Multi-cultural Britain

The experience of immigration allows Muslim women to go through a process of leaving their homeland and living in the foreign land. In the modern multicultural world, the issue of finding one's own identity is difficult. Hence, some Muslim women attempt to find their own place in the alien country by having a hybrid and modern identity. They maintain some aspects in their native culture and adopt others from the new culture; and thus, they can fit in both cultures.

1-Challenging Fate as a Form of Identity Formation

Although Nazneen reminds herself from time to time that fate governs her life and it is futile to fight against it, she hesitates at the beginning of the story. She becomes aware that she can challenge it in London since it is a multicultural place. Her first thought is mainly an indication of action or agency 'What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge.' (Ali, 16)

Different changes occur in Nazneen's life increase her confidence and self-esteem; she starts to believe that fate is not everything after all. Her identity becomes strong and apparent; she even takes decisions without the interference of her thoughts about destiny. Nazneen starts to redefine her fate through sewing clothes; she feels more independent by relying on herself. Therefore, she can send money secretly to her sister in Dhaka. 'Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well [...] For a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life.' (Ali, 277-278)

Nazneen starts to behave more independently than ever before and she begins to develop her identity uncaring about her husband and other men. She feels more

independent, especially when she refuses the request of her husband to return back to Bangladesh. At last, she decides not to go with her husband since she does not want to give up her life in England. “Chanu said, ‘You are coming with me, then? You’ll come?’ ‘No,’ she breathed. She lifted his head and looked into his face. It was dented and swollen, almost out of recognition. ‘I can’t go with you’ she said.” (Ali, 478)

Another feature of the development of her identity is after the birth of her son. She refuses to give him to Mrs. Islam with insistence. Before his death, she takes him to the hospital instead of letting him to his fate as it happens to her with the hope that he will be treated. She prays to God day after day and takes care of him, because ‘At once she was enraged. A mother who did nothing to save her own child! If Nazneen (...) had not brought the baby to hospital at once, he would have died. The doctors said it. It was no lie. (Ali, 135-136)

The death of Nazneen’s mother was another event that has a great impact on her changing attitude towards the fate. Rupban dies when Nazneen is only 14 and she does not know the reason behind her mother’s death. Nazneen knows after that her mother bears a lot; her husband betrays her and marries another woman. Her mother does blame no one and this leads to her breakdown. Although she is a saint, she cannot bear the situation and commits suicide as the only solution to get away. Her mother is always advising her daughters to wait and see, but she does not wait and she leaves them alone and this causes Nazneen to doubt the belief of fate whether it is right or wrong. She decides that she will not be a puppet of fate and it will not direct her life anymore. She becomes increasingly so strong since she does not rely on others’ views; she takes bigger and bigger decisions. ‘Suddenly her entire being lit up with anger. I will decide what to do. I will say what

happens to me. I will be the one. A charge ran through her body and she cried out again, this time out of sheer exhilaration.’ (Ali, 405)

2- Transformation from Dependent into Independent Muslim Woman

Independence of women is one of the themes of feminist literature. Muslim women specifically are a typical example of the oppressed group by men. As a result, women fought for their rights for hundreds of years ago and this was one of the main points of feminist literature. Trew and Kremer argue that ‘feminism takes as its focus the nature, rights and interests of women.’¹⁰³

Monica Ali’s novel, *Brick Lane*, deals with women differently. Wherever they go, they feel themselves isolated from both their own community and the host society. As a consequence, Nazneen wants to make their voices heard by attempting to change from a dependent to socially and psychologically independent woman. Nazneen passes through two fold experience of being a woman and an immigrant at the same time. She follows another path, which is different from the one that the other women follow. She thinks deeply about fate; and thus, she tries to challenge it.

Hasina has a great impact on Nazneen’s wish to be an independent woman. She struggles against fate and she wants to live a free life. She is young and beautiful; her beauty is ‘almost unbearable to own or to look at’ (Ali, 6) by men. She endeavors to look for her happiness and love by eloping with her lover; an incident that makes her father so angry. All of the things that have relation to her life in Bangladesh are mentioned in her letters. Nazneen does not like the behavior of her sister, because she thinks that no good will come from it. After thinking, Nazneen recognizes another meaning of fate; she wonders whether it is a fate for Hasina to run away and to be with her lover or not: ‘If fate

¹⁰³ Karen, Trew and John Kremer. *Gender and Psychology*. Great Britain: Arnold, 1998, p. 27

cannot be changed, no matter how you struggle against it, then perhaps Hasina was fated to run away with Malek.’ (Ali, 22) Many questions hold Nazneen’s thinking about the real meaning of fate. Nazneen feels envy for her sister’s life and wants to experience the same feeling of being independent. Hasina does not give up fighting and she escapes from her cruel husband. Hence, she does not return back to her hometown, but instead she stays in Dhaka and disappears with the cook. Hasina writes in one of her letters that ‘I am not like her [Ammu]. Waiting around. Suffering around. She wrong. So many ways. At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. she take the only one forbidden.’ (Ali, 434)

Hasina does not like to pass through the same experience of her sister, Nazneen, which is based on waiting, suffering, and hopeless life. She encourages her sister by her ventures and this affects her imagination one day; she even imagines herself an independent woman too. As a way of being satisfied with her sister’s actions, Nazneen asks her husband to bring her sister to London and she supports her secretly with money that she collects after working. In doing so, Nazneen helps her sister fighting against fate. Nazneen’s sense of being independent develops in London with her family life. She accepts marrying Chanu by seeing him only in a photograph, because she does not have the right to say nothing against her fate.

For Chanu, Nazneen is a worker rather than a wife. She hears him once speaking with someone in a telephone and Chanu tells him that ‘she is a good worker.’ (Ali, 23) She is often regarded as an object; when someone needs it, he will take it. This statement is clarified in Chanu’s view about marrying Nazneen when he states that ‘a blind uncle is better than no uncle. I waited too long to get a wife’ (Ali, 23) which suggests that having a wife is better than nothing. His main point is to have a wife to do housework and to give birth to babies. At the beginning, Nazneen thinks that Chanu is so grateful for having her,

but she gets shocked after hearing his conversation on the phone. Hence, her dissatisfaction starts with her marriage, which is not based on love as she imagines.

Nazneen wants to interact with the people there, but she is somehow confused. She does not know what she would like to say and what she can say to people in different occasions. The basic point of communication is the language since knowing the language of the host society will open the doors for immigrants to be able to understand that different society, especially in the field of education and employment. Nazneen does not know the English language except for the words 'sorry' and 'thank you'. Later, she knows other words such as 'pub', 'money' and 'hospital'. She hopes to attend the same college that her friend Razia attends to learn English. But when she asks her husband about this point, he refuses that and reminds her of her baby and the responsibility of being a mother; and thus, it becomes needless to learn English. Nazneen does not give up and starts learning English by watching TV, talking with friends, and taking some phrases from her daughters. By doing so, Nazneen becomes self-confident little by little and this also encourages her to involve herself gradually in the community and society. At the beginning, Nazneen does not prefer to go out because of the lack of the language; she instead likes to watch TV. Language is the main tool for the immigrants to use in order to facilitate their assimilation or integration in a new society. Then, she becomes interested in something that she watches on TV, which was about ice skaters. It is the first time for her to watch a man wearing a tight suit and a woman with a short skirt which is totally against religion and women are supposed to be covered.

The scene of ice skaters is significant for Nazneen's idea of independence. She wants to be that woman because of her bravery and the feeling of freeing both the mind and the body. She wants to adopt the new culture; and thus, to find her true self. Nazneen engages in the first move by watching streets, buildings and people as she likes without being

embarrassed until she reaches Brick Lane where she gets lost. As a result, she knocks someone's door and a man answers her. She runs away without a reason; he tells her something and the only thing that she does is to say 'sorry'. After, she goes to a pub for toilet and a restaurant to ask for directions to her home; and thus, she becomes able to communicate with people.

In many cases, Nazneen is able to express her own will whether to accept or to refuse. Nazneen insisted on saying 'no' to the demand of Chanu to sit in his metal tubing and canvas chair, 'Nazneen [refuses] to sit in it, even when her husband [tells] her not to be a damn fool of a woman and try it. She just [refuses] and that [is] that.' (Ali, 82) Moreover, she leaves her housework undone whenever she feels tired. For Nazneen, the meaning of a traditional woman is broken down and she wants to do what she likes. She becomes more independent, especially when her husband retires from his job in the council; and thus, he has no permanent position. She starts working to support her family outside beside to her housework. Even in a time of debt, Nazneen does her best to protect her family. One day, Mrs. Islam goes to Nazneen to ask for her money by pretending that she is a miserable and a dying lady, but Nazneen refuses to give her the money; she even tells her that she will give her and her sons no money even if they cut her arms. Nazneen is fearless and so angry which led Mrs. Islam to go away from the house; and thus, Nazneen wins over not only Mrs. Islam but also over the fears in her heart.

