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**Reading Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) as an Islamic Feminist Novel:
Najwa's Empowerment Through Spirituality and Social Connections**

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master in Literature, Civilisation, and Language Teaching.

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Dedication

This work is but a word of thanking to my husband who was by my side to support me, to my guardians and parents who encouraged me and did not hesitate to offer help whenever I asked. To my sister “Nounou” and my brother “Bylka”. To Mima and my in-laws who I consider my second family.

To my joy Thanina.

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Abstract:

For the past few decades, a good deal of attention has been paid to Islam and Muslim women. As a matter of fact, the literary market has been fertilized with a considerable number of works by and about Muslim women. With the aim of contributing to this field, this study analyzes Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* (2005) from a postcolonial feminist perspective and highlights the role of religious practices, namely, the veil and the mosque in consoling and empowering Muslim women. This study delves into the deepest thoughts of the protagonist, to explore Najwa's spiritual journey and metamorphosis from a being least pious to most intensely devout and highlight Aboulela's contribution to the growing debate on Muslim women.

Key words: Islamic feminism, social connections, spirituality, empowerment.

المخلص:

كثرت في العقود الأخيرة الاهتمام بالإسلام والمرأة المسلمة وانتشرت أعمال أدبية عنها وعن إنجازاتها، ومحاولة منا المساهمة في هذا المجال جاءت دراستنا حول رواية *Minaret 2005* للروائية ليلى أبو العلاء وذلك من خلال دراسة هذه الرواية من منظور نسوي، مبرزين دور الدين المتمثل في الحجاب والمسجد في تقوية وتمكين المرأة المسلمة. وفي ثلاثة فصول تغوص الدراسة في عمق شخصية ومعتقدات بطلة الرواية "نجوى" لاستكشاف رحلتها الروحانية، والتحول من مسلمة غير ملتزمة إلى مسلمة متدينة، وإظهار مساهمة الروائية ليلى أبو العلاء في النقاش المتنامي حول النساء المسلمات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاقات الاجتماعية، النسوية الإسلامية، الروحانية، التقوية.

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General Introduction

In the aftermath of the apocalyptic event of 11 September 2001, “Muslim Literature” has gained significance in the Contemporary English Fiction. Literature becomes the medium with which Muslim writers answer back the Westerners stereotypes and misrepresentations of both Islam and Muslims. As a matter of fact, issues facing women become a thriving field of research. Consequently, a considerable number of works has been produced putting on the spot Muslim women; thus, they have attracted the focus of literary studies and become the canons of postcolonial lectures.

The issue of Muslim women’s role and status become the focus of various academic researchers. Moreover, throughout the last few decades, the academic field of social sciences has been continuously challenged by the paradigm of gender. Therefore, the subject of “*oppressed Muslim woman*” in her connection with the Islamic practices is among the most studied issues within postcolonial studies.

The 1990s witnessed a proliferation of writings by and about Muslim women, as is the number of interested scholars who address issues of gender. This was the outcome of women’s mass participation in the movement of freedom which is a landmark in the history of Muslim women empowerment. Nowadays, Muslim women have new responsibilities and roles, apart from the traditional role they were used to play for ages. As they crave to reframe their identities, it is spirituality which remains a source of strength, guidance and wisdom. Basically, for Muslim women spirituality is not otherworldly, it is as much about social connections and works as it is about soul and state of mind. If a Muslim woman is well-equipped with self-awareness and spiritual powers within herself, she becomes more confident and determined.

The present study will concentrate on the work of one of the Muslim women writers, Leila Aboulela, and will explore her work in the light of postcolonial theory with regard to contemporary discourse on feminism and Muslim women empowerment through spirituality. By this work, we wish to contribute to the recent growing debate on works by and about Muslim women. We are interested in Aboulela's narratives, namely *Minaret* (2005), for her use of English as a vehicle to express her opinion and ideas. The present research has been undertaken with the objectives to study Muslim women empowerment in relation to spirituality and highlight the writer's contribution to correct the preconceived ideas about Muslim women.

Minaret presents a very monolithic and closed understanding of religion; it emphasizes the role of spirituality and faith. It is about a female protagonist who succeeds to find a place for herself in exile after facing many problems. It is faith and spirituality which generate in the novel's protagonist a strong will to carry on her life. Indeed, the novel is a good example of what spirituality and faith can provide Muslim women with.

The value of the present study lies in the contributions it hopes to achieve. Such a study, we believe, would contribute to the debate about the tensions between the universal and local conceptualization of feminism. Moreover, it is expected to contribute to the field of literature and literary studies. It might be helpful for those who are interested in the study of Muslim women narratives and Islamic feminism.

Central to this investigation is the following question: to what extent does Aboulela's *Minaret* foreground and advocate Islam as a strategic choice of empowerment and spiritual relief for the protagonist? It is necessary to answer these research questions: what is the role of social connections for the protagonist? How do Islamic practices like wearing the veil and going to the mosque help the protagonist? And finally, to what extent does Leila Aboulela contribute to the growing debate on Islam and feminism?

What is hypothesized, therefore, is that Muslim women empower themselves through spirituality and self-awareness; when a Muslim woman is well equipped with spiritual powers would face whatever the dilemmas she may find herself in. we put forward that it is spirituality and social connections which enhanced Najwa's will to carry on life. Additionally, the novel is a vivid portrayal of Islamic principles and their role in guiding and saving Muslims, mainly those placed in an uncomfortable environment as it is the case for Najwa. By the same token, Aboulela may contribute to the growing debate over the Muslim women. Eventually, Najwa's story is an invitation to re-think some feminist analysis about Muslim women since the western feminist interpretations remain insufficient.

Searching through books, doctoral researches, search engine and other sources reveals a subtle number of works published on the subject of Muslim women writings and their struggle to empower themselves. Many Muslim writers have created masterpieces in English about Islam and Muslims, for example, Fadia Fakir, Ahdaf Souief, and Leila Aboulela.

Leila Aboulela, along with other contemporaries, explores themes such as Muslim women's representation, the process of integration when placed in a new environment, the quest for identity and other themes. *Minaret* is Aboulela's second novel. In the literature review of the novel and the writer, we have found a number of articles and doctoral researches dealing with Aboulela's works.

Youcef Awad (2011), *Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*, has examined the heterogeneity of Arab women writers in diaspora through comparing and contrasting the thematic expressions of narratives produced by Arab women writers in English in Britain and the United States.

Molli Shomer (2015), *Re-Presenting Muslim Women: the Difficulties of (Un)Veiling the Muslim Women in Muslim Women's Autobiographies*, has offered a glance into the life of Muslim writers and the oppression they face, also, she highlighted the importance of literature for these marginalized women since it stands for the refuge where these oppressed writers show off their Muslim part of identity and their pride of being veiled.

Susan Taha Al-Karawi and Ida Baizura Bahar (2014) have discussed the hybrid identity of Muslims who live in Britain; they have asserted that this identity is achieved through the struggles and feeling of being placed in a host culture that overlaps with the Arab Muslim identity. Claire Chambers is another literary scholar and writer who has written on the issue of Muslim narratives, in particular, works of Leila Aboulela (2011), "*Recent Literary Representation of British Muslims*"¹, analyzes *Minaret* and *Maps for*

¹ Claire, Chambers. "Recent Literary Representation of British Muslims." *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty First Century*. Eds. Mickael, Balley, and Gay Redden (London: Routledge, 2011) 175-188.

Lost and Lovers (2004) written by Nadeem Aslam. Another work by Claire Chambers is *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Author* (2011), in which she interviewed thirteen writers, coming from different cultures; Leila Aboulela is one of those interviewed writers. Geoffery Nash (2007) has examined *Minaret* and three of other works of Arab in which the writers discussed the Anglo-Arab encounter and the voice of Arab writers in diaspora.

In addition to other doctoral theses and analytical articles which proved to be relevant to the suggested study such as Firouzeh Ameri's (2012), *Veiled Experiences: Re-Writing Women's Identities in Contemporary Muslim Fiction in English*, in which she suggested that Leila Aboulela's novels, *The Translator* (1999) And *Minaret*, advocate Islamic principles, for Aboulela being a devout Muslim affords women a sense of well-being.

