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**Religious Rituals and Cultural Identity in: Leila Aboulela's
Minaret (2005)**

**A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements of
the Degree of Master in English: Literature and Civilisation**

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and many friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my loving mother 'Aisha' whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity ring in my ears, my dear sister 'Linda' and my sweet brothers 'Lotfi' and 'Taher'. My gratitude extends to the light of our family my beautiful grandmother, without forgetting my support in this life beloved aunts and uncles; to them I acknowledge that this paper could not have been done without their support.

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Finally, I would like to thank my dissertation partner Zaghad Nour Elhouda for her love and support, without forgetting to mention her cute little baby Aniss who brought joy to our meetings.

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) engages with the Muslim African immigrant experience in Britain. This dissertation is about religious rituals and cultural identity in this novel. It draws on the first chapter to present the theoretical framework of Aboulela's literature in general and *Minaret* in specific. While the second and third chapters are about the analytic part of the novel in relation to the role of religion, more specifically Islam, culture and traditions in re-shaping the life of the novel's protagonist. In order to depict the features above, we decided to adopt the analytical method. The objectives behind this dissertation are first, to reach the conclusion that Aboulela's *Minaret* is religiously rich. Second, to prove that Islam transmitted the life of the main character to a better status. Motives behind conducting this research are to show that Muslims in a Western atmosphere are able to keep their Islamic and cultural identities alive, so they present Islam properly.

ملخص

تتناول رواية ليلي أبو العلا المنارة (2005) الواقع المعيشي للمهاجرين المسلمين في بريطانيا بحيث تناقش دراستنا الشعائر الدينية والهوية الثقافية التي تزخر بها الرواية. الفصل الأول يناقش الجانب النظري الذي يميز أعمال أبو العلا بصفة عامة وروايتها المنارة بصفة خاصة. بينما الفصلين الثاني والثالث فيتمحوران حول الجانب التحليلي المتعلق بدور الدين، الثقافة والعادات في تكوين شخصية بطلة الرواية. من أجل تحقيق الغايتين المذكورتين أعلاه قمنا باستخدام المنهج التحليلي. الهدف من وراء هذه الدراسة هو الوصول إلى أن رواية المنارة ثرية بالمراجع الدينية، وإثبات أن الإسلام ساهم في تحسين حياة البطلة. المحرك الأساسي لهذا البحث هو إظهار أن المسلمين في بلاد الغرب قادرون على المحافظة على هويتهم الإسلامية والثقافية وإبقائها فعالة بحيث يمثلون إسلامهم بطريقة صحيحة.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

General Introduction:

Since 9/11, the West has developed a visual shorthand for representing Islam. The most common stereotype is that of the veiled woman, a figure that ambivalently straddles both ideals of multicultural inclusivity and the threat of radicalization as the context demands. With the hope to break this stereotype apart by highlighting the diverse political and cultural contexts in which Muslim women think about the veil, Muslim women writers are engaged in writing back to counter the misrepresentation of Islam so that, the wrong images of the anonymous veiled woman can no longer be read as shorthand for Islam.

Due to the image shaped by the media, Islam in the West is demonized. Muslim women are presented either as victims or as fortunate survivors of a violent religion. This stereotyped view towards Islam and Muslims has put more pressure on Muslim immigrants. Sense of detachment in the land of the others and the burden of distorted image that makes them feel rejected. Leila Aboulela offers a realistic view on the status of Muslim woman, and how she reacts toward disappointment and misfortune. Therefore, this dissertation is going to depict the religious rituals practiced within the novel and the cultural identity that is represented by the main character. How she sees religion as her savior and the community she includes herself into preserves her identity, unlike how the Westerners perceive the image of Muslim women and misconceive Islam's principles. Najwa, *Minaret's* protagonist, represents migrant Muslim women, consequently the religion they adopt. The struggle they experience in the West 'over creating a modern yet religiously traditional identity' (Al-karawi 225).

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This study concentrates on one of these Muslim women writers, Leila Aboulela, a Muslim woman novelist, who uses English as her mean of expression, to explore her novel *Minaret* (2005), with regard to spirituality, identity representation, and diaspora along with respect to postcolonial and cultural theories. *Minaret* tells the story of a Muslim young girl, Najwa, once privileged and secular in her homeland Sudan. In Britain and after the death of her father, she seeks refuge in the Muslim community, where she starts making her own living and devotes herself to her religion. This turbulent journey reshapes the protagonist's character, and transforms her to a wise person. Wishing to contribute to a recent growing debate on works by Muslim women writers in diaspora, the selected work meets the following criteria: first, the context revolves around the confusion and struggle of the main protagonist to identify herself in the society in general and within her family in specific. Second, the protagonist embarks on a spiritual journey that theculminates in a much deeper faith than she had before.

Therefore, the central question of this study is: to which extend does Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) celebrate the Muslim traditions and rituals? Besides a discussion of the significance of the hijab and sacred places for the Muslim women, do Muslims need to defend and define their religious identity? Will religion and culture persist as core criteria for identity formation?

What is hypothesized, hence, is: first, religious and cultural references represent the core of Aboulela's *Minaret* as Islamic rituals and traditions represent a pillar component in the Muslim identity and play a crucial role in making Muslims proud of their religious identity. Second, the importance of Islam in re-shaping the life of the novel's protagonist.

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Searching on this topic, many books, articles and theses meet this study's concerns amongst; Rey Chow, author of *Writing Diaspora* (1993) criticizes the illusion that Muslim women's voices have been accounted for, even if they have only been heard through the colonizer: the colonist's text itself already contains a native voice-ambivalently. For Chow, it is not enough that the Muslim women speak through the colonizer; instead, Muslim women need a space to speak for themselves. An alternative method of representing Muslim women must be achieved in order to open up a space for individual Muslim women's stories to be heard.¹

Tariq Ramadan in *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* relates this difference to the need for recognizing the importance of crafting a new kind of Muslim identity in the Western societies, one that seeks independence from the paternalistic influence of Muslim countries.²

Mohja Kahf's essay *Packaging "Huda": Sharawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment* (2000) sparked my interest. In her paper, Kahf shows ample evidence to the mishandling and the appropriations of the original text (through mistranslations) to satisfy readers' expectations. Her arguments urged to look a bit closer into the politics of reception of literary texts written outside of the West.

¹ Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) Print.

² Ramadan, Tariq. *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2004) Print.