The scene of skating appears at the end of the novel and Nazneen is the main character of the field. She does an unusual thing; Kabeer notes that 'In Bangladesh, a country[...] [with] strong norms of purdah [...] in Britain [...] Bangladeshi women were largely found working from home, in apparent conformity with purdah norms.'¹⁰⁴ Razia states at the end

¹⁰⁴ Naila Kabeer, *op.cit.*, 2000, p. 8

‘[t]his is England, you can do whatever you like.’ (Ali, 492) Nazneen is totally free of mind in that moment.

Conclusion:

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali presents the different obstacles and problems that the immigrants Muslim women face in British multicultural society. Identity renegotiation is mainly one of the crucial issues of immigration that comes as a result of the struggle between two conflicting cultures, the native culture, and the alien culture. The protagonist, in the novel, experiences such a struggle in defining her identity in Britain not only as an immigrant, but also as a woman. At the beginning, her sense of loss, alienation, homelessness and quest for identity overcomes her; and thus, she asserts her identity by practicing her traditions in the foreign land. Being fascinated by some aspects of British culture, the main character becomes in an in-between state; hence, she tries to create a new identity by building a knot between two cultures.

CHAPTER THREE

Self-exploration and Religious Identity in *Minaret's* Multi-cultural
Society

Introduction

The issue of female religious identity is one of the crucial subjects that have been studied in British Muslim fiction. Leila Aboulela dealt with this issue in the context of postcolonial times in her second novel, *Minaret* (2005) with the aim of giving an importance to the sensibilities of being a Muslim woman in the West.

This chapter aims at analyzing Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* with the purpose of foregrounding the struggle that the Muslim woman passes through to define her religious identity in a multicultural setting. She is neither a victim nor an escapee of Islam, but she willingly commits to her faith. Aboulela describes the harsh reality of life that Muslim women face in multicultural Britain. They are subject to racial discrimination, loneliness, alienation, and homesickness. In the new country, many of them do not want to change their life; therefore, they maintain their cultural identity by joining the same community in the host country. In the novel, the heroine feels like a stranger in an unfamiliar setting; therefore, she longs for her native land, Sudan. She holds to religion that enlightens her life.

I- Aboulela's *Minaret* in Context:

As a reaction to the western misrepresentation, Muslim women writers wrote back in British Muslim fiction about Muslim identity. Leila Aboulela praised Islam and Muslims in her novel, *Minaret*, and showed the importance of religious life rather than the secular one.

1- Writing Back to the Centre:

Negotiating Muslim identities is one of the subjects that contemporary Muslim writers tackled in their literary works. In accordance with Claire Chambers's *British Muslim*

Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers (2011), the works of these writers were classified in British Muslim Fiction. She claims that there are often similarities in the fiction of these writers, especially in dealing with the issue of identity and its tensions. She argues that 'we can usefully speak of them as a loosely connected and often discordant family.'¹⁰⁵ They are mainly regarded as representatives of their culture; and thus, they are obliged to bear the burden of the presentation by putting themselves into the dangerous zone, which is authenticity¹⁰⁶.

As a reaction to the different stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women, Muslim women writers sought to define their identity by creating a new space to speak about Islam and Muslims in a positive way. In doing so, they attempt to write about their culture in a literature that is based on counter-discourse. In their narratives, Muslim women writers express the new reality of the people, who are presented as passive and oppressed. They challenge such views by depicting the lives of people, who are depending on Islam, in a positive way. They emphasize that Islam is a belief that fits modern world. Khalifa argues:

Narratives by Muslim women writers who come from different backgrounds and are located in the Western metropolis, challenge the static vision of Islam as oppressive of women by depicting the lives of normal people, who live in normal time and live Islam as a dynamic belief system and a positive value system that is relevant to the modern world.¹⁰⁷

Many Islamic concepts have been translated and introduced in the works of Muslim women writers. This process is basically an attempt to 'Islamize' the colonizer's language; and thus, to give a suitable expression for the misunderstood and misrepresented culture

¹⁰⁵ Claire, Chambers. *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. Hampshire. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 272

¹⁰⁶ conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features in <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic>

¹⁰⁷ Mahmoud Abdel-Hamid Mahmoud Ahmad Khalifa, *op.cit.*, 2011, p.3

and religion. Therefore, the main aim of the Muslim women writers is self-representation in order to write back the oriental discourse. It represents Muslim women as oppressed and in need of liberation that is only achieved by ‘giving up the whole culture and belief in Islam in exchange for modern Western ideology and culture.’¹⁰⁸

Besides challenging Orientalist views, Muslim women writers oppose the thoughts of the hegemonic secular feminists. Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn view that secular feminists ignore the centrality of Islamic spirituality and they even do not consider Islam an issue of identity to Muslim women.¹⁰⁹ Khalifa asserts that

These writers struggle to write back from a strategic positioning where they reclaim their Islamic cultural and religious identity as a mode of discourse that enables them to write back to the stereotyping centre in the West. For the purpose of contesting the stereotype imposed on them, they have to reclaim the Muslim woman subject from the flux of postmodernism and the closed view of Islamophobic Orientalism.¹¹⁰

Based on the rights of women, Western women regard that Islam oppresses women; and thus, they should liberate themselves from it. Hence, to fight against such ideas was a difficult task for Muslim women writers.

2- Leila Aboulela as a British Muslim Writer:

Leila Aboulela attempts to challenge the orientalist and secularist biases by looking for special vocabulary to express Muslim women’s cultural identity in her fiction. The

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2-3

¹⁰⁹ Jawad, Haifaa, Tansin Benn, *op.cit.*, 2003, p. 13

¹¹⁰ Mahmoud Abdel-Hamid Mahmoud Ahmad Khalifa, *op.cit.*, 2011, p. 6

experience of immigration to Scotland encourages her to start writing. She declares in an interview that traveling made her a writer. In 1992, Aboulela started writing after leaving Sudan for Scotland. A sense of homesickness and alienation overcame her. The people there did not know too much about the two aspects that makes up her identity, which are Sudan and Islam. Hence, she gave a good image about her country and religion in her narratives by stating that it is the circumstances that obliged her to come to the West instead of choosing it. Moreover, she proclaimed that she is in a place where the West is viewed as the best and Africa is a place of chaos where Muslim women are oppressed by Islam. Therefore, she found that fiction is the only way to describe her resistance to such views.¹¹¹

Aboulela is aware of the dichotomy between the West and the East, but leaving Sudan allowed her to be more conscious about such reality. In the Sudan, she enjoys a privileged position that distracts her from paying attention to her identity, while in the West she represents the Orient, because of her veil. Her identity has been frozen by the centre to become the oppressed and oriental woman.

Faith and religion are two basic elements in her works through which identity markers are discussed. Wail S Hassan sees that Aboulela is among the significant Sudanese writers, who introduced practicing Muslims into British literary scene. He explains that her works are mainly ‘narratives of redemption and fulfillment through Islam’, and that ‘Aboulela materializes the slogan of the Islamist movement that emerged in the mid-1970s: “Islam is the solution”’.¹¹² Mike Philips claims that Aboulela is one of the writers who dealt with

¹¹¹ Malavika, Vettath. “Sudanese author Leila Aboulela is dreaming of a lost future”. The National. 5 Nov 2013, n.p.

¹¹² Wail S., Hassan. “Leila Aboulela and The Ideology Of Muslim Immigrant Fiction” Novel: A Forum On Fiction. *Humanities International Complete*, Vol. 41.2/3 (2008): 300.

another aim in her writings; she praised Islam instead of satirizing it. According to Philips, these writers ‘avoid the cute and ingratiating tone’, and they ‘write from inside the experience of growing up and living with a network of customs and beliefs, which have themselves been subject to dramatic and far-reaching changes in the 20th century’¹¹³. Hassan adds that this kind of literature is new; it presents the aspects of Muslim lives to the West or non-Muslims. Meanwhile, it features the different types of discrimination, such as racism, Islamophobia, and prejudice.¹¹⁴

Muslim writers resorted to a new kind of literary response to the West, which is Halal fiction. It is one of the elements that Aboulela used in her works. Claire Chambers asked Aboulela about the Halal novelist label, she explained that this term was not welcomed by the Sudanese writers at the beginning, because they want her to be liberal like them. But after, they did accept it as long as it was associated with the meaning of being one of them.