After searching and checking several sources, the majority of the studies which have been done on *Minaret* are either articles, doctoral thesis or book chapters; yet, no study so far, as far as we know, has discussed the subject of the protagonist's empowerment through spirituality and faith under the scope of Islamic feminism and the importance of trans-cultural dialogue for displaced Muslims mainly. Therefore, a study is needed to examine the extent to which the novel advocates Islam and alliances among Muslim women as the strategies that help the protagonist to overcome the challenges she faces in London and the extent to which the novel conforms to the ideals of Islamic feminism and Muslim women empowerment through spirituality; hence, the study aims to fill this gap.

This study falls within feminist postcolonial theories, precisely Islamic feminism; therefore, we will follow a descriptive-analytical approach with a return to postcolonial theory. The data used are of qualitative nature. The specific procedure used in the selection of quotations involves close reading² to have a deep understanding of the novel and collect textual data from the utterances, expressions, and thoughts of the characters, namely the protagonist, in the novel.

Our dissertation will be made up of three chapters: the first chapter discusses the theoretical background on which this study draws its contributions, dealing with Muslim women writings and postcolonial feminism. The second chapter analyzes the novel from a feminist perspective and highlights the strategic role of Islam -means of empowerment- and the viability of feminism as a transcultural movement. The third chapter analyzes the spiritual dimensions of the novel. A discussion of the central role of the veil and the mosque mainly will be the core of this chapter.

² In literary criticism, close reading is a method of approaching literary texts. It is commonly applied to the detailed analysis of a literary text; it consists of a careful and sustained interpretation of passages. It emphasizes the single over the general; it focuses on words, the syntax, and the order in which the sentences unfold ideas. Literally, the reader scans the lines of the text. (Baldick 2015)

Chapter One: An Overview of Muslim Women Writings and Postcolonial Feminism

Introduction

This chapter will try to give a general overview of Muslim women writings, the nature of their writings, the topics and themes they elaborate. Feminism has shown a refreshing willingness in the Postcolonial era; indeed, third wave feminism is usually linked to postcolonial feminism; hence, the voice of feminism is more audible in postcolonial literature, including Muslim women writings, than anywhere else. Given that feminism is relevant to our study, a discussion of feminism, namely, Islamic feminism is highly recommended.

1. A General Overview of Muslim Women Writings

Over the past few decades, a great deal of attention has been given to Muslim literature above all Muslim women writings. In the aftermath of September 11, mainly, Western media and texts portray Islam through lenses of violence and barbarism. They perpetuate distorted images about it as being a threat to the Western democratic order. For many people in the West, the concept of “*Muslim women*” entails oppressed, submissive women, and victims of Islamic traditions. Thus, attempts within literature to reframe the radicalized female subject have become increasingly important.

1.2 Muslim Women literature after the event of 09/11

On the eve of 09/11 event, the literary market has been fertilized with writings by and about Muslims and Islam. Susan Darraj argues: “*since the tragedies of September*

11, 2001, the work of these writers [Muslim writers] has received even more attention, as Western readers seek to understand the “Arab mind” and world” (123). Books about Muslims become hot commodities, mainly, that penned by women. Apparently, the event revitalized Muslim literature, from 09/11 onward; in this context, Claire Chambers says: “writers began to re-examine the neglected issues of representation of Islam and Muslims in a more nuanced way” (*Recent Literary Representations*, 176). The ultimate goal of these writers is to challenge the Western biased stereotypes.

Muslim literature -mainly that penned by women- attempts to liberate Islam from all misrepresentations and misunderstandings. Western media is usually used to generate pejorative images about Muslim women; they are presented speechless, oppressed and invisible. Yet, Muslim writers are engaged in writing their alternate discourse; they made the subject of Muslim women the core of their narratives. Muslim women are presented in a new light, in a way which contradicts with what the Westerners accustomed its people with, they are presented as educated, decisive, progressive and independent who are no longer victims of their societies but fighters who do not need men or the West to save and rescue them.

As it has been stated above, the concept of “*Muslim women*” connotes submissiveness and backwardness. For many people in the West, Islam is the religion that deprives women of their rights. Basically, Islam’s supposed oppression of women shows itself most probably to Western eyes in Islam’s obligatory wearing of the scarf.

Leila Ahmad argues:

Veiling- to Western eyes, the most visible marker of differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies- became the symbol of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of assault on Muslim societies. (152 1992)

Granted, the veil is a large part of many Muslim women's lives and identity. For Westerners, the veil or the practice of veiling is an evidence of Islam's oppression and hostility regarding women. They associate Muslim women with lack of agency and patriarchal dominance while Muslim societies as primitive and uncivilized. The veil, inevitably, is seen as the sign of Islam's backwardness. Therefore, many Muslim writers, mainly women, started to contest and resist these falsified ideas and stereotypes. As a result, feminists -men and women- attempt to underscore Islam's stress on women's right and gender equality.

It is worthy to note that Muslim women fiction plays a crucial role in correcting the Westerner's misconception of Islam as the religion that oppresses women and denies their rights. Their writings play a cardinal role in breaking the stereotypes by drawing new images about Muslims women. Unlike, the Westerners who argue that the veil is a symbol of women's oppression and patriarchal dominance, yet Muslim women writers use it as a tool of empowerment and spiritual relief. Their writings highlight their concern about the way Islam is portrayed aside from the actual inaccuracies and negativity. As a matter of fact, they use ordinary characters who behave in a very normal and dynamic way; as Khalifa argues: "*in action not as metaphors or as static being outside history*" (3). More importantly, they portray Islam in a very positive way by showing its values and principles.

To certain extent, their writings are a candid portrayal of issues and trivialities facing women mainly those who live in ex-colonizer's countries, they provide a vivid and authentic representation of Muslim women above all. Besides, the originality in reflecting national, cultural and social issues, Muslim women writers gave birth to a new type of literary writings. They write novels, short stories and in other literary genres. They use English as the vehicle which enables them to express their concerns and portray Islamic culture and issues. More importantly, they portray Islam as a marker of their identity, no more an element of oppression but a weapon which enables their characters to overcome all constraints and challenges. In this sense, Dalal Sarano, in her interesting article, argues:

literary works written by Arab Anglophone women writers mainly novels and short stories have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab women whose identity is perceived by the Western readership as being different, peculiar, complex, and mosaic because of her portrayal in the media and in the books of early Orientalists. (66 2014)

The above quotation highlights the fact that Muslim women narratives -above all Arab women- have gained attention and recognition thanks to the modern works of Muslim women writers.

For a long period of time, the works of Muslim women have been dismissed by the Western readership. In fact, it is through the use the colonizer's language -English in our case- and Western literary genres, that their works have gained more recognition and attention, they have brought visibility and credit Muslim writers and helped Muslim literature to gain more readership. Accordingly, writers have overpassed problems of translation; indeed, through translation and transliteration, many Islamic concepts and

notions have been introduced into English which once was the language of the colonizer.

As a result, Muslim literature sees a proliferation of literary productions. Their narratives are rich stylistically as well as with thematic diversity; they produce literary masterpieces in which they expose the creativity and talented Muslim women. Definitely, these writers have boosted literary productions about Muslim women, they write both to quench the Western curiosity and correct the Western misconception of Muslim women. Undeniably, writing in English brings universality to a lot of Muslim writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Fakir, and Leila Aboulela as well as many other writers.

Genuinely, these writers are engaged in self-representation, they identify themselves as Muslims then as women as Ferial Ghazoul explains it: *“these writers are engaged in an Arab-Islamic womenism that is not all a replica of western feminism”* (qtd. in Malak 124). Farhana Sheikh, Leila Aboulela, and Ahdaf Soueif are such products of Muslim women writers. Their writings are a candid portrayal of issues facing women such as the veil, the contemporary portrayal of Islam and its rituals, racism, Islamophobia, their narratives are awash with spelled-out- stereotype-breaking. They focus mainly on the protagonists who struggle to overcome the challenges they face.

Overall, the writings of Muslim women are used to be dismissed, they could only write about their lives and their lives are not worth reading. Today, Muslim women fiction gained significance to the point that the more cover Muslim women is the more attraction it gains. Yet, it is very difficult to study and analyze women’s writing without a basic study of feminist movements and have an idea of what Muslim feminists do.

2. A Glimpse into Postcolonial Feminism

For the last few decades, feminism has shown a refreshing willingness emphasis on Muslim women and the correction of the preconceived ideas about them. Postcolonial theorists and feminists struggle against the colonial discourse. In fact, they work for social, cultural, economic, and religious freedom for all women. As a result, by the second half of 20th century many forms of feminism have emerged, namely, Islamic feminism which started to speak up what Islam calls for.