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Another important source that is strongly used in the analytical part of this work is the doctoral thesis of Firouzeh Ameri titled *Veiled Experiences: Rewriting Women's Identities and Experiences in Contemporary Muslim Fiction in English*. This thesis discusses the Western representation of Muslim women which is wrong due to the event of 9/11. It also deals with religion and culture in Aboulela's writings in general, and her novel *Minaret* in specific.

In terms of methodology, the subject of this dissertation necessitates the analytical method. So that it can examine the religious rituals and analyze how culture strengthens one's identity with regard to the theories of religious and cultural identity.

The dissertation's structure is going to be as follows: the first chapter focuses on the theories that have relation with cultural and religious identity. It also puts emphasis on how migrants construct their identity to protect their own uniqueness and to present their background. The second chapter represents Leila Aboulela's way of writing in terms of style and language, and how she uses her writings as a sword to fight the dominant Western representation of Islam. Ending with the third chapter which is the core of our study. It is mainly analytical, discussing how religion is portrayed in the selected novel, *Minaret*. It investigates the strength of religion in the formation of Najwa's character, and how she restores her existence within the Islamic community.

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This study is not about answering the above questions only. Nevertheless, with the prospect of contributing in defending the image of Islam, it gives insights about how the others view Islam in general and Muslim women in particular. It also provides an overview of the challenging voice represented by Muslim women writers. That proved Islam as a religion of peace and dignity, and its rites came to preserve the women's rights. Concluding with the importance of culture and traditions of a given religion the construction of one's personality and unique existence.

CHAPTER ONE

A Theoretical Backbone to Approach *Minaret*

Introduction:

This chapter investigates the significance of Muslim women's writings, and how they contribute to the contemporary literature. It will trace how their works, sculpture the most appropriate image about Muslim woman's identity in order to portray the weight of their accomplishments.

1. An Overview on Muslim Women Representation in the West:

Among the topics that attract both writers and readers is the literature of minorities (vulnerable groups and unfortunate ones). It provides an opportunity to explore the other cultures, traditions and religions, and it shows how they are living and reacting to these customs. Muslims have always been under the microscope, due to the picture drawn by the media, especially, after the 9/11 events. This Islamophobic sense was a preferable subject to many writers. Particularly, those who like to distort the image of Islam. One concern is the portrayal of religion and identity.

In the last few years, there have been a noticeable increase of interest in literary works produced by foreign languages, especially, by Arab male and female writers who are described by Westerners as either *Anglophone* or *hybrid*. Literary works written by Arab women writers, mainly novels and short stories have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab woman whose identity is perceived by the Western readership as being different, peculiar, complex, and mosaic orientalist (Sarnou 2014, 66).

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There has been a remarkable number of non-Muslim writers who tried to portray the life of Muslim communities. But it could not provide a realistic image, rather it worked on vilifying the Islamic notions, especially, when it comes to the status of women, they tend to depict it in stereotyped manner. Everything that Muslim women do or say is somehow already tainted as a result of a predetermined misunderstanding on the part of a large portion of Western writers and readers. In other words, Western writers were too far to project the position of women in the religion of Islam 'since colonial times, Muslim women were depicted as oppressed and repressed in Western representations' (Firouzah 2012, 5). This was unfair for both Islam and Muslim women. In this stream and in order to provide a better reference and a valid viewpoint, Muslim women writers attempted to write back as countering the representation of Islam in the West.

Muslim women writers were able to challenge the colonial representation of Muslim women as oppressed. They depicted women as strong, articulate, outstanding and ready to reject any oppressive powers. Muslim women writers created a modern genre of English fiction in the form of a series of novels. They worked on exploring distinctive topics, such as cultural dissonance between Muslims and other cultures and religions, morality, modesty, gender, sexuality and especially identity. A number of these Muslim women writers are worldly influential, just like Mohja Kahf, Assia Jabar, Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela. Their writings provided a different description of Muslim women's daily life, how these women seek protection and freedom from their religion. The religion that came to honor women, restore their dignity and preserve it from any harm.

1.1. Traces of Post-Colonial Feminism in *Minaret*:

With the emergence of this generation of Anglophone literature writers, topics about Islam in general and Muslim women in particular were in the hands of the experienced people. Narratives produced by this category of Muslim women are labeled as post-colonial, feminist, non-native, Anglophone or hybrid literary discourse. Ahdaf Soueif, Assia Jbara, Leila Aboulela, Soraya Antonius, Fadia Faqir and others are seen as the most popular Muslim women writers. 'English, as the major language, under their hands has been de-territorialized and metamorphosed to meet the cultural specificity of Arab women as writers who traverse worlds, cultures and languages' (Sarnou 2014, 69).

Geoffrey Nash (2007) suggested that contemporary Anglophone Arab writers use English rather than Arabic as the language for their fiction for personal preference to avoid cultural restrictions and censorship, and to optimize exposure. Some Anglo-Arab writers are embedded within an English-speaking environment either in their country of origins or in Britain such as Leila Aboulela, or the United States of America. In terms of themes and literary discourses, works by those women contribute to the creation of a new genre of literature that is neither Arabic nor English.

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The first collection of Arab and Muslim women's feminist writing published in English was, *Opening The Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing (1990)* by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke. It is about fifty pieces by Arab and mostly Muslim women. 'The contributions which are translated from Arabic into English are categorized under three main headings "awareness", "rejection", and "activism" suggesting how Muslim women are aware of the injustices against them, have started resisting oppressive practices and are actively engaged in feminist practices so as to make a difference in their conditions' (Ameri 2012, 20).

The Western representation of Islam and the Muslim woman has been always unfair. Muslim women are presented either as the victims of a violent religion or as its fortunate survivors. These women's liberation from misery is suggested to be about isolating themselves from Islam and Muslim culture and becoming completely bound to the Western way of life. In contrast, Mohja Kahf, as an Arab Muslim writer, suggests that 'what could affect the representations of Muslim women and the construction of knowledge about them have been the geographical origins of the representing texts, the preoccupations of time, the material or ideological conditions affecting the relationship between the West and Islamic societies' (1999, 3-9).

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Because of this misrepresentation of the Muslim women, Muslim writers have created a new genre of memoirs by which they fulfill the reader's desire for facts and truth. Here are some of these memoirs. *Burned Alive: The Survivor of An Honor Killing Speaks* (Souad, 2005); *Sold: One Woman's True Account of Modern Slavery* (Muhsin, 1994); *Behind The Burqa: Our Life In Afghanistan And How We Escaped To Freedom* (Swift Yasqur, 2002); *Price Of Honor: Muslim Women Lift The Veil of Silence on The Islamic World* (Goodwin, 1995) and many other memoirs. Indeed, Anglophone Muslim literature, especially the one produced by women, is a flourishing field of literary, cultural and discursive research, not only because it is considered as a minority literature, but also because it represents an important bridge of communication between the West and the Arab Muslim world.