In Sudan, writers and intellectuals are usually very liberal and left wing and so on, and people want me to be like that, they want me to be the liberated woman, so they are appalled at this *halal* writer thing. But when this was written in *The Muslim News*, it was written meaning that “she’s authentic, she’s one of us”; it was meant in a nice way, so I take it as a compliment.¹¹⁵

Aboulela preferred, in many occasions, to show how religious faith is dealt with by common people in their daily lives. Ferial J. Ghazoul asserts that ‘what makes her writing ‘Islamic’ is not religious correctness or didacticism. Rather, it is a certain narrative logic

¹¹³ Mike, Philips. “Faith healing”.*The Guardian*, 11 June 2005

¹¹⁴ Wail S. Hassan, *op.cit.*, 2008, p. 317

¹¹⁵ Claire Chambers, *op.cit.*, 2011, p. 400-1

where faith and rituals become moving modes of living'¹¹⁶. Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator* (1999), is regarded as 'the first halal novel written in English.'¹¹⁷

3- Minaret and Islamic Fiction:

The embodiment of Islamic features in Aboulela's novel, *Minaret*, has been one of the aspects of writing back to the canon. The existence of Muslim characters in the novel is based on the aim of correcting the image of religious people, who are often described as dull and harsh. She also wants to present her experience as a Muslim character in her fiction. At last, she intends to give tribute to the religious people, who enhance her life.¹¹⁸

Making a difference between religious and non-religious people is another aspect of challenging the stereotypes. The religious ones are often described as kind, sincere, loving and selfless; while the non-religious people appeared as cruel, selfish, and shallow. Omar, Najwa's brother, and Anwar, Najwa's boyfriend, are examples of non-religious people. They are often associated with negative aspects, such as irresponsibility. Wafaa and Ali are two religious people, whom Najwa described with admiration. The use of adjectives, such as kind and protective are attributed to them.

Representing other symbols positively, like the veil, is also a kind of writing back. The veil is presented positively in contrast of what is claimed by the West. The non-religious people regard it as an aspect of oppression and that women are obliged to wear it.

¹¹⁶ Ferial J., Ghazoul. "Halal fiction." *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*. (542) 12-18 July. (2001) <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/542/bo4.htm>.

¹¹⁷ Nesrin, Koç. *REPRESENTATION OF BRITISH MUSLIM IDENTITIES IN LEILA ABOULELA'S MINARET AND NADEEM ASLAM'S MAPS FOR LOST LOVERS*. Diss. 2014, p. 23

¹¹⁸ Saleh, Eissa. Interview with Leila Aboulela. *The i Witness*. July 2005. 01 Aug. 2015<<http://www.iwitness.co.uk/features/0705fe03.htm>>.

Therefore, Aboulela corrected the misrepresented image of the veil by asserting that it is needed in Muslim women's lives since it provides them with a sense of security from the western gaze. She adds that Muslim women feel proud after wearing it and this is the case of Najwa. She says:

When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought "not bad, not so bad". Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore.¹¹⁹

The title of the novel is composed of another feature of Islamic culture, which is the minaret. It has a relation to the place of worship for Muslims and it is the one that directed Najwa to the right path, the religious one, after being lost. Aboulela illustrates in one of the interviews that

The title *Minaret* appears to endorse the power of orientation that Najwa sees in the structure of the Regent's Park mosque – 'We never get lost because we see the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it'¹²⁰

If everything in Eurocentrism about the West is good, everything that has relation to Islam and Muslim culture is also good for Aboulela. In an interview, she demonstrates her intention of writing back by saying: 'I started writing more or less as a reaction against the Gulf War and the anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the media.'¹²¹

¹¹⁹ . Leila, Aboulela. *Minaret*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005, p. 247

¹²⁰ MacPhee, Graham. *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011, p. 157

¹²¹ Saleh Eissa, *op.cit.*, 2005

II- The Path towards Identity Formation in the Sudan

In the postcolonial period, societies become fragmented and this affected people's sense of identity. Some follow their own traditions and cultures; while others prefer the culture of the colonizer. The post-colonial fragmented culture of Sudan is the major cultural setting in *Minaret*. Dr. Visam Mansur states that one of the postcolonial period's characteristics in the ex-colonized societies is the division of classes: high class and low class. The members of the high class are known as the bourgeoisie class; they adopt the western culture in their lives to maintain their status. Whereas the low class is the marginalized one since they get closer to their own culture.¹²² .

1- Najwa's Life before the 1985 Coup

In the novel, the Sudanese society is divided into classes and the family of Najwa was from the high class, who adopted western models in their life. As one of the girls of high families, Najwa is influenced by western fashion and style, which are important in making distinctions between the classes, whereas the village girls wear modest clothes. Concerning religion, Najwa is not a practicing girl as required and instead she enjoys her life by going to clubs. Religion is the daily practice of the poor or the people of the village. As a result, the gap between the elites and the working class intensifies in a kind of master/slave relationship.

Najwa is, to a high degree, influenced by the western culture. She becomes detached from her native culture and attaches to the western one. A sense of displacement develops when she neglects her origins and is eager to adopt the new culture (language, ideology, and traits) and imitate it; and thus, she feels as outsider in her own society. Therefore, she

¹²² Mansur, Visam. Post-colonialism. Web page. 12 Apr. 2009. 19 Aug. 2015 <<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/4573/Lectures/postcolonialism.html>>.

is privileged of adopting the western culture and even gets the sense of superiority over the natives. She belongs to a bourgeoisie class and her father is an advisor to the president and her mother is a housewife. Her brother, Omar, is a westernized boy, who spends most of the time attending parties or watching Top of the Pops. Najwa is admirable of the western culture; thus, she adopts it. She mentions that 'We ate from china and silver. We wiped our mouths with napkins that were washed and ironed every day.' (Aboulela, 15) Furthermore, her dreams are shaped by the American films and the Pop songs. Her family lifestyle prevents them from interacting with the outside world; thus, they are detached from socio-cultural aspects of the other people. There is no interaction between the two groups, but they can interact with the other world through the maids or the people who need their help. She describes her life by stating that 'I was an aristocrat, yes from my mother's side with a long history of acres land and support for the British and hotels in the capital and bank accounts abroad.'¹²³

Adopting the mentality and ideology of the westerners affects Najwa's identity formation. Studying English, as a language of the master, is one of the aspects of the westernized life. Altbach highlights this point by stating that 'elites have often sent their children to private schools conducted in European language in an effort to maintain their privileged position.'¹²⁴ In fact, Omar believes that colonization has a positive impact on their lives and it is the colonizers, who bring civilization, industrialization, technology, education and advanced life to their country. Najwa says that 'Omar believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left.' (Aboulela, 11) As a result, the members of the high class support the existence of the western ideology instead of fighting it. Dr. Al-Malki declares that 'the colonized elites were alienated from their

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39

¹²⁴ Onwuchekwa, Chinweizu, and Ihechukwa Madubuike. *Towards the decolonization of African Literature*. Vol.1, Enugu: Howard University Press, p. 12

communities' needs and instead of attempting to de-colonize they strengthened the British ideology.¹²⁵

2- Najwa's Sense of In-betweenness in her Native Country

Being a Muslim woman and adopting western models in her life create a sense of in-betweenness for Najwa in her native country. The divided nature of postcolonial society, which is mostly influenced by the West, is the reason for the people's different views. Najwa prefers all what has relation to the west, ignoring almost her traditions and culture. Aboulela asserts that one of the features of postcolonial society is the natives' conviction 'they are primitives and uncivilized by referring to them as 'Third World' in comparison to the west where it is modern and civilized.'¹²⁶ As a consequence, they regard themselves as inferior; whereas, the new and modern generation of Najwa find themselves exposed to western culture; and thus, they are 'the best advocates of the superiority of the West.'¹²⁷

The clash between modernity and tradition affects Najwa's cultural identity as she feels an inferior and an outsider in her own country. Even though she is aware that she is a product of the west, she tries to adopt some values to feel her nativity or belonging. However, the idea of being an aristocrat and getting western education widen the gap between her and her native culture. Najwa's stance to the girls of the village has a sense of superiority. She points out:

They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too

¹²⁵ Amal, Al-Malki. *Traditional and Modernity in Post-colonial Novels: A Comparative Study of Chinua Achebe and Al-Tayyib Salih*. London: SOAS, 2003.