2.1 Definition of Postcolonial Feminism

Many scholars, such as Maggie Humm³ and Rebecca Walker⁴, argue that the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first wave during the 19th and early 20th century, the second was during the 1960's and 1970's and the third wave starts mainly during 1990's and extends to the present days. Feminism accelerated since 1960's mainly within the civil rights movement in the United States and the end of colonialism. ("History and Theory of Femisnism" 2017)

The question of women becomes the very concern of any researcher in the contemporary women's movement. Accordingly, many scholars have tempted to define it; consequently, multiple approaches to feminism have emerged. For instance, Idyorough defines it as: *"a belief as well as a movement meant to address the gender*

³ Maggie Humm is a published author. She is one the pioneer of third wave feminism. She writes very important books on feminism, among her books: *Modern Feminisms* (1992) and *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (1989).

⁴ Rebecca Walker is an American writer, feminist, and activist. Walker has been regarded as one of the prominent voices of third wave feminism. In fact, it is Walker who coined the concept of third wave feminism. In her writings she expresses her offense at what she saw as the silencing of women by men. ("Rebecca Walker" 2016)

imbalance in the society” (36). Hence, postcolonial feminists aim to end all forms of patriarchal dominance and gender inequalities. In this framework, Judith Astrellara argues:

Feminism is a proposal for social transformation as well as a movement that strives to end the oppression of women. In this double aspect; feminism has always existed as part of the historical societies in which it has developed: it has been influenced by the specific social, economic and political traits of its society. (Qtd. in Rowbotham 6 1992)

In fact, the concept of feminism can be broadly used to describe the conviction and/or a movement that aims to liberate women from all forms of subjugation and segregation. Feminism in a postcolonial frame triggers the situation of woman in a particular place since women’s life is linked to the environment where they live.

Accordingly, Young, in his book, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, assumes that postcolonial feminists focus on the ordinary women in a specific place and aim to highlight the degree to which women are still working against the colonial legacy (166). Correspondingly, Raj Kumar Mishra states: “*feminists of postcolonial origin should come forward and make differences visible and acceptable across cultures. If lives, experiences, and circumstances of women of postcolonial settings are divergent, they should be judged, evaluated, and treated as such*” (129). Therefore, postcolonial feminist focus on the particularity of women’s life, as a result, they should be evaluated as such.

2.2 Goals of Postcolonial Feminism

Third wave feminism emerged around the 1990s in the West. It marks the shift from the second wave commitment to the notion of common and shared interest among women; they propose replacing the unitary image of women with a concept of fragmented and multiple identities. Postcolonial feminists reject the idea that there is one absolute truth but rather many truths none of which is privileged along gender lines.

The ultimate goal of postcolonial feminists is to liberate women from men's dominance and inequalities and combat misrepresentation and underestimation. They campaign for women's rights such as dignity, autonomy, they aim to eliminate all sorts of violence against women either at home or workplace, sexual harassment, and rape and all subsequent discrimination and segregation against women. Postcolonial feminists seek to present women in a new light: innovative and active contributors of values who are able to be the masters of their lives.

Women's identity and self-identification become two cornerstones of 1990s feminism. Therefore, its advocates are urged to respect differences, affirming the singularity of each woman's experience and struggle. Postcolonial feminism helps to shape feminism from universality to a movement of individual experiences and struggles. They struggle against the aftereffects of colonial oppression that sometimes results in the glorification of pre-colonial cultures.

As stated above, the issue of feminism becomes very important in postcolonial studies. Researchers try to frame women's issues in relation to their societies rather than to the norms set by the Western feminist. Postcolonial literature with respect to feminism is the vehicle with which activists express these new perceptions, it is through writings and other arts and folklore that writers faithfully depict and portray their

experiences. Their demand for equal rights and individualism helped them to create a feminist movement which was further enhanced thanks to female participation in freedom movements in almost all the independent countries. This is the very reason that Third world Feminism is often related to post-colonial feminism. Hence, the voice of feminism is more audible in postcolonial fiction, including Muslim women writings, than anywhere else.

Obviously, postcolonial feminism is a movement that endeavors to ameliorate women's lives and ensures their rights. Given feminism is a social movement, this makes it different from one society to another depending on the political and economic and other circumstances under which it is produced. Therefore, there exist different forms feminisms.

3. Islamic Feminism:

It was during 1990's that the term Islamic feminism was first used by Muslim writers. In fact, the term has been used in different Muslim countries by many writers and scholars. For example, in Iran, it was first used by Shahla Sharkat in her journal, *Zanan*⁵, founded in 1992 and by Mai Yamani, a Saudi Arabian writer, in her book *Feminism and Islam* (1996). As a result, the mid-1990's witnessed a growing evidence of Islamic feminism.

3.1 Definition of Islamic feminism

Islamic feminism, as a concept, Badran defines it as: *“a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence”* (242). Islamic feminism aims to recover the notion of equality of all Muslims regardless of gender differences in both public and private life.

Like postcolonial feminism, Islamic feminism struggles and insists on full equality of women and men across the public and private space. Feminists, within the framework of Islam, use Islamic discourses to express their call for rereading and reinterpretation of Islam mainly, in what concerned gender equality and social justice. They argue that the holy Qur'an affirms the principles of equality of all human beings and there is no distinction between genders. In re-examining the holy book along with

⁵ *Zanan* magazine (*Women* in English) is a monthly women's magazine published in Iran. It focused on the concerns of Iranian women with an Islamic point of view and had intentions of protecting and promoting their rights.

*Hadith*⁶, Islamic feminists seek to answer back those Westerners who claim Islam's oppression and discrimination of women, they even emphasize that violence against women is, in fact, anti-Islamic.

3.2 A General Overview About Islamic feminism

As Badran argues, the emergence of Islamic feminism coincides with the spread of electronic technology that facilitated the circulation of information and ideas. Islamic feminism has articulated a strong position on gender equality, enunciating the full equality of women and men in public and private realms (2002).

Furthermore, Meriam Cooke assumes that:

Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning. Actions, behaviors, pieces of writing that bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail do not translate into a seamless identity.(59 2001)

It is clear, Islamic feminism helps women mainly living in the West; it gives them Islamic principles of understanding gender equality, social opportunity, and their own potential. It also helps formerly colonized countries to reconstruct a new and more egalitarian understanding of their religion in order to change the old mindsets and cultural advocated by the extremists. Therefore, the portrayal of women by Muslim women writers should also be seen in the context of postcolonial feminism.

⁶ The Hadith is an eyewitness account of a saying or action of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) or sometimes one of his companions not otherwise found in the Qur'an.

Given the historical cultural and political exchanges between the two cultures: the West and the East, namely, geographical proximity, the effects of colonialism and globalization, feminism and Islam become intricately linked sites. Writers started to explore commonalities rather than highlighting differences. The plot, themes, setting and structures of the works written by Muslim writers perfectly reflect this enduring process of cultural exchanges

Islam has created a new sense of family and has changed the mentality of both men and women. Mutual respect and esteem are the basis of any relation between man and woman. Islam raised women's status. In this sense, Islamic feminism is an inter-Islamic phenomenon produced by Muslims at various locations around the globe. Islam's advocators hold that Islamic feminism promotes the enjoyment of social justice within the society, it also contributes to the creation of a more pluralistic and socially where all people will be treated equally whatever their ethnic, religious, and gender affiliations.

In this context, Muslim women writers valorize the different forms of feminist tendencies as a field of alliance building. They use their Arab-Islamic heritage and their experiences in Britain as a foundation to transcultural dialogue and cross-ethnic coalition. At this respect, Abu-Lughod states: "*One of the things we have to be most careful about in thinking about Third World feminisms, and feminism in different parts of the Muslim world, is how not to fall into polarizations that place feminism on the side of the West*"(780). Therefore, when dealing with feminism in the Arab world we must go beyond the binary opposition that focuses on the distinction that exists between the West and the East.