2. Religion and Identity in the Life of Immigrants:

Religion is so important in the formation of one's identity, and the way religion is lived among migrant Muslim women shows how people are in need of spiritual guidance and orientation. Muslim women tend to be seriously attached to their religion, especially, when they experience immigration, willingly or unwillingly. This kind of attachment represents a sort of self-protection from melting in the other culture and environment.

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 the agents who enact them. (Baum 1077)

Indeed, the quest and the process of identity formation have become significant in contemporary literature.

On the one hand, 'religious identity can be located as part of the repertoire of identities that individuals inhabit alongside their national, sexual, racial, class and ethnic identities' (Zine 115). The link to religion differs from one person to another and changes in different stages of a person's life. According to Peek (2005), the aspects of religious identity can become less or more salient and move up and down the so-called hierarchy model of identities.

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On the other hand, Muslim identity, especially its religious designation, because of being evaluated by the adherence to Muslim religious tenets and spirituality, cannot be treated as free-floating, and there can still be said to be certain constant references in the construction of Islamic identity. Furthermore, 'Muslim identity is rooted in Muslims' lives because of having a basis in the spirituality and sacred texts of Islam, attractive to many Muslims' (Zine 2002, 112).

Both Jasmine Zine and Ake Sander have tried to find the most appropriate definition to the Muslim. Zine declares that 'being a Muslim is not simply a label divested of any associations to the religion of Islam' (116). While Ake talks about four categories of people who are identified as Muslims. First, the ethnic Muslim who is the one who considers himself/herself a Muslim because of his/her Muslim parents and background. Second, the cultural Muslim who is the one who acts and socializes according to his/her Muslim ethnic and cultural origins. Third, the religious Muslim who is the one who actively practices and believes in Islam. Finally, the political Muslim who is the one who believes in Islam, but this belief for him/her is mainly used for sociopolitical purposes (187). In short, the religious designation is more firmly fixed by Islam especially the Quran.

Obviously, people are divergent, everyone adopts the approach that suits him/her the best. Some when they find out that they are forced to live in a secular country, they attempt to equip themselves with some knowledge about Islam. That is to say, they prepare themselves for any kind of prejudice in order to be convenient and to reject any probable atheism. They insist on going to the mosque, attend religious lectures and engage in cultural practices.

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... Others have shifted their religious understandings through devising their Islamic practice to suit themselves, or changing or blending their religious involvement. Some have become more secular, some spiritual, while others blend Islam with Christianity or new age beliefs. (Stirling et al 17)

These kinds of adaptations represent the way Muslim women behave in order to cooperate with the lived circumstances. Living in a secular country imposes certain conditions that make Muslim women in a continuous search for flexible ways of acclimatization. The previous perquisites they brought up from their homeland should fit the new atmosphere, that is to say, some religious practices are better to be done in public others in preferably intimate.

Muslim women reshape their religious identities through their daily lives to cope with the constant changes. Changes that occur in Muslim women's lives determine the fluidity of their cultural and ethnic identities. Amongst the things that contribute to the protection of Islamic identity is practicing the religious rituals within a community, which gives a sense of unity. A group that shares the same objectives and interest, so to form a cultural institution.

2.1. Identity and Migration:

Identity is best described as a process that refers to how individuals and groups, consider and position themselves comparing to others, according to a given notions such as gender, sexuality, culture, race, nation, class and occupation. Identity is a social phenomenon that includes language, dressing and occupation of space.

Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesizing relationships of similarity and difference. The outcome of agreement and disagreement and at least in principle always negotiable, identification is not fixed. (Jenkins 8)

Identity is the outcome of two main components, self-representation and social classification. These two elements result in the feeling of being recognized and differentiated from the others. Knowing your differences, where to belong, and when to be included or excluded are stuff that shapes one's identity.

Moving to the meaning of migration, 'Migration is referred to as a process that begins with the arrival in a country, but continues bringing one's (regular or irregular) permanence in a foreign country while one holds the status of alien or foreign resident' (La Barbera 2015, 10). She says that it refers to human mobility from a place to another. Migrants move from their homelands to other places carrying with them places of their past, past experiences and memories. These processes are often framed in terms of Diaspora, exile or immigration, a continuous feeling of detachment, unable to go back nor to feel home in the prominent space.

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Combining these two notions we figure out the importance of place in the making of people's identity. People need to feel safe, protected and home in order to practice their cultures and customs, which in other words construct their identities. The place is essential in the formation of one's identity 'to be human is to be in place' (Cresswell 1996). That is why immigrants create bonds with their new environment that manifest in affective or cognitive terms as a sense belonging, employing a critical geographical conceptualization of places, carrying with them traditions and ethnic practices and resulting in a diasporic sense and feeling of loss.

Nevertheless, lately immigrants transformed these concepts of longing and exile in a creative and productive way, such as, art and literature. On June 2010, the *New Yorker* celebrated 'the 20 under 40' most successful young writers in the United States, almost all of whom were of "migration background"¹

2.2. Cultural Identity:

Culture, without a doubt is a necessary brick in the construct individual's identity. 'Cultural identity refers to identification with or sense of belonging to a particular group based on various cultural categories including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and religion' (Hsueh-Hua Chen 2014). People work on maintaining their cultural identity through shared knowledge such as language, traditions, religion and customs. This identification is not stable because people's characteristics are not limited to their ethnic heritage, but rather it is susceptible to modifications and changes. That is because as human beings we are subjected to change place and consequently change the culture, this does not mean that we will abandon what we had previously, but instead we will form a hybrid

¹ Steckenbiller, C, Brigitte .*Putting Place Back Into Displacement: Reevaluating Diaspora In the Contemporary Literature Of Migration*. University of South Carolina. (2013) Thesis

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multicultural identity. The term cultural hybridity thus, refers to the mixture of cultural influence that shapes a human.

According to Lusting, what distinguishes cultural identity from other kinds of cultures is its flexibility. It is likely to be enriched with life experiences. He notes that cultural identities are dynamic and they exist within a changing context, which results in the change of a given identity. Thus, cultural identity nowadays is even seen as a social network of people who follow and imitate social norms and habits from the media as a process of globalization.