¹²⁶ Sara A., Al-Asmakh. *Politics of Identity in Multicultural Settings: a Literary Analysis of Leila Aboulela's Novels, The Translator and Minaret*. London: SOAS, 2009, p. 3

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

tight blouses. Many girls dressed like me, so I was not unusual. Yet these provincial girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobés that covered their slimness - pure white cotton covering their arms and hair. (Aboulela, 13)

Religion is a quite powerful element in Sudanese society and most people practice it. Najwa and her family follow it to a certain extent. For instance, they do charity works, fast Ramadan, and like to listen to Azan (calling to prayer). Najwa enjoys looking at covered girls, but neither she nor a member from her family pray. They believe that prayer is for the servants only. She watches them step by step in the night while doing their ablution and prayer. She confesses that she is awake, but she does not pray.

The servants stirred and, from the back of the house, I heard the sound of gushing water, someone spitting, a sneeze, the shuffle of slippers on the cement floor of their quarters. A light bulb came on.

They were getting ready to pray. They had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake and I didn't. (Aboulela, 33)

Najwa is a hybrid, who belongs to two different cultures, but neither of them seems hers. Nurminen argues that 'hybridity can lead to what has been termed in-betweenness, which is a state of alienation, or loss of identity, as the process of hybridity has caused the individual to become an outsider in both cultures.'¹²⁸ Najwa adopts some of her traditional practices; while at the same time, her lifestyle and orientation are western. For example, she wears mini-skirts that she even feels uneasy in wearing them. In Sudan, she feels an outsider because of her father's position and the same for London wherein she feels as an inferior because of her skin color. As a result, Najwa loses her identity since she cannot form her views of what she wants or who she wants to be. The sense of in-betweenness lets

¹²⁸ Laura, Nurminen. « Postcolonial Cultural Identity and the Caribbean White Creole in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The Orchid House*. » Diss. Turku, 2012

Najwa uncomfortable with her position. Hence, the feeling of being alienated from her own people and religion overcomes her. Being alienated from her own people is manifested in a scene of praying where she stays

watching those who were praying. Not everyone prayed. Girls like me who didn't wear topes or hijab weren't praying (...) The others lined up on the palm-fibre mat but it was too small to take everyone. The ones who came late made do with the grass. Our Maths lecturer, who belonged to the Muslim Brothers, spread his white handkerchief on the grass. He stood, his shoulder brushing against the gardener's. The student who was leading recited the Qur'an in an effortless, buoyant style. I gazed at all the topes of the girls, the spread of colours, stirred by the occasional gust of wind. And when they bowed down there was the fall of polyester on the grass. (Aboulela, 45)

3-The Influence of the 1985 Coup on Najwa's Identity Formation

One of the factors that allow Najwa to renegotiate her identity is the social and political instability in her country. The contradictions and split loyalties lead to the social and political turmoil. As a result, 'coup d'états'¹²⁹ are everywhere. Najwa's father is accused of being one of the government officials, who is responsible for the country's deterioration and disintegration.

As a result of the conflicting ideologies, anti-government movements emerge to look for the best of the post-independent nation. One of the active communists in the university was Anwar, who attacks Najwa's father for being the responsible one for the corruption of the country. He tells her that 'He is taking advantage of his post government, he takes

¹²⁹ Sara A. Al-Asmakh. *Politics of Identity in Multicultural Settings: a Literary Analysis of Leila Aboulela's Novels, The Translator and Minaret*. Diss. 2009.

commissions on every deal the government makes with a foreign company.’ (Aboulela, 46) Yet, the country remains corrupt after her father’s execution. All of a sudden, Najwa and her family face a military coup that devastates their life.

Najwa cannot sleep that night and she does not get what is the problem and all that she does is to listen to her father’s conversation on the phone. She senses something terrible from his voice. Then, she wakes up to see what happens. She describes the moment of the departure of her father in details; she says that ‘He was getting dressed, buttoning his shirt. He turned and looked at me as if he couldn't see me, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be going out in the middle of the night.’ (Aboulela, 55) The departure of Najwa’s father is the first hint of her identity’s perplexity.

Najwa asks her mother about the departure of her father in the night, but her mother does not reply. She seems busy ‘as if she was listening to a voice in her head, a voice that was listing things for her, telling her what to do.’ (Aboulela, 55) Instead, she asks her to go and sleep. Many questions are in the mind of Najwa about her father and she says ‘I wondered where Baha was going, where was he travelling to. Why didn't they tell me that someone important had died abroad?’ (Aboulela, 55) After numerous questions and new events, especially when the father of Najwa ‘sat in the back seat and that was wrong, (...) He shouldn't be in the back seat (...). except in taxis or when Musa was driving.’ At last, when Omar asks his mother, she tells him that there is a coup. Najwa’s life changes after such a military coup and it deteriorates more, especially when her father imprisoned for embezzling the government’s money. After her father imprisonment, Najwa’s identity is shaken. All of the members of the family are sent to London to live a life of exile. For Najwa, losing one’s country is like losing one’s identity.

III- Religious Consciousness and Identity Formation in Multi-cultural London

Being exiled to a multicultural place provides the exiled person with new realities. In the second part of the novel, the main character feels a sense of in-betweenness in her attempt to know about her religious identity. She defines her identity by wearing the veil and joining the community of believers, who motivates her to observe her religion.

1-The Feeling of In-betweenness of an Exiled Woman

Exile is a notion that involves ‘a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin.’¹³⁰ Many factors contribute to the situation of being exiled. The miserable situation of the postcolonial setting is one of these factors; it resulted in the production of exile. The colonized exile themselves from their own culture, languages, and traditions; and thus, they will be in an in-between state. Ashcroft illustrates that ‘The production of this ‘in-between’ class, ‘white but not quite’, was often a deliberate feature of colonial practice.’ (Aboulela, 93)

In *Minaret*, after the 1985 coup, Najwa and her family go to London as exiles with the help of their uncle: ‘It was Uncle Saleh who decided that we should come here. He had sorted everything out, all in a few hours, getting us on the last plane out before they closed the airport.’ (Aboulela, 60) Najwa is not satisfied with her uncle’s action and she thinks that it is preferable for them to stay in Sudan to not let her father being regarded guilty. Yet, she says nothing. The first weeks in a new country is nice for Najwa and Omar, but the situation of their mother is deteriorating. She is shocked at what happened in Sudan; she is waiting for any news about the coup by ‘surrounding herself with all the Arab papers

¹³⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key concepts in post-colonial studies*. London: Routledge, 1998, p. 92

as well as The Times and the Guardian, phoning round and leaving the TV on all the time.’
(Aboulela, 57)

In London, the family’s sense of alienation and loss increases, especially after the execution of the father. And thus, the unity of the family is broken down. A sense of hopelessness overcomes the members of the family. Najwa expresses her sadness: ‘When Baba was hanged, the earth we were standing on split open and we tumbled down and that tumbling had no end, it seemed to have no end, as if we would fall and fall for eternity without ever landing.’ (Aboulela, 63) Najwa is alone and her sense of identity becomes torn between the past and the present; she mourns the happy days of the past in the Sudan, which are not like those of London. ‘the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world’ have overcome Najwa.¹³¹ She becomes ‘exiled from the sheltered, Westernised lifestyle of the Sudanese ruling elite, Najwa can discover little of value or meaning in looking back at her former life in Khartoum.’ (Aboulela, 153) Her family disperses because everyone in her family faces a problem either physical or psychological. Her father is hanged for his corruption; her twin brother is imprisoned; her mother dies after being psychologically ill. (Aboulela, 152)

The life of Najwa changes from a privileged secular girl and daughter of a high post-government official to a modest maid in the houses of the rich Sudanese families in London. She works as a servant to her employer Lamya, whose heritage is mixed between Sudanese and Egyptian. She lives the same life that Najwa once enjoyed and all that

¹³¹ Anon. An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri, 12 April 2008 http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_I/interpreter_of_maladies2.asp#interview. In Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff. *Transcultural English Studies :Theories, Fictions, Realities*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi.

remained for her is a memory. At the beginning of the novel, Najwa expresses her feeling about the end of her dream by saying that 'I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move.' (Aboulela, 1) Unlike her previous experience, Najwa attempts to behave as a house maid.