In an interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela asserts that for her “*instead of having Islam as part of the culture [she] consciously present[s] it as a faith*” (*British Muslim Fictions*, 94). Indeed, Leila Aboulela is engaged in promoting her Arab-Islamic culture and explores commonalities with other cultures. Leila Ahmed argues that Islamic feminism has been dominant in Egypt and the Middle East for the twentieth century, and secular feminism remained an alternative marginalized voice until the last decades of the century. She adds that secular feminism in the Middle East has been generally associated with the Western and secular tendencies of the upper and middle classes. Whereas, Islamic feminism has articulated its platform within the indigenous, vernacular, Islamic discourse typically in terms of social, cultural and religious renovation. (1992)

It is important to note that Islamic feminism is the creation of women and men for whom religion is important in their daily lives and who are troubled by inequalities and injustices perpetrated in the name of religion.

Conclusion

This chapter tried to give a general overview of Muslim women writings. After the apocalyptic event of 09/11, literature written by Muslim women becomes a thriving field of research. Women started to write about their issues and tried to answer the Western stereotypes about Islam's supposed oppression of women. Then it shifted to speak broadly about feminism being one flourishing movement within the Postcolonial era. Postcolonial feminists insist on the necessity to analyze women's experiences individually; as a consequence, many forms of feminisms have emerged; for instance, By the second half of the 20th century, Islamic feminism which emerged by the second half of the 20th century, mainly during the 1990's and started to speak up what Islam calls for.

Chapter Two: Feminist Empowerment Through Social Connections

Introduction

This chapter will try to analyze the novel from a feminist perspective and will try to answer the following question: to what extent Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) foregrounds and advocates Islam as a strategic choice to overcome and resist the hardships that the protagonist faces when arriving in London. The analysis of this novel will provide examples of veiled women in the United Kingdom, namely London, in order to stress the importance of religion. By the same token, the narrative makes normal spiritual centered lifestyle and experiences and constantly attempts to emphasize the positive repetition of transcultural and cross alliances. Therefore, it will examine the viability of feminism as a transcultural movement, and the extent to which do these relations help Muslim women to empower themselves.

1. Transcultural Alliances: Najwa's Strategic Choice

Arabs have a long history of invisibility and marginalization in racial and ethnic discourses in the West. It is thanks to the works of Arab Muslim writers that the Arabs have gained more visibility by drawing the reader's attention to the issues that these immigrants face when deciding to settle in the West. As a matter of fact, themes of settlement and exile are among the major themes that these writers discuss in their narratives. As a result, they throw the door wide open to representing newcomers to the West. In this context, Aboulela's works *Minaret* exposes these new themes, namely exile, and immigration to Britain and highlights the role of spirituality and faith as a site of female solidarity and empowerment.

1.1 The Religious Transformation of Najwa:

The novel traces the experience of a Sudanese girl who succeeds to overpass the chaos and horrible experiences she had in London thanks to her faith and belief in Islam. In fact, the novel is a good example of what Islam as a religion can offer to its believers, namely, what Islamic feminism can offer its advocators. In *Minaret*, Islam bypasses social classes, ethnic, racial boundaries and creates a sympathetic environment that enables Najwa to survive thanks to the sisterhood support, where Islam serves as a ground for a feminist solidarity and support network.

Indeed, Aboulela traces Najwa's experience and transformation from an upper class westernized girl to middle class devout Muslim. The narrative moves from 1984 to 2004 and chronicles Najwa's experience and attitudes towards Islam and people around her. On the one hand, the story of a spoilt westernized girl who has a comfortable life thanks to her father's job. On the other hand, that of a desperate and exiled girl who seeks to cope with the horrible circumstances she faces in London. It is worthy to note that Najwa has two experiences: in 2004 the protagonist's life was traumatized by a *coup d'état*, after which her father is found guilty and consequently executed then her experience in London and the chaos she went through. Consequently, both experiences motive her to seek strategies to survive and cope with the very difficult circumstances she faces while in London.

To some extent, Najwa is a privileged protagonist, educated. She arrives in Britain for a permanent stay; she is cut off from her homeland and stays in London. Seen from this perspective, the novel contributes to increasing the visibility of Arabs in Britain and highlights the coming of age of Muslim British communities; hence, the need to address the issue of Najwa's integration and settlement became very important.

Although Najwa was alone, cut from any family ties and assistance, yet she is able to integrate smoothly into the new environment. Additionally, looking into how this exiled female manages to transform her new habitation is quite significant as a cross survival plan i.e. Najwa's experience and her relationship with other women can be considered as an empowering feminist stance that the novel seems positively described. The ability to make links and have relation with Muslim women from different ethnic origins can be seen as a process of "*transforming habitation*" as Ashcroft argues it in *Postcolonial Transformation*. In fact, for him the practice of habitation is more than the occupation of a place, it is itself a way of affirming one's belonging and location. Furthermore, the process of "*transforming habitation*" is the ability to overcome the confrontations with geographical boundaries that separate countries and go beyond them (182).

Therefore, Najwa's ability in making relationships with women coming from different cultural backgrounds and ages is an act of going beyond the borders and transforming them. We can assume in this, that boundaries that separate countries are not physical or geographical but rather social, cultural as well ethnic. Hence, the ability to transform boundaries is made available to exiled, displaced people and marginalized because of their common experience. When Muslim people are placed in another environment, it is the religion which unites them. In fact, the experience of having

boundaries reinforces their union. In this context, the protagonist, Najwa, endeavors to identify herself with people from different backgrounds and engages in a constructive transcultural dialogue. Therefore, the novel exhibits a tendency toward investigating dialogue with minority and ethnic groups and explores the relation between Muslim who come from different countries.

1.2 Impacts of Islam on Najwa's Relations

Najwa has found stability and the serenity she was looking for in the company of the Muslim women of the mosque who, unlike Anwar and her relatives, have not let her down; they offer her the basis she needs. Najwa is attracted by the vibrant and supportive environment that the Muslim women provide her; she is attracted by their help when the people she has known for a long time seem to abandon her.

Islam offers a fertile ground for a feminist agenda that bypasses the national and linguistic barriers. Indeed, to borrow Nash's words, for Aboulela's characters "*the religious frame supplies not merely a term of reference or consolation*" (136), it also supplies Muslim with a point of contact with the outer world. By foregrounding Najwa's success to identify herself with the other Muslim women with whom she doesn't share a common language, the writer aims to highlight that Islam can act as a bridge that breaks through isolation and loneliness in diaspora. Genuinely, Islam not only "*shapes an emerging awareness of different and helps articulate an alternative to Western modernity that is nevertheless inscribed from within its conditions of possibility*" (Nash 123), but also offers a basis of commonality. In fact, Aboulela's fiction endows women with the power to resist and transform certain lived experiences through their

Islamic faith; therefore, her work can be read as a site where Islamic feminism plays a central part.

Aboulela through *Minaret* aims to highlight the importance of friendship and social connections among Muslim women. It is this friendship that has saved Najwa from loss and despair. Indeed, she resists the Western and secular values thanks to the support she receives from the community of Muslim women at the mosque. Likewise, there is an appreciation of this religious space that allows worshipping God and offers a religious freedom and tolerance to people from different origins.

This idea is further echoed in Najwa's experience. Najwa suffers because of the male characters around her, in an interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela assumes:

The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life: her father disappoints her, then her brother lets her down, she becomes very disillusioned with her boyfriend Anwar, and even Tamer- who is presented sympathetically because he's religious like Najwa-even he disappoints her because of his immaturity. (British Muslim Fictions, 113 2011)

The above quotation clarifies Najwa's disillusionments and disappointments with male characters; Yet, Najwa seems to be courageous and brave mainly after her commitment to religion and faith. She takes care of her family when they arrived in London; she has never let her brother even when he was jailed. Besides, she gives money to Anwar when he was in London, although he has never treated her well. More importantly, she was the refuge that sustains Tamer from the hostility of her sister that refuses to accept his outlook as a devout Muslim. Obviously, Aboulela presents women brave and who survived without men's assistance. In this vein, the writer succeeds to counter the Western discourse on Muslim women.

Through her emphasis on cross cultural encounters, Aboulela participates in the current discussion on feminism as an international movement that simultaneously challenges gender equality and addresses socio-economic and political differences among women. Moreover, the novel valorizes cross cultural dialogues as a strategy that help to overcome the obstacles that exiled Muslims may face. Through her characters, and their encounters, Aboulela exposes the differences and commonalities between their experiences and more importantly, she explores the relations that may exist between Muslims of different countries and how do they act between each other. Through exile, immigration or settlements women from different cultural backgrounds and social classes interact, exchange ideas and contextualize their differences.