2.3. Religious Identity:

Religious identity refers to self-identification (Smith 233). This term is used to categorize individuals relying on a given qualities such as a place. Individuals must see their classification as appropriate; it is important to recognize the value of the place. They should not see it just an ordinary placement. Religious identity is like cultural identity, some people need to be set in a community that provides them with the orientations in their own lives. Whereas, other tend to live in a situation where they see themselves as members of various groups. They tolerate the differences of the other, but at the same time, they work hardly to protect their own unique identities. 'Religion tends to be a key determinant of identity formation depending on circumstances, the groups covered and the period covered in the analysis' (Oppong 2013). Identity is embedded within religion. Religion is a set of social practices, cultural manifestations and ritual rites. This results in strong emotional belonging to a place.

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It seems apparent in societies where religion is deeply embedded in social life, people tend to derive their emotional strength and stability from religious identity and traditions which set them apart from those not adhering to them. (Yamin 2008)

As it has been demonstrated above, religion plays a crucial role and constitutes the core of the individual construction of identity

Conclusion:

In other words, religious identity refers to the way people relate to religion, whether to belong to a religious community or simply by manifesting the religious values by themselves and demonstrate the strength of religious beliefs in their everyday life. In simple words, the religious identity is a clear statement saying that the individual is in charge of how he/she sees religion and how he/she chooses to manifest it. King (2003) argues that religion has a great power in the making and the formation of a religious identity through ideological, spiritual and social resources. To conclude with, Muslim immigrants back up themselves with cultural habits and religious practices, so they can surround their existence with features that maintain their personalities. Identity is something that individuals ‘do’ rather than something that they ‘have’, as a process rather than as a property (Jenkins 2008). That is to say that identity is not inherited, it is gained through the use of language, manifestation of traditions which includes religion and other cultural habits that reinforce self-identification.

CHAPETR TWO

Leila Aboulela's Literature and Originality

Chapter Two: Leila Aboulela ‘s Literature and Originality

Introduction:

This chapter discusses Leila Aboulela’s way of writing in general. It explains a further background of her novel *Minaret*, as a case of study. This chapter also aims to provide an analytic foundation for the discussion of both the selected novel and dominant Western representations of Islam, especially popular Muslim life narratives as a background for the study of *Minaret*.

1. Aboulela’s Writings Background and Analysis:

Aboulela’s writings are always beautifully observed. Her voice is strongly heard by both Arab Muslim audience and Western critics. Her way of linking words can be described as a chain of meaningful messages transmitted to her readers. She is a writer of rare and original talent. The literary texts produced by Aboulela have recently become significant for scholars and academics. These scholars have noticed an important new hybrid literary phenomenon in her writings. Such texts that fuse foreign linguistic background in Arabic cultural context also have contributed to the reshaping of bridges of cross-cultural and trans-cultural dialogues. Since she is equipped with first-hand knowledge of both cultures, the Sudanese and British cultures, she assumes the role of a double-sight observer of the two entities. According to The Daily Telegraph, ‘Aboulela conveys the sense of two worlds touching and creating a further world, a new place in which it is exciting to find such a gifted writer’.

1.1. Stylistic Aspects of Aboulela's Literature:

In terms of style, when reading Leila's novels, the reader immediately feels like he/she is a character within the story because of the use of detailed descriptions such as 'This one is all peaches and cream, this one is like a model, this one is mumsy with or without her hijab (Aboulela 2005, 381). Leila through mentioning every detail about the characters, either physically or psychologically, as audience, we imagine all events like if we are entering into the characters' world. She uses the stream of consciousness as a device so that the reader will be able to know what the character is thinking of. This technique is clear in her second novel *Minaret*, when Najwa, the main character, thinks of the girls coming to the mosque when saying, 'Usually the young Muslim girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me though I admired them. I always find myself trying to understand them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London' (Aboulela 162,163). When knowing what the character is thinking of, the understanding of feelings and events becomes easier for her readers.

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Most of her writings are about Islam and Muslim women, so in describing Aboulela's characters, the term religious consciousness¹ is more appropriate. She herself refers to this point, saying that, 'I am interested in writing about Islam not as an identity but going deeper and showing the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith' (Eissa 2005, par. 3). That is to say that the narratives mainly explore the principal character's sense of oneself in relation to Islam, apparently independently of the social views of others. It is about the inner component of the Muslim identity of the character. For example, Aboulela's first novel *The Translator* (1999) is about a devout Muslim woman, Sammar, who is aware of her Islamic identity and lives a Muslim life. Even though she falls in love with a man from Scotland, she refuses to marry him unless he converts to Islam. Because Sammar respects the rules and basics of Islam in a Western atmosphere she says, 'We're not like that. You and I are different. For them it is a token gesture' (Aboulela 1999, 299).

Leila as a *diasporic* writer is rooted in the specificity of her hybrid identity. She has found a space in her narrative to explore her own depiction of home. Either she re-shapes the home she left behind as grown-up citizen with critical insight, or, if born in the West, she evokes home, often with nostalgia at a later stage of her life'. In this sense, the perceptions of home, as being identified by Leila and other Arab women writers, are different because the word "home" is associated with their conceptualization of their homeland, home country or the place they are supposed to belong to. In Aboulela's writings, the past memory becomes glasses through which her characters see their new environment in Britain.²

¹ The term 'religious consciousness' in description of Aboulela's fiction was first used by Geoffrey Nash (2002). It is defined by Swami Krishnananda as 'the consciousness that there is something above, beyond you, more than you, larger than you, transcending you, which you would like to reach, is religion. You may call it religious consciousness, if you like'

² Sarnou ,Dalal, *Narratives of Arab Anglophone Women and the Articulation of a Major Discourse in a Minor Literature*, (International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal, Vol. 16, No. 1/ 2014) 74

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However, her fiction also witnesses such nostalgia that pushes those characters to turn to religion as a site of trans-local identity formation. A nostalgia, which submits them to the possibility of resisting the new pressures that they face into a secular present in Britain or of romanticizing a particular past in the Sudan. For instance, in her novel *Minaret*, Najwa says, 'it's been a long time since I was nostalgic for Khartoum' (Aboulela 2005, 231). Besides, at the end of the novel, she feels nostalgic to her family by saying, 'I need my parents' room. I need their bed; its clean sheets, the privilege' (Aboulela 2005, 569).

There is no doubt that Aboulela is a good writer. She knows exactly how to put simple feelings into words. Her works can be considered as autobiographical. There is much of reality and simplicity depictions in her texts by putting the imagination aside and deciding to write about what she sees and feels. Aboulela's writings are not just the translation of language, but also the translation of religions and cultures across Eastern and Western countries, and the effect this translation has. As she has said in an interview, 'I want also to write fiction that follows Islamic logic. This is different than writing Islamically correct literature' (Eissa 2005, par. 3).