Najwa feels ashamed of her past and did an effort of not mentioning anything that has relation to it. When the mother of her employer, Doctora Zeineb, asks her about her origins, Najwa cannot tell the truth, because she cannot decide which kind of identity she has. Najwa neglects the fact that she is Sudanese when Doctora Zeineb states that Lamyia is from Khartoum and her father is Sudanese. Najwa replies:

`Really?' My heart starts to pound as it always does when there is the threat that someone will know who I am, who I was, what I've become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali? (Aboulela, 72)

Living in such circumstances, Najwa is in a liminal situation. She is caught between the mysterious past and the unimaginable future. She even cannot find herself since her identity is attached to her father's success and importance, but she finds difficulty in asserting her identity after the failure of her father. She does not work hard and she passes all the days daydreaming of her parents and how they are considered as a source of protection to her. She remembers her past life:

I have a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, soundless sadness like a forgotten dream. (Aboulela, 13-14)

Before coming to London, Najwa thought that she can take her own decisions and can even become a westernized Muslim girl. This feeling of independence has been supported by her friend, Anwar. When a political party led a successful coup against the party that Anwar was supporting, he was forced to exile. The presence of Anwar in London is like a sense of attachment to the past and home for Najwa; and thus, their relationship develops since he provides her with the feeling of belonging.

The mistreatment of Najwa's relatives in London increases her alienation. For instance, the wife of her uncle, Eva, does not treat her properly. She does not help her to find a good job and she lets her instead to work as a housemaid with a low wage. Najwa's cousin, Sameer, cuts his relationship with her, especially when he becomes socially, economically and academically successful. The mistreatment of Najwa's relatives on the basis of socio-economic privilege mirrors her life in Khartoum where she behaves in a bad way with the lower class people. In London, she finds herself among the under-privileged relatives and friends, who use to deal with her in a good way because of her socio-economic level. However, she is with them, she feels isolated and alienated and this ambivalence created a sense of emptiness. She is not prepared for the experience of exile that is so harsh; she can do nothing because of the feeling of being rootless. She thinks that losing one's country is related to losing her identity.

Najwa cannot seem to be herself or find herself. Her upbringing has not prepared her for this life of exile: she has never been independent, nor does she have the qualifications that will help her survive in London. She feels unsettled, rootless, and suffers the anxiety of not being able to build a future of her own, having been deprived of home for good. The loss of country for Najwa is linked to her sense of having lost her identity.¹³²

2-The Veil and its Significance in Defining Najwa's Religious Identity

In multicultural societies, Muslims attach themselves to Islamic signs to reveal their Muslim identity. Göle states that the title of the novel *Minaret* as a symbol 'together with the dome has become a 'structural metonymy' of Muslim identity.'¹³³ Besides to minaret, among other Islamic signs is the veil, which is considered as a 'mute symbol'. According to Göle, Fatima Mernissi sees that the veil has different meanings. It can be visual with the function of keeping oneself from the others' gaze, it can be special by separating the sexes, and it can be moral.¹³⁴

The veil marks the separation between the private and the public spheres, but this does not mean that the veiled women do not attract the communities to their appearance. They are described as 'mobile homes' as Lughod defines them. Göle asserts that

¹³² Susan Taha, Al-Karawi. "Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*". *Journal of Language Studies* 255. Vol 14.3, (September 2014): 264

¹³³ Göle, Nilüfer. "Islam In Public: New Visibilities And New Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 173

¹³⁴ Nilüfer, Göle. *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*. USA: Michigan University Press, 1996, print, p. 94

The veil conceals the departure of Muslim women to the outside World, for, although, the veiled women are in the outside World, they still remain in the ‘inside,’ and the veil constantly reminds them that they belong to the *mahrem* sphere.¹³⁵

Aboulela’s novel, *Minaret*, has been written to contrast western views about Islam and Muslim women’s identity. It is an example of a woman’s struggle to assert her religious traditional identity over the modern one. In doing so, Najwa passes through a period of crises and transitions in a moment of liminality or hybridity. Wearing *hijab* or not wearing it is the main point for Najwa to define her identity. To stress the importance of religion within transculturation and interfaith relations of Muslim women in the West, many instances of veiled women in London are presented. Wearing the veil is intended to contrast the western views; the West regards that Muslim women wear it by force. Women, in this novel, wear the veil willingly because ‘voluntary veiling is believed to be an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture.’¹³⁶ Such voluntary veiling ‘re-establishes a link with authentic past culturally and its dissociation from the West.’¹³⁷ Najwa longs to be part of Khartoum Islamic life that she is passively observing:

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130

¹³⁶ Zeiny, Jelodar, Md. Yusof, Noraini, and Mahmoodi Khalil. “Bearers of Culture: Images of Veiling in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*”. *3L: Language Linguistics Literature, Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. Vol.19.2 (2013): 74

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74

I remembered the girls in Khartoum University wearing *hijab* and those who covered their hair with white *thobes*. They never irritated me, did they? I tried to think back and I saw the rows of students praying, the boys in front and the girls at the back. At sunset I would sit and watch them praying. They held me still with their slow movements, the recitation of the *Qur'an*. I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it. Whenever I heard the *azan* in Khartoum, whenever I heard the *Qur'an* recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. I usually didn't notice it, wasn't aware that it existed. (Aboulela, 140)

In the novel, Aboulela presents Najwa as a devout Muslim woman, who is so satisfied with her religious identity. She knows deeply that she is a Muslim and she lives consciously and unconsciously as a Muslim. Najwa comes to London as an exiled woman, who struggles to find her identity by negotiating her past of aristocratic, westernized girl and her present of a practicing Muslim woman. Her nostalgia for religious symbols in London provides her with the sense of being at home. Stein expresses that this spiritual longing is 'an actualization of home in Islam.'¹³⁸ The prologue Bism Allah, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem shows the transition in Najwa's life that is different from the former life and previous self.

In an attempt to recover a sense of identity, Najwa passes through individual, emotional and spiritual journeys. Her journey is divided into two parts: the first one before wearing the veil while the other one is after wearing the veil. In both parts, she finds herself in a

¹³⁸ Tina, Steiner. "Strategic nostalgia, Islam and cultural translation in Leila Aboulela's *The translator* and *Coloured lights*." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 20.2 (2008): 16

liminal state struggling to find who she really is. Najwa's rejection of the veil or its subsequent acceptance is fraught with ambivalence and fighting. Najwa and her friend, Randa, discuss for the first time the idea of wearing *Hijab*. The reaction of Randa to such an event is a total disgust of the veil. She says 'Totally retarded,' [...] '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?' Najwa's attitude to such an action is different from her friend and she replies 'what do we know? We don't even pray.' 'Sometimes, I was struck with guilt.' And she thinks immediately about the veiled girls of the university. (Aboulela, 30)

The relationship between Najwa and Anwar is thought of in terms of western types of involvement. She even accepts Anwar's disgust of the girls, who cover their hairs and bodies. The point of not wearing the veil makes him attached to her; he tells her 'I know you're Westernized, I know you're modern (...) that's what I like about you - your independence.' (Aboulela, 184) Pleasing Anwar causes Najwa to forget about her struggle in defining her Muslim identity.

After recognizing that the sense of belonging to one's original culture will not be achieved by following western cultural standards, Najwa cuts her relationship with Anwar. Najwa decides to wear the veil after rejecting Anwar's view about the modern Arab woman. She responds to his attitudes towards Islam and Muslims by saying that 'I can't. I'm tired of having a troubled conscience. I'm bored with feeling guilty.' (Aboulela, 254) After leaving Anwar, Najwa's life changes completely to another life as Cariello argues

that ‘one life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one.’¹³⁹ *Hijab* plays an important role in defining Najwa’s identity; she wears the veil for the first time and looks at herself in the mirror. She wonders whether that girl is she or not: ‘I didn’t look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained; something was deflated. And was this real me?’ (Aboulela, 245) Later, she wears the old tobés of her mother; she expresses her feeling by saying: ‘I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer.’ (Aboulela, 246)

Najwa returns back to make a relationship with the girls of the mosque. They convince her about religion; she also likes their way of wearing the veil. Wafaa is the one, who helps her to buy the veil and shows her how to wear it. ‘Wafaa took me shopping for my first headscarves. I ended up buying them from Tie Rack. I chose the colours but followed her guidance in buying squares as well as long rectangles (...) she showed me how to tie each one.’ (Aboulela, 256) After being satisfied with wearing the veil, Najwa feels that she can be visible and invisible at the same time by hiding her past and meanwhile asserting her identity in public. Moreover, she senses peace inside her. She manifests this in her expression:

¹³⁹ Marta, Cariello. « Searching for Room to Move: Negotiating Space in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*.” *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives Anglophone Arab Literature*. (2009): p. 340

When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought ‘not bad, not so bad’. Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn’t see me anymore. (Aboulela, 256)

For Aboulela, the veil does not signify tradition, ignorance, or invisibility as the West regard it; it signifies instead religious awareness. Najwa feels proud that she becomes invisible because she regards invisibility as ‘the very tenet of identity on which she builds her selfhood.’¹⁴⁰ She is not comfortable in London, especially before wearing the veil. Wearing mini-skirts and tight trousers attract men’s attention; and thus, she is disturbed. She thinks that wearing the veil regains her lost dignity.