Najwa's metamorphosis from a non-practicing Muslim to a devout Muslim has brought many changes to her life, mainly her relations. At first, besides being upper class girls, Najwa and Randa seem to share common hobbies like music, dancing, and swimming. Yet, when they look to Iranian girls moving in black chadors, Randa describes them as "*totally retarded*" (Aboulela 29), unlike Najwa seems confused. Their reactions are different Randa declares that women in chadors are "*crazy*" and asks "*how can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything?*" (Ibid), Najwa, on the opposite, asks "*[w]hat do we know about Islam? We don't even pray*" (Ibid), although she does not wear the veil, yet she is not at ease within herself; she is aware that she is neglecting her religious life, unlike Randa who seems quite satisfied with the Westernized style she is following.

Randa becomes more tied to her Western education. She does not change her view about the veil, in spite of her education, even though now she is studying in Western universities, she maintains her view about Muslim women and the veil, “[t]he sight of them wearing hijab on campus irritates me.” Randa says (Aboulela 134). Najwa goes back in time and remembers when she was a student “*I remember the girls in Khartoum University those who wear the hijab and those covered their hair with white tobies, they never irritated me*” (Ibid), even if she was not wearing the veil, yet she is tolerant towards those put it on. But now after her devotion, she realizes that she does not have the ideas as her previous friend, she is aware now that her relation with Randa is no longer that of the past they “*only had a past in common*” (Ibid 236). It is most probably the fact that both of them belong to the same background which unites them and urges them to disconnect themselves from the other veiled girls. However, in London, their relation seems to fade away gradually as Najwa becomes more religious and Randa more close to the western culture.

Similarly, her relation of Aunt Eva, a Syrian orthodox, seems to fade away too. At first, after the death of her mother and the imprisonment of her brother, Najwa feels comfortable in keeping ties with her mother’s friend: Aunt Eva. At this stage, Najwa seems to have relations with different people from different backgrounds; Christian orthodox, Marxist and capitalist. As if she is experiencing which one suits her the best.

She reestablishes her relation with Anwar, a leftist student, while he disapproved the black chadors the Iranian girls put on, he hypocritically tells Najwa that “*Arab society is hypocritical with double standards for men and women*” (Aboulela 75). He is unable to admit that the black chadors stand for the Iranian women’s alignment to the Islamic revolution against Western intervention. Moreover, his attitudes towards Najwa

as being ahistorical and cannot survive outside her luxurious life do not change. In other words, Anwar could not understand Najwa's transformation. When she meets him in London, he could not notice her metamorphosis: "*I have changed Anwar,*" Najwa says. "*No you haven't you are just imagining*" He answers (Ibid 224).

Anwar cannot realize or at least doesn't accept that now Islam means a lot to Najwa. He cannot understand the importance of her relation with the other women. For him Islam denigrates women, it is Islam that imposes such oppressive laws on women. Actually, Anwar, as for almost all Westerns, is ignorant of Islamic principles and what can religion mean to Muslim women. It is clear in his refusal to admit the importance of Najwa's camaraderie at the mosque which rescues her and helps her to escape from social alienation; in fact, it is this community which gave her a sense of belonging, being a member in the group ends Najwa's ordeal. It is clear that Najwa has utterly changed; she is unable to reconnect with her ex-friends because of their ignorance of Islam and their refusal to tolerate Najwa's metamorphosis.

Najwa's best friend is Shahinaz, a South Asian British Muslim, they came from totally different backgrounds and cultures, they don't even speak the same language, they do communicate in English, yet they seem very complementary, and they are quite delighted to have such a close relation. Paradoxically, Najwa and Shahinaz do not share the same view about all issues, yet they do negotiate their point of view in a way that satisfies both of them. For instance, their opinions about marriage differ; nevertheless, this difference in opinion does not bother them or even shake the foundation of their coalition. It is a constructive discussion that boosts their connections and solidifies their friendship. It is Shahinaz remains Najwa's friend and confident till the end of the novel. By the end of the novel, the writer describes a scene when both of them pray at Najwa's

house and gives a hint that Najwa may join Shahinaz and goes back to university.

Najwa says:

Why shahinaz is close to me as a friend, and how Sohayl approved her choice, is one of these strokes of good fortune I don't question. We have little in common. If I tell that, I think she will say, very matter of fact, but both want to become Muslims. (Aboulela 104-105 2005)

In fact, Najwa is satisfied with the relation she has with her new friend, she is even wondering how her friend's husband has no objection about their relation. What is important for all of them is their interest in Islam.

The very little common they have is quite sufficient to set up a close relationship based on mutual interest in religion; it is their quench to know more about religion that unites them. In this context, Aboulela highlights the power of religion to create a homogenous community regardless of the differences that may exist among people. Literally, religion is the medium which unifies and creates solidarity among women regardless of their convictions about other issues, what matters the most is their interest in religion.

By the same token, religion is the setback between Najwa and her ex-friends from Sudan. Although all them came from the same country and do speak the same language, yet she cannot be closer to them. She may share the same opinions with them, yet the fact that they don't practice religion Najwa feels uneasy with them. Consequently, she establishes a strong relation of friendship with a south Asian British Muslim woman who does not speak Arabic. This, in fact, stands for the transnational nature of Islam that overpasses all the barriers that may separate people. In this respect,

Najwa can have a close relation with her teacher of Qur'an that speaks the same language as she does, yet she does not, she says: "*strange that she is not my friend, I can't confide in her and when we are alone the conversation hardly flows*" (Aboulela 185), Najwa wonders why she is not so near to *Um Walled* although both share the same language which can make discussion easier between them. Obviously, the writer delegates language and upholds faith to highlight the importance of religion.

Additionally, Najwa expresses her disappointment with the political instability in her homeland, Sudan, she states: "*coup after coup, one set of people after another like musical chain*" (Ibid 139). It is clear that Najwa gets fed up with the political mess in her country. Gradually, Najwa got integrated into a religious community which gave her a sense of comfort and security. In this vein, *Minaret* presents Islamic sisterhood as a house of social stability, serenity and affective support. Besides, like other "third world writers", Aboulela exposes the role played by politics and politicians. Given she is the daughter of a high-ranking Sudanese officer; she grows up in a nationalist environment. Rejecting these political discourse stands for the failure of these discourse. Displaced from her country, Najwa finds social and psychological security in the Regent's Park mosque.

All in all, Najwa's emersion with religion and her social connections with the Muslim women community have utterly changed her life and the nature of her relations. Islam is the basis of a support network that provides her with emotional and practical help when she was in serious difficulties, regardless of the ethnic, racial, linguistic, and social differences among them.

2. *Minaret*: A Counter-Discourse to the Western Feminism

In the few last couple of decades, mainly after the 09/ 11 Muslim women writers target the presentation of Muslims mainly Muslim women. Their narratives focus mainly the re-presentation of Muslims; valorizing Islamic principles and values, portraying experiences of Muslim women living in diaspora and the processes of integration, assimilation in addition to other key issues related to Muslims and Islam. Indeed, their narratives have made visible Muslims. Leila Aboulela, along with her contemporary, has highly contributed to this field of literature.

2.1 Breaking Stereotypes About Islam

Minaret is a story of women who has been a subject of several hard experiences when she arrives in London; she becomes more stable and calm as soon as she becomes nearer to religion. She finds solace and refuge in Islam, it serves as a liberating factor for Najwa. She is not all impressed by the Western way of life; instead of taking benefit of the new free environment that the West offers she finds consolation in the companionship with the Muslim women in the Regent's Park mosque and the practices of religious rituals.

In the novel, to some extent, all the characters succeed to have an ordinary life that any Muslim can have without being at odd with the original culture or their Muslim identity or obliged to let their mother culture. For instance, Najwa integrates into the environment she finds in London without being obliged to surrender to marginalization or adopt the host culture. On the opposite, the heroine spontaneously valorizes religion, spirituality, and faith; it is in no way imposed on her by any patriarchal power; however,

she takes advantage on the transnational unity that Islam offers and its ability to erase all sorts of differences that can exist among people.

The novel, indeed, highlights the relationship that exists between womanhood and Islam where both inter-act to negotiate a place. Aboulela's work is Najwa's spiritual journey from a faithless to a devout religious woman who reframes her identity according to her faith and spirituality. The fact that she lives in a secular environment: London, does not prevent Najwa from practicing her Islamic rituals. Moreover, Aboulela contradicts with the Western discourses that blame Islam as being the religion that favors barbarism and intolerance, for them Muslim women are backward and suffer from male's oppression whereas Muslim men terrorists and violent. Aboulela's presentation of Muslims' experiences and lives and her stress on the importance of religion in guiding them, she strongly opposes the Western's view. Through her characters, she aims to show the role of Islam for Muslims, she presents it as the savior and the source of strength from where Muslims get the relief and the power to survive.