She usually presents the main characters in her novels as devout Muslim women. Women who are aware of their religious identity, especially their religious state of mind. The main character's religious state of mind aligns the narrative logic of Leila's fiction to a religious one. As Ferial J. Ghazoul puts it, 'there is a certain narrative logic in Aboulela's fiction where faith and rituals become moving modes of living' (2001, par. 1). In addition to that, Wail Hassan argues that 'the narrative logic of Aboulela's fiction expresses a religious world view that does not normally inform modern literature' (2008, 310).

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Aboulela plays with the solid things of everyday life in order to explore the complex web woven around the interface between her different cultures and languages. The effort of migration by carving out an English that absorbs traces of Arabic and [one that] is infused with Islam. The language that writers such as Aboulela are crafting has to be malleable in its function of depicting multiple cultures, experiences and spiritualities. (Cooper 44-45)

1.2. Linguistic Aspects of Aboulela’s Literature:

Linguistically speaking, the use of Arabic words without translating them into English is also a special touch used by Aboulela in her literary products. In her novel, *Minaret*, she uses many expressions in their mother tongue. For instance, the words ‘Azan’, ‘baglau’, ‘henna’ and ‘sheikh’; ‘insha’Allah’ instead of ‘if God wills’; ‘Ahlan’ instead of ‘welcome’; ‘ya Habibi’ instead of ‘my dear’; ‘Salamu alleikum’ instead of ‘hello’; ‘Eid’ instead of ‘feast’; and ‘Tarha’ instead of ‘prayer mat’ and many other expressions. In other words, Leila is keeping her Arabic identity within her writings.

Leila Aboulela, through her writings, has introduced a new genre of English fiction in the form of a series of novels. So instead of describing and criticizing the Western view towards Islam, she writes from the experience of growing up and living within a Western atmosphere. Her novel *Minaret* provides a great example of this genre. This novel challenges the Western representation of Islam more directly due to her positive representation of Islam and Islamic lifestyle. In fact, an “Islamization of goodness” is evident. ‘Aboulela’s fiction suggests that Muslim identity can be central to Muslim women’s lives that is a form of consciousness for them, affecting all aspects of their lives and essential for their sense of well- being. In this way, the narratives naturalize Islamic-centered lifestyles and experiences and denaturalize secular experiences of Muslim women’ (Ameri 2012, 94,95).

2. *Minaret* as a Case of Study:

After talking about Aboulela's ways of writing in general, now we go deeper and more specific to her second novel, *Minaret*. This novel marks her out as one of the most popular Muslim women writers. The narrative is tranquil and lyrical, developing the thoughts and emotions of her protagonist. It is realized that she has begun, on the first page of the novel, to see her familiar world through Najwa's eyes. The story of Najwa's fall unfolds with the deliberate inevitability tale, but in this process, Aboulela describes the social and political atmosphere of Sudan's Westernized elite in the eighties. The novel is about Najwa's journey from pride and confusion to humility and peace. Once she adopts the hijab, she begins to see the world from a new perspective.

Minaret is Aboulela's second novel after her first novel, *The Translator*. This piece of writing discusses the life of Muslim women in the West and the problems that they face because of their religion, their culture, their clothes and their way of life. The coming title summarizes *Minaret*'s events.

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2.1. *Minaret*'s Background:

Minaret is a novel written by Leila Aboulela in 2005. It tells the story of a Sudanese woman, Najwa, who has to immigrate to Britain after the two coups in Soudan. In Khartoum, she lives a wealthy life with servants all around her, but after her father's execution, her mother's death, and her brother's imprisonment, her life have completely changed from a wealthy girl to a house-cleaner in the houses of upper-class families. At the University of Khartoum, she loves a man named Anwar who keeps humiliating her father, and even when she goes to Britain, she meets him and becomes his girlfriend. She gives him everything he wants, but he refuses to marry her. When she feels that their relationship will not last forever, she decides to leave him. This breakup makes her more attracted to the way of life of a devout woman and starts to wear a scarf. One day she starts a new job as a maid in the house of an Egyptian lady, Lamya, where she meets Tamer, her junior and the son of Doctora Zeinab and the brother of Lamya. Najwa finds in him the man she is wishing. Tamer is a devout 20 years man, who falls in love with her. Once Lamya knows about their relation, she throws Najwa out the house. Doctora Zeinab, knowing that her son is deeply connected to Najwa, goes to her and gives her money as a reward for staying away from him. After thinking, Najwa sadly decides to leave Tamer and takes the money so that she can go to Mecca for Hajj.

Najwa's conversion is not an easy surrender to tradition. Instead, it is a hard won dedication to service, a kind of restitution for her formal life. The end of the novel is a disturbing hint that the peace she has achieved is contingent and subject to perpetual challenge. In a narrative of complex reversals, Aboulela takes a huge risk in describing her heroine's religious conversion and spiritual dedication. She succeeds brilliantly. This is a beautiful, daring and challenging novel.

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Minaret is about the fictional representation of the identity and experience of a devout Muslim woman. Through reading *Minaret*, the one enters a religious world that is different from that one presented by Western writers. He/she, the reader, can differentiate between the dominant Western narrative of Muslim women and the narratives by Muslim women writers basing on two main points. First, 'the pretext of *Minaret* challenges the stereotype of a victimized, oppressed Muslim woman. Second, this novel does not represent Muslim women as either victims or escapees of Islam, but as committed to Islam and spirituality, emotionally and morally connected to it' (Ameri 88).

The veiled Muslim woman is represented in the Western culture as living in misery, not comprehensible to Western women. It is only after she has unveiled and escaped to the West that this misery will be removed from her life. This idea is totally changed in Aboulela' *Minaret*. Najwa, the protagonist, when she becomes a veiled woman, she becomes more relaxed to her new life, and when she refuses to adopt the Western lifestyle, she finally accepts her destiny as it is. Another important point when describing Islam is that everything about it is bad. This idea is also neglected in *Minaret* because once Najwa really has understood the real meaning of Islam; she comes to realize that everything about it is good. The novel can be analyzed in many ways. Our analysis of the novel in this dissertation revolves around three main points. First, is how the novel can be read as challenging stereotypes about Islam and writing back to dominant Western discourses about Islam and Muslim women. Second, how the novel offers an alternative representation of the identity and experience of its Muslim woman character. Third, and more importantly, how Islam, religiously speaking, affects the life of *Minaret*'s protagonist, Najwa, and how she finally accepts her destiny. In short, this novel shows how within the commitment to Islam, there are various ways of thinking and practicing, a variety of experiences with religion and different definitions of religious identity. The exploration of this latter, mainly in the novel, is one of the key areas of focus in this study.