3-The Results of 9/11 on Najwa as a Practicing Muslim Woman:

Muslims are often subject to stereotypes and labels for a long period of time. Islam is described as a backward religion while Muslims in general and Muslim women, in particular, are regarded as its victims. This kind of representations intensifies after the attacks of 9/11 on the World Trade Centre. Hence, Islam becomes associated with terrorism and this convinced them that they are living in an age of terror. Being obsessed with Islamic terrorism becomes the same of being obsessed with the veiled women in the West.

¹⁴⁰ Nesrin, Koç. « REPRESENTATION OF BRITISH MUSLIM IDENTITIES IN LEILA ABOULELA’S *MINARET* AND NADEEM ASLAM’S *MAPS FOR LOST LOVERS*. » Diss. 2014

The westerners have a bad image about the veil and they see it as a tool of oppression. As a visible sign, the veil led to terrorist attacks against the women; and thus, it is difficult to be a Muslim or a practicing woman in the West. As a contemporary British Muslim writer, Aboulela refuses to look at Islam with a western eye. Her second novel, *Minaret* (2005), is viewed as ‘a journey of self-exploration and sharing of the inner-self of a Muslim woman whose identity was looked down upon, especially in the post -9/11 and-7/7 era.’¹⁴¹

After being a practicing Muslim, Najwa finds that Islam helps her to get rid of the tribulations and to provide her with a fresh life; and thus, her life becomes more disciplined. Yet, her new life is full of difficulties and catastrophes; she faces painful experiences about wearing the veil in public by people, who never feel comfortable with the presence of viewing a veiled woman. Because of her appearance, Najwa is attacked on a bus. She turns to Allah in this embarrassing situation by reciting some verses; she puts trust in him because he is the only one, who helps her in that moment. She thinks: ‘I tell myself that Allah will protect me so that even if they hurt me, I won't feel it too badly; it will be a blunted blow, a numbed blow.’ (Aboulela, 82)

Najwa does not feel at ease and this is mainly because of her appearance. Even though she is humiliated by some people in the bus, the bus driver ignores her and looks away. She gives a detailed description about what happens to her:

¹⁴¹ Lumpur, Kuala. *Aboulela's Minaret: A New Understanding of Diasporic Muslim Women in the West*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005, p. 288

Laughter from behind me. Something hits the edge of the seat next to me and bounces down the aisle; I don't know what it is. He has missed his target this time. Will they move closer, and what if they run out of things to throw? I look up at the bus driver's face in the mirror. His eyes flicker and he looks away. (Aboulela, 82)

Najwa details this experience and she starts doing things in order to avoid the men whether by looking out of the window or looking down at her shoes, but this does not prevent the three men from approaching. She can do nothing to these guys just to breathe in and out to let anger be away.

4- Najwa's Sense of Belonging to her Religion and Community:

After being lost in Britain's multicultural society, Najwa discovers the importance of religion and religious community in providing her with safety and protection. One of the main points of the novel is the naturalization of religion in the Muslim women's lives and the denaturalization of the secular life. Security, love and peace of mind are considered as qualities of religion while the secular life is totally devoid of such qualities. In *Minaret*, the importance of religion and religious identity in the life of the character is the prominent element. The protagonist Najwa prefers the religious life over the secular one; and thus, she becomes aware of religious identity. Najwa is not a devout Muslim from the beginning of the novel, but her religious identity develops in the course of the novel. Moreover, the emphasis is mainly on the point of the change from a non-practising to a practicing Muslim

woman. Chandrahas Choudhury argues about the importance of religion in the novel by stating that 'we are invited to consider religion ... more like a necessity.'¹⁴²

Aboulela deals with three points that have relation to Islam that make it a favorable religion and an advantage on the part of the protagonist by making her life happier than the one before. The first one is being connected to protective God and this comes after having a devout life. The second element is the feeling of belonging to the community of believers, which makes it enjoyable to practice religion with the group. The third point is the well- structured and well- ordered life that the Muslim will have.

Before being a practicing Muslim, Najwa's family life is devoid of love, security, and protection. She loses her family and becomes a destitute. In fact, Najwa relates religion with her family life; she longs for her past life, but in another way. She says 'I yearned to go back to being safe with God. I yearned to see my parents again, be with them again like in my dreams.' (Aboulela, 251) Steiner states that Aboulela bases her idea on the claim that Islam is like 'set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surroundings.' (Aboulela, 13)

Najwa's relationship with God develops throughout the novel to the point of intimacy. She thinks that He is not the one who should be feared. Security and intimacy develop more when Najwa is watching religious programmes; she thinks that they are transmitting the message to her: 'Don't worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this, all of this will be meaningful

¹⁴²Chandras, Choudhury. "Sudanese exile finds footing in London once she dons the veil: a review of *Minaret*." *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Vol.18. 3 (September 2005): 6

and worth it in the end.’ (Aboulela, 101) Another aspect of intimacy to Allah is Quran; Najwa thinks that reading Quran is an aspect of luckiness since it allows her to speak directly to Allah. Many instances in the novel show Najwa’s sense of security and protection of Allah; she speaks about His mercy by declaring

The more I learnt, the more I regretted and at the same time, the more hope I had. When you understand Allah's mercy, when you experience it, you will be too ashamed to do the things He doesn't like. His mercy is in many things, first the womb, the rahim, He gave it part of his name, Al-Rahnnan - the All- Merciful. It is a place we have all experienced. It sheltered us, gave its warmth and food ... do you remember ... ? (Aboulela, 257)

The sense of spirituality overcomes Najwa after learning about the mercy of God. She feels a sense of belonging to the community of believers, whom they regard as members of the family. She meets them regularly in the mosque where she feels happy

‘Yet I am not sad, this is a happy occasion and I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant. One more line to go. “My Lord, give us from your mercy and blessings so that we can love what you love and so that we can love all those actions and words that bring us closer to you.’ (Aboulela, 190)

Najwa’s awareness of her religious identity intensifies after being in the mosque with the community of believers. She finds that the mosque is the safe place where she feels equal with everyone without regarding the class or status since they come for one purpose, which is worshipping Allah. She also says that ‘In the mosque I feel like I'm in Khartoum

again.’ (Aboulela, 253) After accompanying Muslim women in the Regents Park Mosque, she remembers the practicing Muslim students in Khartoum University, who intrigue her by their practice

I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This was what I had envied in our gardener reciting the *Qur’an*, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I heard the *Qur’an* recited, there wasn’t bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert. (Aboulela, 252-253)

Najwa finds stability in her new life, which lets her hope to not return to the previous one. She keeps on fasting Ramadan ‘since life becomes communal, regulated, disciplined and focused. Without this structure, life is fragmented and difficult.’ (Aboulela, 20) So, the religious experience of the protagonist is nourishing and empowering. In *Minaret*, Aboulela states her view by saying ‘yes, Najwa will overcome the guilt . . . it will be the *Hajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca] that will be the final stage in her process of completely getting over the past and becoming a new person.’¹⁴³

¹⁴³ MacPhee Graham, *op.cit.*, 2011, p. 157

Conclusion:

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) is a story of a Muslim woman, who renegotiates her religious identity. Being a Muslim woman in a multicultural society is a difficult situation for her to assert her identity. Leaving the homeland puts that woman in a complicated situation and she feels lost, especially when she cannot find support from her family. Even though she is exposed to different attacks, she rediscovers her Muslim identity by wearing the veil in public. In a multicultural society, the importance of religion for the protagonist, as a Muslim woman, is emphasized since it gives order and security to the community of Muslim immigrants in general.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The present study sets out to give a close reading of *Brick Lane* and *Minaret* to show the impact of migration on Muslim women's identity formation in a multicultural world. The central focus of this dissertation is identity renegotiation that often seems to be important than any other question in both works as Muslim women protagonists faced difficulties in their search for identity in multicultural Britain. To illuminate the intricacy of such a topic, theories of postcolonialism and feminism were invoked in the discussion. These were featured in the first chapter and were detailed and exemplified in the second chapter on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and the third chapter on Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005).