Once Najwa becomes a practicing believer, she feels guilty about her deeds for not practicing Islamic rituals when she was in Sudan. She painfully remembers her acts and interactions in the University of Khartoum. She remembers when students -boys and girls- pray together but she did not participate. Once she knew the importance of religion, she declares "*now I wanted a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence, I yearned to go back to being safe with God*" (Aboulela 242). Religion and spirituality have reshaped Najwa's life from uncertainty to certainty, before Najwa feels numb when listening to Qur'an or the call for prayer, but now and paradoxically listening to Qur'an or the call for prayers does not upset her anymore, for instance, now during the

*tajweed*⁷ sessions at the mosque, she focuses and listens carefully to apprehend and pronounce correctly.

2.2 Presentation of Muslims

The positive presentation of Muslims in literary text is another aspect that Muslim women writers discuss and Islamic feminist advocates too. Unlike the negative images that Western feminists draw on Muslims, mainly after 09/11, Muslim writers, along with them Leila Aboulela, focus on the presentation of Muslims, they present them as ordinary people who have a very normal life as Khalifa argues “*Muslim writers start to depict characters in action not as metaphors or as static being outside history*” (3).

In such a way, characters in *Minaret* are presented logical and do behave in an ordinary way, the thing that Western feminists used to deny, for instance, do criticize patriarchy but do not blame or accuse Islam of being the religion that calls for men’s dominance or women’s inferiority. Almost all devout Muslim people in *Minaret* are represented as kind, sincere, selfless. It is the non-religion people who are presented cruel, mean and irresponsible. Anwar, Najwa's boyfriend, and Omar, her brother, are examples of non-religious people; they are endowed with negative traits such as opportunism, and irresponsibility. On the other hand, the characterization of religious people is invoked. Najwa, the protagonist narrator describes religious people or convert to Islam, such as Waffa and her husband Ali, with words of admiration using positive adjectives such as kind, protective, and calm. Aboulela constructs an image of “good

⁷ It is a set of rules for proper pronunciation and correct recitation of the Qur’an.

practicing Muslim” and “bad non-Muslim”, in fact, her description of the people around her is relevant for her as she moves from non-practicing to a practicing Muslim.

In the novel, Aboulela has depicted a prototype of a Muslim married couple and the nature of the relation that unites them to draw an authentic image of that relation, she has illustrated by giving a vivid portrayal of Waffa’s relation with her husband Ali. For Najwa, Ali is Waffa’s protector; as their relation is built on mutual respect. Najwa considers Ali as a model of a Muslim man. In addition, to his good treatment of his wife, he practices his religion correctly, unlike Anwar “*condemned as narrow-minded and bigoted, man like Ali, were tender and protective with their wives*” (Aboulela 242).

In fact, this idea is shared by Muslim women, Shahinaz too shares the same view, while discussing Najwa’s relation with tamer; she says “*when I think of a man I admire, he would have to know more than, be older than me.... Otherwise, how can you listen to him and let him guide you*” (Ibid 215). It is obvious that both of them, Najwa and Shahinaz, the idea of an ideal husband is all about the man’s ability to protect, respect and guide his wife. Accordingly, Najwa thanks God that her relation with Anwar does not succeed and she does not to marry him. Above all, Aboulela through this vivid example aims to answer those who suppose that Islam advocates men’s supremacy and women are always in need for men to survive.

Therefore, we can assume in this Aboulela’s novel can be considered as a counter-discourse to both the Western discourses and Muslim writers who fall into the trap of saying that Muslims’ assimilation into the host culture is the unique solution that can help immigrated Muslims to escape from marginalization and racism.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the writer's emphasis on Islamic feminist coalition among Muslim women and the roles that Islam plays in the novel. Aboulela through *Minaret* exposes the viability of feminism as a transcultural movement and the importance of Islam as a means of social connections and a strategic choice that has consoled the protagonist from the chaos she faces. Najwa's commitment to Islamic principles and her spiritual powers have rescued her from the state of loss thanks to the solidarity with other Muslim women. In fact, Islam-based friendship bypasses social class and ethnic differences. It has also discussed the viability of Islamic feminism and highlighted the fact that Islam is the common interest among Muslim women; precisely, it is the basis of partnership.

The next chapter will be dealing with the spiritual dimensions of Aboulela's work, *Minaret*, with particular reference to role of the Regent's Park mosque and the veil as tools which enable Najwa to empowerment herself.

Chapter Three: Empowerment Through Religious Practices

Introduction

This chapter will try to shed light on the spiritual dimensions of Aboulela's novel *Minaret*. Literally, the novel is Najwa's spiritual journey from a faithless and hopeless girl to a devout mature woman. Therefore, we need to enlighten our understanding of the importance of Islamic symbols in the novel, above all the mosque and the veil and the role they played in helping the protagonist to empower herself.

1. Spiritual Dimensions in *Minaret*

Minaret is a portrayal of Najwa's spiritual journey from a spoilt young girl who grows up in a secular and westernized environment to a devout Muslim mature woman. Najwa recovers thanks to her empowerment through spirituality and religious practices namely, veiling and going to the mosque. Indeed, spirituality takes on an intimate and personal quest by Najwa who desires to involve her life in a closer relationship with God. It ultimately becomes a discipline embodied within Najwa's lifestyle. Definitely, her transformation is a significant step in her decision to become fully immersed in the life of a devout Muslim among the community of believers.

1.1 The Role of Spirituality in Shaping Najwa's Life

Spirituality occupies a larger part in Aboulela's *Minaret*, it is used as a common marker that bypasses ethnic differences and facilitates solidarity and friendship among immigrated Muslims. Given that the novel stresses on the fertility of the transcultural encounter as a means of bridging talks and widening the scope of cohesion among immigrant women. In this vein, Aboulela concentrates on transcultural encounter and

cross ethnic identification of her characters; which is manifested through Najwa's eagerness to link her experience with that of other women from different cultural backgrounds. In addition to her multiculturalism, the writer, authentically, serves with her experience as being an immigrant in the possibility of creating a common ground for partnership among women who came from different cultures and succeeds to create a space for the cultures to interact.

The choice of Najwa to be a devout Muslim in London regardless of her socio-economic and political situation is not done at random, the writer aims to highlight the fact that Islam is a blanket under which Muslims are huddled together regardless of their regional, ethnic and cultural or gender differences. Najwa's spirituality could be seen as a form of resistance to all the constraints and obstacles that uproot her from her home country and render her a helpless refugee in London. Indeed, Islam is the shelter that saves her from the hostility that she faces and it is the only thing which offers her a sense of serenity and tranquility. Besides, thanks to her spirituality she becomes in touch with other devout Muslims who offer her a sense of affection and help she desperately craves.

In the novel's vision, Islam brings to Najwa a vital and a new sense of identity. As she says to Tamer, "*I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim*" (Aboulela 110). *Through Minaret* Leila Aboulela aims to present religion as a source of strength for her female narrator-protagonist.

Spirituality is highly regarded as an important entity and a medium that transforms Najwa into a discipleship. It serves to provide meaning and connection on an

otherwise disjointed spiritual experience. It is evoked from Najwa's faith and belief in God, which in turn finds effective representation in the day-to-day expression of faith through Najwa's spiritual encounter with the people. Accordingly, her experience is shown through her relations and interactions with others, in fact, Najwa experiences spirituality as an enlightenment which provides her the energy to carry on her life.

1.2 The Central Role of the Mosque

In an interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela asserts that "*when writing Minaret, I was very conscious that it was a kind of Muslim feminist novel, and girly womanly as well*", The writer maintains: "*the female protagonist of Minaret is disappointed in the men in her life. . . . At the end Najwa relies on God and on her faith*" (*British Muslim Fictions*, 113). Certainly, faith comes to Najwa through the other Muslim women she meets in the Regent's Park mosque. Therefore, the mosque is not only a place to practice prayers, but also a place to make social connections that go beyond social class division, language barriers and ethnic borders. As a matter of fact, the novel draws our attention to the importance of Islamic institutions from which women have been excluded and which Islamic feminists are increasingly gaining access.