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Conclusion

As a conclusion, Aboulela's *Minaret*, explored in this study, obviously reimagines marginalized experiences. It enters into the life of a Muslim woman in the West, offering insights difficult to find in Western hegemonic discourses. The novel, thus, invites the Western readers to take a deep look into the difficulties that a Muslim woman faces while living in a Western atmosphere. Unfortunately, Muslim women's hijab and Muslim mosques have been a complex issue in many European countries. So, Aboulela, and through this novel, is trying to explain and simplify the basics of Islam and Muslim women.

CHAPTER THREE

Religion, Religious Rituals and Cultural Identity in *Minaret*

Introduction:

As it was already explained right from the beginning, this study is purely about the power of religion in changing the life of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*'s protagonist, Najwa, through analyzing her life before and after being strongly related to Islam. Besides the analysis of culture and religious rituals within this novel, this chapter examines and approach the novel in terms of religion and traditions references in the novel.

1. Religion and Religious Rituals in *Minaret*:

After knowing the story of the novel, in this part we will focus more on the religious aspects used in the novel. It is about how religion is the shelter that saves Najwa from falling into sins again. In addition, how she is shown to be in her comfort zone when she lives a religious life.

1.1. Najwa a Devout Muslim: Praying and Fasting:

It becomes clear that Aboulela describes fiction that reflects Islamic logic as ‘fictional worlds where cause and effect are governed by Muslim rather than non-Muslim rationale’ (Larson 4). That is to say that what happens to Najwa is based on a cause and effect in order to reach a religious satisfaction. So here, we will show how she catches up with this satisfaction through studying and analyzing each part with its chapters.

Najwa is both the narrator and the protagonist of Leila’s *Minaret*. The narrative moves back and forth between London and Khartoum. It costs her twenty years to change from an independent Westernized girl to a devout woman. Her religious journey is emphasized mainly in London when she becomes a house cleaner. She is both the narrator and the protagonist of the novel. During these twenty years, from 1984 to 2003, she has passed through many experiences that give her the satisfaction that she needs. The novel also naturalizes Najwa’s life as a devout Muslim, and emphasizes the centrality of religion in the well-being of her soul through showing how living a religious life can be satisfying, nourishing and energizing to her personality. In *Minaret*, Najwa, through associating religion with love, security and peace of mind, suggests that living religiously and upholding religious identity are preferable and more natural for the Muslim main fictional character.

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Najwa's religious consciousness is very strong in a way that affects all aspects of her life, including the words and expressions she uses in her everyday speech. For instance, when she salutes someone she says 'salaamu alleikum' (13); when she is happy, she says 'alhamdulillah' (13); when she wishes for something she says 'insha'Allah' (178); when she likes something, she says 'Masha Allah' (161); and when she is afraid of something or someone she recites some verses of the Quran such as saying, 'I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak' (169).

Religion within *Minaret* is clear right from the beginning when Leila starts with 'Bism Allah, Ar-Rahmen, Ar-Raheem'. This beginning makes the reader aware that Islam is present in the novel. Starting with the introduction, Najwa is in a full acceptance of the sentence, 'I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back' (10). She believes that she deserves this sentence since she is the cause of it, and because she is characterized in such a way that to her, modern reason is not the supreme ruler, and it is Allah's will that determines everything. For instance, when she is accused of taking Lamya's necklace, she starts her meditation, '...I start to pray; the words tumble in my head. Allah, please get me out of this mess. Stop this from happening. I know You are punishing me because I tried this necklace on in the morning, in front of the mirror. I put it round my neck and I will never do that again, ever' (238). Even when the necklace is found she says, 'rely on Allah, I tell myself, He is looking after you in this job or in another job' (241). In other words, she becomes a strong believer of Allah and His will. Najwa has always loved seeing students praying at the university, 'I couldn't see the students praying anymore and I felt a stab of envy for them. It was sudden and irrational. What was there to envy?' (95), but in the last part she is aware of her religious consciousness because she is religiously matured now.

1.2. Ramadan: a Religious Ritual and a Cultural Dimension:

Ramadan as a religious ritual is also mentioned in the novel. Najwa is used to fast in Khartoum, not because it is a religious duty, but to lose weight and to succeed in her exams. Now when she is in London, she completely forgets to fast and feels guilty because she believes that 'fasting is the only religious thing she ever did' (479). Once she knows it is Ramadan's time, she tries to fast but she cannot. Even she does not fast it, but she says, 'I missed the lightness of fasting, my body clean, my mouth dry and then the special food at sunset' (478). That is to say, that she is bound to fasting as a habit, not as an Islamic duty. Later, when she becomes older, she respects Ramadan more, for instance, she says, 'in Ramadan I have confidence, the certainty that, if I keep plodding this path, Allah will give me back that happiness again' (388). In addition to that, she states, 'Today I almost felt like I was in Mecca. It's the same feeling, all the people gathering and the spiritual pleasure' (386).

Aboulela's *Minaret* focuses on three important issues in relation to Islam. Najwa experiencing Islam and living a religious life makes her vision of the world more natural and more bearable compared with the time when she is not aware of her religion. First, the feeling of connection to a loving protective God. This connection is obvious when she has been disturbed by three English men she says, 'I look away out of the window, I tell myself that Allah will protect me so that even if they hurt me, I won't feel it too bad; it will be a blunted blow, a numbing blow' (169). Second, the sense of belonging to the community of believers that Muslims can enjoy. This enjoyment is clear in her sayings, 'I did like them. I liked the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men... I liked the talks at these gatherings because they were serious and simple' (499); and 'but I would leave the mosque refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy. Maybe I was happy because I was praying' (500).

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Third, the structure and order that practicing Islam can give to Muslims' lives. This order is seen when Najwa says, 'I would like to go on Hajj. If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh' (433); and when she is full of energy in Ramadan by saying, 'Now that Ramadan is over I wonder where I got energy from-fasting all day while working, then, instead of going home, going straight to the mosque' (386). In fact, the world of religion in this novel is depicted as a loving nourishing family in which love, binding and structure are provided to the family members.