The relationship between identity and culture is crucial in a multicultural setting. Identity is one of the themes that postcolonial/ feminist Muslim writers tried to tackle in their literary works as a way to assert themselves. Culture on the other hand is an aspect that may include values, traditions, language... And thus, the loss of one's culture means the loss of one's identity since culture defines one's identity. Most of postcolonial/ feminist Muslim writers preferred to use English language to define their culture, they inserted some Islamic terms in a process of 'muslimization' of English language.

Religious identity is a topic that is discussed in the selected works. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) is a story about the struggle between tradition and modernity to define one's self. Living in a patriarchal society, women were expected to follow men and obey them. London, on the other side, is considered as a place of modernity where people and especially women can behave freely. A sense of loss has overcome Nazneen as a Muslim woman since she finds herself in a liminal state. She maintains her traditions in Britain to feel closeness to her homeland; meanwhile, she is fascinated with some aspects of British culture. She observes her traditions with the embodiment of some features in British

culture to create a new hybrid identity. The importance of one's identity in a foreign land is emphasized in this novel, especially when the main character could not live without her Islamic identity that defined her existence. She reconstructs her identity at the end of the novel by preferring to enjoy her life in London through practicing her religion, while living free life devoid of restrictions. Nazneen found out that the main component of her identity is religion that kept her attached to her culture. The last scene of enjoying life in London, while keeping Islamic appearance represents her connection to her culture and her quest to find herself.

Minaret (2005) by Leila Aboulela is a story that is based on clash of cultures. The story of this novel also chronicles the life of Najwa in two places, Sudan and London. Even though Sudan is a religious society, she lived an aristocratic, non-religious life with her family. She was not aware of her religion since the division of classes affected her personality. The high class people do not practice religion properly; however, practicing religion was mainly for the lower class. And thus, a sense of racism has widened the gap between the two classes. Though she is a westernized girl, she is alienated in London after being exiled. Moreover, she lost the members of her family because of the absence of religion. Hence, a sense of in-betweenness with the feeling of identity confusion has overcome Najwa in a moment to decide which path to follow. This novel puts an emphasis on the importance of religion and its consequences in strengthening one's sense of identity. After being attached to religion, Najwa felt the sense of belonging to her community that she once lost. Wearing the veil has been the most prominent marker of identity in this novel and it is the first thing that Najwa attempted to do to signify her Islamic identity.

In process of analyzing the two novels, I emphasized the issue of Muslim women's identity formation in a multicultural society. The protagonists of both novels faced identity crisis and this caused a sense of confusion to both of them. The choice or the path that they selected after such confusion is the main target of dealing with these novels. Even though it seemed that their path is somehow different, both of them regard religion as the basis for their identity formation.

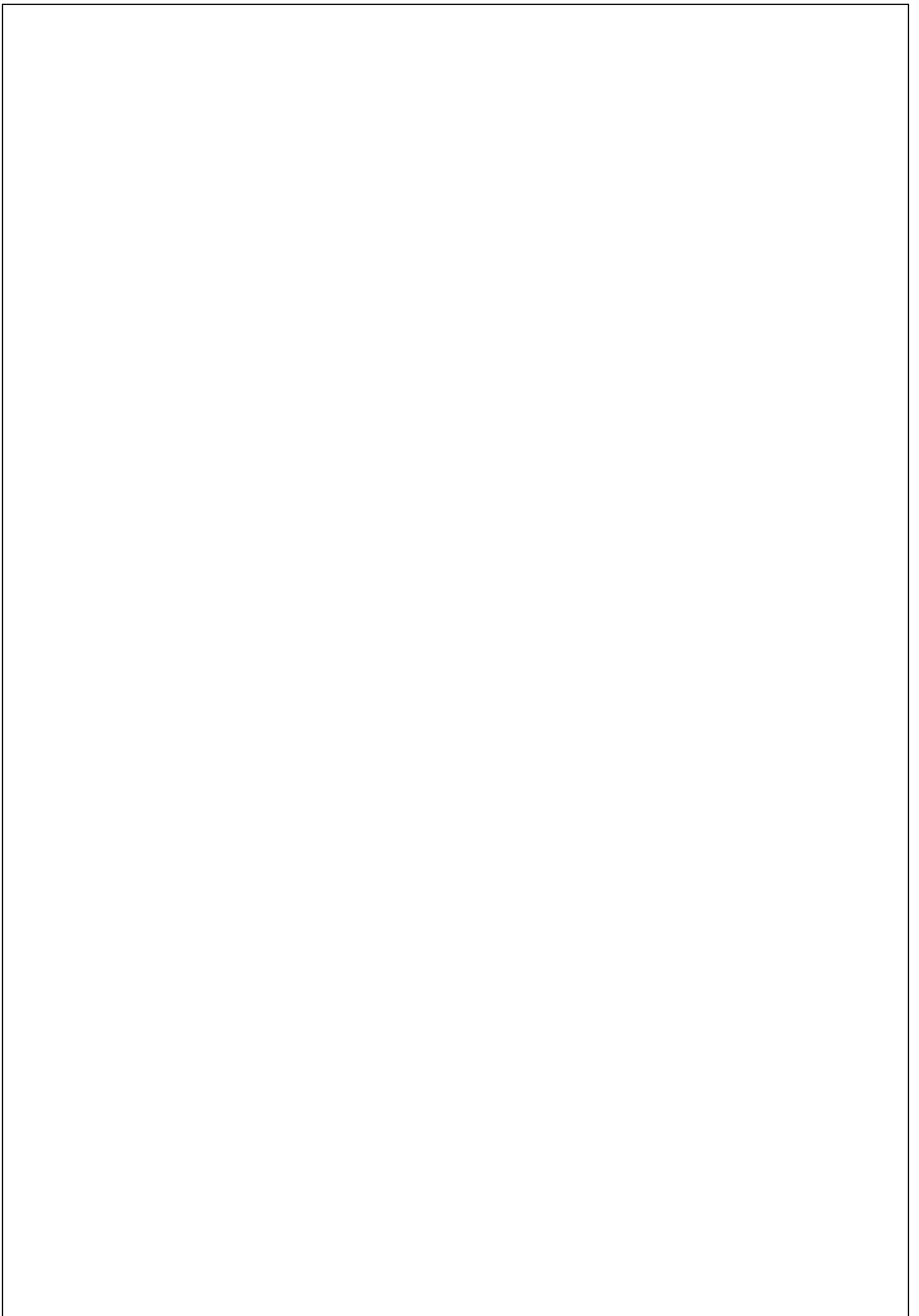
The clash of cultures is mainly what the protagonists witnessed in Britain's multicultural society. I focused on the nature of struggle that the main characters engaged in to know who they are. The sense of in-betweenness is one of the major aspects that I dealt with and this was mainly to show the kind of struggle that Muslim women pass through in order to reconstruct some stereotypes that were used against them. Both Muslim women in the novels attempted to challenge the western and oriental views which regarded Muslim women as passive, weak, silenced.

The event of September 11th, 2001 is often considered as one of the events that increased Muslim women's suffering in western countries. Muslim women were attacked out of suspicion and this was because of their religious appearance. Wearing the veil is an aspect of Islam and everything that has relation to Islam has been associated with negative characteristics. The protagonists in both novels have been attacked because of their religion and because of their identity as Muslim women.

The significance of religion in defining Muslim women's identity is an obvious point in analyzing both novels. The protagonists became aware of the importance of religion in their lives, especially after facing identity crisis in a multicultural setting. Culture and religion are two aspects that define Muslim women's identity in Britain. The possibility of

living without one's religion or culture is something difficult and the loss of one's culture means the loss of identity. Therefore, the main characters were attached to their religion by doing Islamic practices, such as praying and wearing the veil.