The mosque is Najwa's point of reference for regulating her life and providing her with a space for socialization, as Claire Chambers points "*the mosque provides a sense of security, well being and locatedness*" (Aboulela 184). Furthermore, the mosque's minaret serves Najwa as a fixed point of orientation and location; in different occasions, Najwa is able to locate herself thanks to the visibility of the Regent's Park mosque's minaret. Indeed, right from the beginning of the novel, the writer draws our

attention to the fundamental role of the mosque's minaret, Najwa says: "*the trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of the Regent's Park visible above the trees*" (Aboulela 3). It is clear the only visible thing that has attracted Najwa's attention amid the trees is the minaret of the Regent's Park mosque.

After some time in an exploitative relationship with Anwar, Najwa is horrified to realize that she has forgotten the time of Ramadan through her involvement with him. She seeks refuge in a new sort of empowering women's world—that of the ladies' area at the Regent's Park mosque. This religious space offers Najwa the opportunity to transcend time and space and thus reframe together the dispersed fragments of her world: "*I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room ...*" (Ibid 74-75). Najwa's connection with the women in the mosque and her adoption of the hijab can be read as a recuperating of self from the various male forces that have disrupted her life and worn her down. The mosque becomes the embrace that gives her a sense of place and belonging in an otherwise hostile world.

By reading some scene at the mosque, we notice that Najwa cherishes her moments there; she is delighted and happy. For instance, during the *tajweed* session, Najwa declares: "*the concentration on technique makes me forget everything around me*" (Ibid 74). When celebrating the *Eid* party at the mosque, Najwa feels a sense of belonging, a sense of being a member of a group: "*I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant*" (Aboulela 184). Here, the writer gives us hints of her happiness of being a Muslim woman surrounded by believers; she expresses the

protagonist's disappointment with her past, being a nonbeliever gives her a sense of disobedient and shyness. Likewise, she is glad to forget her own past and now she is satisfied with being a member of this group that loves her and gives her support and help she needs.

As a practicing Muslim, Najwa's life becomes more organized and ordered, her interaction with London's times and spaces is reconfigured too. Heeding the call to prayer and other religious times, for instance, the *tajweed* session and the religious lectures that Um Walid, have helped her to reorder her life according to her religious concerns. In this context, even her relations with men are reframed, once she becomes a practicing Muslim, she encounters Anwar only one more time as a prelude to her redemption. Significantly, she wears the hijab and meets him in public space, while most of their previous meetings have been in private space. Likewise, her relation with her employer's younger brother, Tamer, whom she mostly meets in public spaces, and in all cases, she is wearing the hijab.

1.3 The Hijab: A Signifier of Spirituality and Devotion

Through highlighting this aspect of the hijab, the novel is writing back to some unexamined assumptions in some feminist circles about the nature of hijab. Indeed, Aboulela's focus on the importance of the hijab as a source of solace and comfort, her work fills a gap in the Western representation of Muslim women by showing the rootedness of religion in the lives of Muslim women.

Wearing the hijab at the mosque unifies women and gives them a sense of belonging, without the hijab, ethnic differences seem to alienate Najwa from the Muslim women she knows, to celebrate the *Eid* women put on new cloths and take off their hijab in the women's section of the mosque Najwa reflects "*this one looks Indian, as if the hijab had made me forget she was Indian and now she is reminding me, in the sari with her flowing hair and jewellery*" (Aboulela 156). Further on, Najwa notes: "*but it is as if the hijab is a uniform the official, outdoor version of us. Without it our nature is exposed*" (Ibid 68). The veil erases social and ethnic differences. Accordingly, the mosque is presented as the epicenter of an Islamic transnational feminist movement and the hijab as the symbol of unity and solidarity. The veil creates a sense of belonging, familiarity and commonality. It occupies a central space; it is a sign of Muslim authenticity. In fact, the veil is seen as a sign with multiple layers of meaning, veiling is believed to be an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture.

In the novel, the hijab consoles the protagonist and brings for her a sense of liberation and relief: "*around me was a new gentleness, the builders who had leader down at me from scaffolding couldn't see me anymore. I was invisible and they were*

quite” (Aboulela 247). It is important to note that the word invisible has been wrongly interpreted by critics. However, Leila Aboulela has argued that she uses the word invisible to highlight efficacy and value of the veil as a safety blanket, when Najwa wears the veil she goes unnoticed and therefore, escapes from harassments and other abuses. In an interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela assumes: “*by wearing the hijab, recognizes the subtle allure of concealment*” (*British Muslim Fictions* 187). The veil is healing and liberating Najwa, it is when she wears the hijab that she feels peace and tranquility.

Aboulela via Najwa wants to answer back the Western feminists who associate the veil with Muslim patriarchal oppression. The veil for Najwa is a source of comfort and solace. Najwa’s choice to wear the scarf can be seen as an effective strategic option, based on her localized experience and the context under which Najwa decides to wear. The hijab represents a useful employment of the politics of location. At first glance, one might think that Najwa's decision to wear the hijab and be a house wife is because of her backwardness. Yet, when we consider her experience as a woman in exile might help us to contextualize Najwa's needs and goals. Najwa’s choice to wear the hijab is a personal one, although she faces delicate situations, namely, when she has to deal with the scorn of young people because of her veil, yet she was determined and self-confident and she does not change her mind.

Through Najwa, Aboulela targets mainly Western feminists; by portraying Najwa’s experience, she wants to expose what Islam can mean to a young Muslim woman mainly if placed in a hostile environment. Above all, Aboulela makes it crystal clear that Najwa’s religiously and faith is not imposed on her by any religious institution or any oppressive patriarchal authority, on the opposite, it is a personal

choice and a self achievement based on the protagonist's experience. By reporting the context and the circumstances under which Najwa takes her decision to wear the hijab, Aboulela invites the reader to perceive Najwa's choice as a way to overturn a hostile experience and challenge all the obstacles she faces during her downfall in exile. Like other Muslim women writers, Leila Aboulela puts emphasis on the importance the Najwa's emplacement that triggers resistance to survive.

In *Minaret*, the veil and mosque do not entail negative connotations; the veil is no longer an element of oppression but rather a sign of religious awareness and a strategic tool to overcome all the difficulties. The belief that the Muslim women who attend the mosque are uneducated or come from the poorer social classes is highly opposed to the novel. All in all, *Minaret* is a portrayal of Islamic principles and their role in saving Muslims.

2. Postcolonial Feminism in *Minaret*

As it has been stated in the first chapter, postcolonial feminists focus on the fact that there is no standard for women's life, every woman has her own life, therefore; as Raj Kumar Mishra notes: "*If lives, experiences, and circumstances of women of postcolonial settings are divergent, they should be judged, evaluated, and treated as such*" (129). Postcolonial feminists stress on the particularity of women's experience and life, as a consequence, they strongly advise to take into consideration the all circumstances where do these women live.

2.1 Najwa's Experience: Reconciliation of Islam with Feminism

Najwa's downfall and her experience in London force her to seek companionship with others; it is obvious through her attempts to reconnect with her friend Randa, Aunt Eva and Anwar, yet, it does not stand for a long period. It started soon to vanish and steadily replaced by a more stable, self-fulfilling Islamic feminist coalition.

The writer underscores that gender can never be the only issue that unites women; there are also other socio-economic factors that determine such alliances such as social class, race, education, and religion. Furthermore, Aboulela seems to suggest that there is no point in trying to ignore differences among women of different cultural background because they do exist indeed. Instead, she urges the feminists to carefully listen to women's voices. By offering nuanced representation of Najwa's life before and after exile, the novel, genuinely, engages with postcolonial feminist movement and targets the correction of Islam's misconception namely, the idea that Islam goes against

the ideas that the feminists advocate and the necessity to analyze women's experience in relation to socio-economic and political environment where do these women live.

In *Minaret*, Islam is reconciled with feminism. Najwa, during 1984's, was very pleased with the life she had, an upper class elite "*was I not an emancipated young women driving her own car to university? . . . That should make me feel good about myself*" (Aboulela 10). Conversely, her luxurious life prevented her from having ties with less prestigious girls at the university. Mentioning the two girls who study at the same department with Najwa, her outlook reflects her social class as being a number from the upper class: "*they were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and what was the reason we were not friends*" (Ibid 14). Once again, the novel highlights the idea that being a woman cannot be the sole common ground for identification and alliance among women. However, there are other issues which can influence friendship and social contact among women such as religion, that's why Najwa could not identify with the outlook of those girls. Genuinely, the novel contributes to the current discourse on the significance of Islamic feminism to Muslim women who come from different social and cultural backgrounds.