Najwa's sexual relation with Anwar makes her feel guilty. She can feel happy instead, but there is a kind of regret in her sayings such as, 'I can't. I'm tired of having a troubled conscious. I'm bored with feeling guilty' (503). She thinks that she is free and she can do anything while in matter fact she is not. Her religious consciousness has always pushed her to the right way. She treats her religion as a dead one, but thanks to Wafaa, the one who washes the body of her mother, that religion has been born again in Najwa's heart. Wafaa through her insisting on Najwa to pray and to go to the mosque, and due to Anwar, Najwa is saved from being one hundred per cent Westernized.

Anwar telling Najwa 'Grow up' (483) is the turning point in her life. She says, 'when I walked barefooted back to the bedroom, I felt kind of peace. I lie in bed and fell deeply asleep. When I woke up I had a shower, but it was not an ordinary shower, it was like starting refresh, wanting to be clean, crying for it' (489). This statement shows that from this moment Najwa's life is going to be changed. The shower she takes is not like other showers. She is washing her soul and body of the sins she has done, so she can be clean and refreshing.

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Now when discussing the religious rituals in the novel, we come to the question of which one of these rituals is the reason behind Najwa's devotion to Islam. There are mainly five points, Azan, reciting of the Qur'an's verses, fasting in Ramadan, praying, and most importantly the washing of her mother's body. According to Najwa's experiences in Khartoum and in London, these rituals help her to become the woman she has ever wanted to become.

Her religious sense is seen since she is introduced as a young girl in the university. Even though she is doing bad things such as going to the disco, but once she hears the Azan, there is a strange feeling inside her. Furthermore, when she first goes to the mosque she is enjoying hearing some verses of the Qur'an, 'But it was the girl reciting who held my attention, her detachment that was almost angelic. So which of your Lord's favors do you deny?' (490). By the use of flashback she says, 'I tried to think back and 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 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...' (280).

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In one Ramadan Najwa forgets to fast which makes her feel guilty and uncomfortable because according to her, 'it's part of our religion' (477). While in the coming Ramadan, she gets a chance to say her prayers, 'My Lord, You are the One who created us, You are the One who guides us, You are the One who feeds us and when we fall ill You are the One who cures us. My Lord, forgive us our sins...' (377). Moreover, after her mother's death, she is asked to pray for her so she says, 'I felt that same blackness in me. I became aware of that hollow place. Perhaps that was where the longing for God was supposed to come from and I didn't really have it' (281). In short, all these religious rituals that are essential in Islam are present in the novel.

When Najwa says, 'I can do what I like, no one can see me', she is misled by the idea of not being observed while in matter fact Allah is above her. Whenever she does a wrong thing, she feels something strange inside her. This feeling is the feeling of guilt. Because Allah is always with her, He sends her Wafaa as an angel to save her from falling in faults again. Najwa describes her as her guider by saying, 'she was a guide, not a friend' (508). Most importantly, when Najwa says, 'the mercy of Allah is an ocean' (16), she is sure that Allah will forgive her if she continues believing in Him.

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Religion in general and Islam in specific is used as a tool of power by writers and their characters. In other words, Aboulela has used Najwa as her real shadow in the novel. Najwa has not been a devout Muslim woman all her life. Thus, her Muslim identity evolves in the course of the novel and by which the narrative depicts a process of change from the non-practicing to the practicing life of a Muslim woman, such as from the non-practicing of the prayer to the practicing of the prayer. Therefore, through comparing the two worlds and describing the positive effects on the protagonist of following a religious life, we can come to the conclusion that Najwa's life has transmitted to the good side.

'Set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surrounding' (Mernissi in Steiner 2008, 13). According to him, when a person makes his or her religion as the source of power, he/she can consider the whole world as a home. This idea is seen in the novel because Najwa considers London as her homeland, Khartoum.

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Aboulela, as a Muslim writer, tries to show her readers some Islamic basics in order to make them get more knowledge about Islam. Her main character, Najwa, is resaying what she has learnt from her teacher, Um Waleed, about Islamic principles that each Muslim should follow. These principles are ‘the extra prayers, the extra charity, the daily reading of the Qur’an, not backbiting, not gossiping, not envying, not lying’ (380). Another important Islamic element is the hijab. Aboulela using Najwa’s voice says, ‘But it is as if the hijab is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is expose’ (383). The Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), is also mentioned in the novel. Um Waleed says, ‘Ya habibi, ya Rasul Allah’ (381). In Islam, there is also the shrouding of dead people. This action is clear within the novel when Najwa’s mother is washed and shrouded in London.

The seclusion in the mosque is a very important point in Islam. Tamer who is presented as a devout young boy says, ‘I did feel spiritually stronger. I did reach a kind of detachment, like things didn’t matter, not in a careless, angry sort of way, but more like I would take them in my stride’ (395). Asking forgiveness for others is seen when Najwa asks forgiveness for her father, ‘every day I pray that Allah will forgive him; every day I ask mercy for his soul’ (403). She also asks forgiveness for herself, ‘I regret the whole thing. I often wish I could go back in time and erase what I’ve done. But it doesn’t matter whether I forgive myself or not. I only want Allah to forgive me’ (418).

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Najwa believes that what happens to her family is based on the religious logic that Devine Will is operating on whatever happens to humans. The disaster that has befallen her family, her father's execution, her mother's death and her brother's imprisonment are all, to her, the results of their lack of faith and their disobeying God. Najwa says, 'I reach out for a sense of shame, for a sense of guilt or ever sheepishness' (192). In contrast, she refers to the relationship between religious and family life, and associates the God of religion with safety and parental protection, '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' (242). Now religion to her is around all aspects of life. According to Chandrahas Choudhury, the world of religion is treated like a lifestyle choice, in *Minaret* 'we are invited to consider religion... more like a necessity (2005, par. 6).

2. Cultural Identity in *Minaret*:

Talking about culture is talking about traditions. As Arab Muslims, sometimes we practice our religion more as a part of our culture and traditions. We see things from a cultural angle more than a religious one. In *Minaret* (2005), this vision is seen on many occasions. For instance, the title itself 'minaret' can hold a big meaning. In Islam, the building of mosques does not require having long and high minaret, but in the novel, the minaret is high so it can be seen. This idea is supported by Najwa when saying, 'we never get lost because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it' (432). This statement also has a religious sense. It holds the meaning that wherever Najwa goes, she will return to her Islamic identity by being always guided by the minaret of the mosque.