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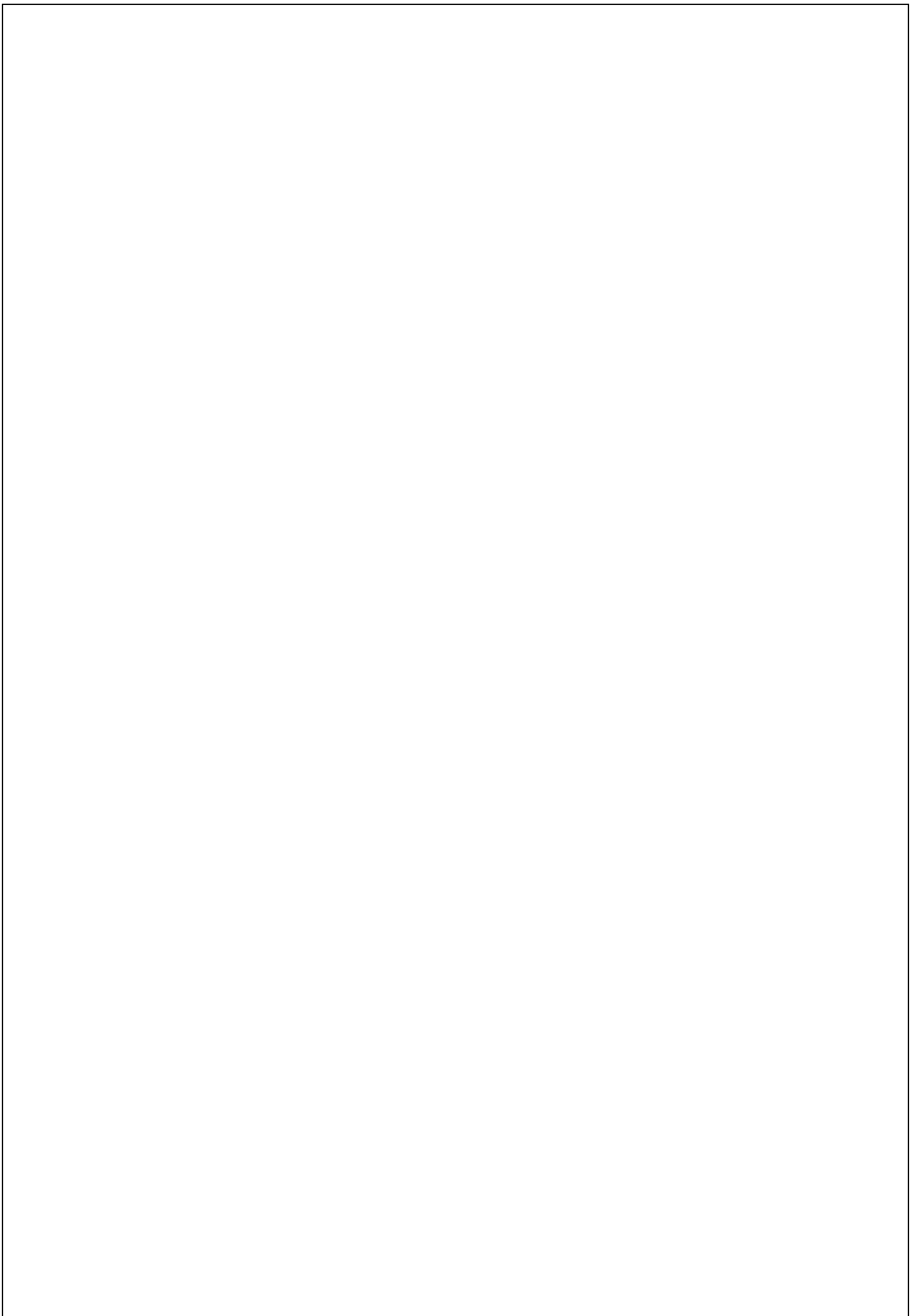
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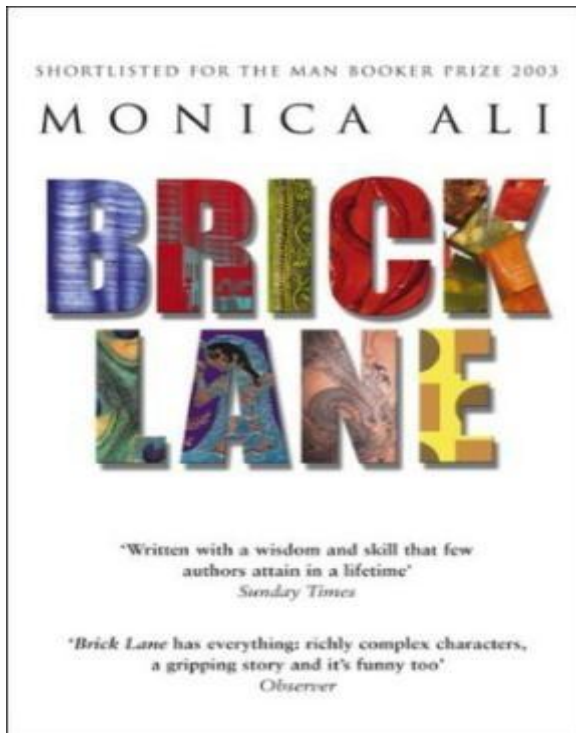
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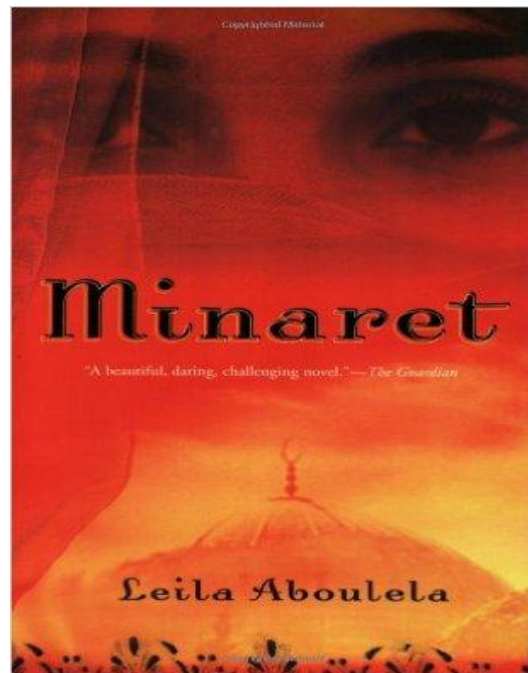
Appendices

Appendix A



The Bengali British writer Monica Ali was born on 20 October 1967 in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh and moved with her family to England in the 3-year-old, where she grew up in Bolton near Manchester in northern England, and studied philosophy, political science and economics at Wadham College, Oxford. Her first novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), got an immediate success and translated into twenty-six languages. *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Monica Ali was listed by the Magazine Granta among the twenty British young novelists and candidates for a promising future in the world of novels.

Appendix B



Leila Aboulela (1964), a Sudanese typewriter, novelist and writer, born in Cairo, and in the city of Khartoum where she joined the Khartoum School of America and her daughter was first demographically scientist in the Sudan. She graduated from the University of Khartoum in the year 1985 in the specialization of the economy and was given a master's degree in statistics at the London School of Economics. She lived for in Scotland and currently studies and lives in Doha. Her second novel, *Minaret* (2005), was nominated for the Orange Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Award.

Synopses

Synopsis of *Brick Lane*

Brick Lane is the story of Nazneen, a young Bangladeshi woman, who married a man twice her age, Ahmed Chanu. He takes her to London where she finds difficulties in surviving in a whole new culture. In the small Bangladeshi estate, Nazneen meets other Bangladeshi people who grow through their own struggles. Some of them struggle against the traditions they left behind, while others struggle against the new traditions that their English-born children are exposed to. Nazneen stays in London and she survives with the help of Razia. The women establish a sewing business with some of their other friends and they make a good living catering mainly to white women who will pay high prices for Bangladeshi/Indian-style clothing. The novel ends with a surprise trip for Nazneen. Nazneen's daughters and Razia take her to an ice-skating rink for the first time, where she will be free to skate, they tell her, even in her sari.

Synopsis of *Minaret*

The story of the novel begins with Najwa's luxurious life in Khartoum. She is a rich girl whose father is a government official, they have a big house run by six servants, and they travel abroad in holidays. Even though she is a Muslim, her lifestyle is mainly based on western models, such as clothes, pop music, and parties. At university, she befriends Anwar, who holds a disdain for the faith and veil-wearing girls. He always embarrasses Najwa because of her father's corruption that led to his execution after unavoidable coup. Afterward, the family of Najwa fled to London.

In London, Najwa's life is different and deteriorating. Her brother becomes an addict and stabs a policeman; and thus, he is taken to prison. Her mother suffers a lot and finally dies. Anwar comes to London after another coup that happens in Sudan and he finds Najwa in a desperate position. He is the one that reminds her of her past; however, she recognizes that he has no intention to marry her. Hence, she cuts her relationship with him and joins a group of Muslim women at the Regent's Park mosque. She also works as a maid at some Arab families' houses. She becomes more attached to her religion after the experience of disillusionment. She starts to see the world from a new perspective after wearing *hijab*. As a result, her life changes from pride and perplexity to humility and peace that is achieved after her religious conversion and spiritual loyalty.