Later on, Najwa ponders how she used to take her experience as the norm for measuring the achievements of other girls at the university. In postcolonial studies one cannot generalize a woman's experience on the other women, because they are personal and individual, as it is the case for Najwa, when she was in Sudan she has made a generalization about them and their needs although she ignores the socio-economic background of other Sudanese girls, the thing that postcolonial feminists reject.

Moreover, through tracing Najwa's dissociation from the provincial girls at the university, the novel makes it clear that gender cannot be the only basis for creating a progressive social movement. Regardless of being of the same gender, Najwa cannot know the needs of other women because of her social class. It was after her painful experience in London that Najwa was urged to reconsider her outlook. Najwa used to consider that higher education means the same thing for all girls at the University of Khartoum, this is illustrated when she says: "*I was in university to kill time until I got married and have children. I thought that was why all girls were there but they surprised me by caring about their education, forgoing ahead with their jobs and careers*" (Aboulela 120). Although they, Najwa and the Sudanese girls, belong to same generation, but they utterly differ in their socio-economic conditions. In this sense, Najwa's re-examination of her previous attitudes after being in exile and having a hard experience in exile aims to show the importance of taking into account the different experiences of women within the same region and gender.

Being a Sudanese does not mean that Najwa's experience or concerns stand for those of all Sudanese women. Social and economic differences are among the key factors which determine one's attitudes and beliefs, every woman has her concern. This idea is further elaborated, when Aboulela introduces Lamya, a London-based rich well educated Arab student and her mother, *Doctora Zeineb*. The fact Najwa shares the same language with them, Arabic, does not help her to have a close with them. Their relation is that of employer-employee. When she starts to work as their housekeeper she expresses her hope to become close to Lamya, yet she recognizes that "*she will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin color, which is a*

shade darker than hers” (Aboulela 116). Najwa is quite aware that it is difficult to overpass the social class, ideological beliefs, nationality and level of education.

For Lamyia, the veil is a sign of backwardness and working class status. It is better explained towards the end of the novel in a party that Lamyia organizes, one of the guests dresses in an Islamic dress code and starts stripping to the standing ovation of other friends. Najwa discovers that the girl is joking and she does not wear the hijab. Yet, Najwa was not troubled; even though they made from one of the markers of the Islamic identity an object of ridiculous and amusement she remembered previous attitude towards the hijab; this pushes her to remember her experience when she discusses the veil years ago with her close friend Randa about the girls in black chadors.

Aboulela’s work offers the reader an opportunity to look at the veil from different perspectives and urges the reader to consider the socio-historical and political implications of the veil. Consequently, *Minaret* can be considered as a part of the ongoing debates among feminists on the need to ground analysis in a sustained constructed context that encompasses socio-historical, religious and economic elements in addition to gender issues.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the spiritual dimensions in Aboulela's novel, *Minaret*, with particular reference to the central role of the mosque as the center of Muslim communities, the school where Islamic principles are taught and the place that sustains Najwa. Then it has discussed the significance of the veil as an identity marker and a tool of empowerment. Finally, it has commented on one of the Muslim women writers, Leila Aboulela, who has highly contributed in correcting the image of Muslim women. In fact, through Najwa and other characters in the novel, Aboulela aims to answer back the Westerners who portray Muslims mainly Muslim women in a pejorative manner and generate on them bad images.

General Conclusion

As it has been already stated, Muslims' voices started to be heard namely after the apocalyptic event of 09/11. Literature written by Muslim women becomes a thriving field of research; Muslim women started to write about their issues and tried to answer the Western stereotype about Islam's supposed oppression of women. Consequently, Muslim women fiction has gained significance. Therefore, analyzing women's writing from a feminist perspective would be very interesting.

By the second half of the 20th century Feminism has shown a refreshing willingness. Postcolonial feminists strive for equal rights and individualism. Moreover, feminist movements were further enhanced thanks to female participation in freedom movements in almost all the independent countries. This is the very reason that third world feminism is often related to postcolonial feminism. Hence, the voice of feminism is more audible in postcolonial fiction, including Muslim women writings, than anywhere else. As a result, Islamic feminism emerged and flourished mainly during the 1990's and started to speak up what Islam calls for.

In *Minaret*, Aboulela has stressed on Islamic feminist coalition among Muslim women and the roles that Islam plays in the novel. Aboulela through *Minaret* exposes the viability of feminism as a transcultural movement and the importance of Islam as a means of social connections and a strategic choice that has consoled the protagonist from the chaos she faces. She also highlights the viability of Islamic feminism as the basis of partnership among women who come from different origins and backgrounds. Najwa's commitment to Islamic principles and her spiritual powers have rescued her from a state of loss.

In Fact, *Minaret* is Najwa's spiritual journey. Aboulela has put a great emphasis on the central role of the mosque as the center of Muslim communities, the school where Islamic principles are taught and the place that sustains Najwa. The veil as an identity marker, a tool of employment and a safety blanket under which Najwa becomes invisible to most Western eyes. In this context, Leila Aboulela contributes in correcting the image of Muslim women. The novel is an answer to the Westerners who prejudge Muslims mainly Muslim women as backward and weak who are always in need for men to save them.

As it has been hypothesized, the novel, indeed, foregrounds and advocates Islam as the strategic choice that serves as a tool of empowerment among Muslim women. In the loneliness of her exile, Najwa turns into spirituality which becomes the source of relief from the sudden difficulties and solitude in which she finds herself. The protagonist encounter with the other Muslim women, her decision to wear the veil and the role of the Regent's Park mosque boosted Najwa's spirituality and generate in her the will to carry on her life, in fact, they give her an unexpected power to deal with her everyday problems and create in her a sense of belonging And family.

Definitely, reading *Minaret* is an invitation to re-think some feminist analysis in order to open a space for new discussions that are able to catch the changes that are in the actuality. Actually, in the face of the emergence of these new Muslim women's identities, traditional feminist interpretations can remain insufficient. So, for many Muslim women turning to spirituality and faith is not a return to the past, but a strategy to negotiate a place in a hostile environment. In *Minaret*, Najwa creates a new paradigm of Islamic womanhood that challenges both the Western stereotypes about the supposed universal submissiveness of Muslim women to men and patriarchal nature.

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Appendices:

A: The novelist

Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo, Egypt. Her mother is Egyptian and her father in Sudanese. Leila moved to Sudan at an early age and lived in Khartoum, the capital city of North Sudan, continuously until 1987. She learned English at Khartoum American School and at the Sister's School, a private catholic high school. She graduated from the University of Khartoum where she studied statistics. She then got her Master of Philosophy in Statistics from the London School of Economics. In 1990 she moved to Scotland with her children and husband. Leila started writing in 1992 while working in Aberdeen College and later as a Researcher assistant in Aberdeen University. Since 2000, Leila and her family have lived in many places including: Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. She is now living in Aberdeen.

Leila Aboulela won the first Caine Prize for African Writing. She is the author of four novels, a collection of short stories and several radio plays. Her novels, *The Translator*, a New York Times 100 Notable Books of the Year, *Minaret*, and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), were all long-listed for the Orange Prize. *Lyrics Alley* was Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize. Leila's book of short stories *Coloured Lights* (2001) was short-listed for the MacMillan Silver PEN award. Her work has been translated into 14 languages. ("Aboulela" 2017)

B: A Brief Summary of *Minaret*:

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* is a novel about a young Muslim woman, once privileged and secular in her native land and now impoverished in London, gradually shifts from being least pious to most intensely devout. With her Muslim hijab, Najwa is invisible to most eyes, especially to the rich families whose houses she cleans in London. Twenty years ago, Najwa, then at university in Khartoum, would never have imagined that one day she would be a maid. An upper-class Westernized Sudanese, her dreams were to marry and raise a family. But a coup forces the young woman and her family into political exile in London. Soon orphaned, she finds solace and companionship within the Muslim community. Then Najwa meets Tamer, the intense, lonely younger brother of her employer. They find a common bond in faith and slowly, silently, begin to fall in love. Written with directness and force, *Minaret* is a lyric and insightful novel about Islam and an alluring glimpse into a culture Westerners are only just beginning to understand.