2.1. Islamic Traditions: Religion and Culture:

Another point is the respect of the husband's family. This point is taken as a part of traditions. According to our culture, the woman has to live with her husband's family and this is clear in the novel when Shahinaz, Najwa's friend, says, 'I know it is the Islamic thing for a man to obey his mother and I should support him in this' (221). It is a matter of charity, not a matter of obligation. Therefore, we can say that the novel is rich with religious and cultural references. The Eid party is also traditional action done by Muslims. In Islam, normally, we do celebrate after Ramadan. This idea is based on the Hadith of our Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), *للصائم فرحتان: فرحة عند إبطاره وفرحة عند لقاء ربه*, which holds the idea that the fasting person has two joyous occasion, one joy when he breaks his fast, another joy when he meets his Lord.

It is clearly noticed that people are dancing and enjoying the Eid in the novel, but somehow, they over react in doing so. As Muslims, the Eid is not a matter of having party and dancing, but it is about forgiveness and continuing what has been done in Ramadan.

In *Minaret*, Muslims in London are having a party of the Eid, which is overreacting. This overreaction is based on the fact that they are a minor group of women who are celebrating this event because it is related to Islam only. Maybe this minority makes them feel weak and alone, so they fulfill this weakness by gathering and celebrating to show to the world that Islam is presented everywhere. Besides, people are happy because they know that Allah will reward them for their fasting.

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Islam is a born religion in every one of us, we practice it and respect its rules, sometimes as a part of our personality and sometimes as a part of our culture. That is to say that, for some of us, Islam is only a name and this is exactly the case of Najwa when she is a teenager in Sudan. She sees Islam as nothing serious because she is raised like that. Neither her parents nor her friends are strong believers. Therefore, her surrenders affect her vision towards Islam. Nevertheless, when she grows up, she becomes more attached to Islam.

Religious and cultural references are also present in Leila's *Minaret*. She uses these two aspects as a part of her personality and to simplify them to her readers. It is such an honor to know that a woman in a liberal place is able to keep her religion on. Even though Najwa has made a horrible mistake, but eventually she repents, and as our Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) says, From Anas, radiyallahu' anhu, who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, saying, 'Allah the Almighty has said: 'O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me, and hope in Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds in the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I shall forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with an earthful of sins and were you then to face Me, without having associated anything with Me, I shall grant you an earthful of pardon'¹. Narrated by al-Tirmidhi.

¹ عن أنس رضي الله عنه قال: سمعت رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يقول: قال الله تعالى: يا ابن آدم إنك ما دعوتني ورجوتني غفرت لك على ما كان منك ولا أبالي، يا ابن آدم لو بلغت ذنوبك عنان السماء ثم استغفرتني غفرت لك، يا ابن آدم إنك لو أتيتني بقراب الأرض خطايا ثم لقيتني لا تشرك بي شيئا لأتيتك بقرابها مغفرة. رواه الترميذي

Conclusion:

After depicting religion and traditions within the novel, this chapter asserts that Leila Aboulela uses different techniques in order to make her writings artistically presented. *Minaret* as an example is one of her most significant literary products. The reader learns about Najwa's association of religion with love, protection, stability, security and company. Her positive view about the experience with Islam is seen through her comments, and reflections about religion. This special relationship with religion and everything in her life is transmitted through her eyes. Najwa's positive experiences with religion are partly constructed, and are based on the discourses to which she has been exposed; therefore, these experiences, as well as the enjoyment derived from them, are represented as real for her.

General Conclusion

General conclusion

Muslim women writers, through their works, have tried to make the picture of Muslim women living in the West nicer than the bad picture presented by Westerners. Muslims, especially women, have been always presented in a wrong sense. They are seen either as complicated and old-fashioned people, or as weak and victims of Islam. Nevertheless, thanks to those writers, including Leila Aboulela, Muslims now are beautifully seen and presented as wise, strong, and peaceful humans. That is to say that the new presentations of Muslim women by Muslim women writers are realistic and more logical than the Western representations of Muslims and Islam.

When talking about religion and religious identity, each one of us should think of the real meaning of both, identity and religion. These two terms are strongly related to each other, because having an identity is having a particular religion, not necessarily Islam. Because Muslim women in the West are a minority group of believers, they insist on going to mosques, attending religious meetings and engaging in cultural practices in order to preserve their Islamic identity. Therefore, amongst the things they do in the protection of this identity is injecting the sense of unity and love between them. They try to feel home in order to feel safe because living in another country creates the sense of exile and loss, so these immigrants transform these feelings to creativity.

Leila Aboulela, as a Sudanese writer, has given to the Arab-Muslim literature a real taste. She has written three novels. All her works are about male and female Muslim characters. Those characters, at the end, become strongly related to Islam and present Islam in a good manner. Stylistically speaking, Aboulela uses many techniques such as the stream of consciousness and the flashbacks. While, linguistically speaking, she uses Arabic and religious terms as a sign for her Arabic identity.

General conclusion

Moving to the analytical part, Leila Aboulela is taken as an example and her second novel *Minaret* (2005) as a case of study. The focus is to analyze religion, religious rituals and cultural identity within the novel. Najwa, *Minaret*'s protagonist, is a Sudanese girl who moves from prosperity and loss in Khartoum to poverty and safety in London. Through her experiences, she has transformed from non-caring weak girl to a veiled strong woman. This transformation comes as a reaction to the circumstances that she has lived in.

Religious references are strongly present in the novel. Najwa has always felt something strange whenever she hears the Azan or verses of the Quran when she is a teenager in the university. These awkward feelings become clear to her when she grows up, like if her religious instinct has grown up with her. There are many occasions in which Najwa goes back to Allah as her safe home. For instance, when she is accused of stealing the necklace, she returns to God and starts her meditation.

Religion and culture are both a key words within the novel. Even though, Najwa at the beginning treats Islam as a part from her culture, but lately, she deals with it as a part from her religious identity and consciousness. She has always see things from a different angle but ones she grows up, her view becomes mature more.

General conclusion

Leila Aboulela is using her character, Najwa, to show her readers that Muslims are wrongly presented especially after 9/11. She sends the message that women in Islam are honored and protected and this is exactly the case of Najwa. Her relation to Islam has made her more respectful in the eyes of others and her own eyes. Therefore, at the beginning, she is a cultural Muslim¹, but at the end, she becomes a religious Muslim. In other words, Muslim women writers have tried to change the stereotype picture of Muslims and Islam and they succeeded in doing so. In other words, those Muslim writers have tried to write using a mixture of English language and Arabic identity in order to create masterpieces.

This study has answered the main question; besides, the two hypotheses are proved. Therefore, and as a result, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* is rich with religious and cultural references, and its protagonist, due to Islam, becomes a better person.

Shortly speaking, thanks to Aboulela and all other Anglophone women writers, the Muslim's literature is nicely read.

¹ This term is already explained in the first chapter

General conclusion

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