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Place, Culture and Identity in Leila Aboulela's Novels: The Translator and Minaret

المكان والثقافة والهوية في روايتي الروائية ليلى أبوالعلا: "المترجمة" و "المنارة"

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD in English Literature

By:

Yousuf Ishag El Gizoli

Supervised by:

Dr. Mohammed Osman Kambal

Co-supervisor:

Dr. Wigdan Yagoub M. Sherif

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Dedication

To Basmal, Balsam, Basma, and their mother.

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Abstract

Most of Leila Aboulela's works explore the complex cultural perceptions between East and West in migration, often dealing with the challenges of migration, particularly in carving a space for belonging. When migrants move from their homeland to a new country, they carry their memories, beliefs, traditions, feelings of belonging with them. Arab Anglophone literature is a genre that deals with the distresses and difficulties of the Arab and African migrants, including cross-cultural conflicts and western perceptions and misconceptions of their identity, which lead to feelings of dislocation, alienation, and depression. This study discusses two contemporary novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) which are written by Aboulela. These novels provide authentic and rich content to explore the Muslim Arab woman's struggle over creating a modern yet religiously traditional identity. What makes these novels stand out is the fact that the Muslim protagonists are capable and successful in overcoming alienation and displacement by creating a new identity, largely due to their commitment to Islam. She portrays how religious actions such as praying and fasting can help facilitate this process. The study, thus, aims at discussing place, culture, and identity in the formation of these narratives and the challenge the protagonists face to negotiate and the freedom to decide their own identity within this diasporic setting. What the two characters in the novel find is that 'Muslim' is an identity that not only has the power to transcend national borders, but also signifies a communal set of beliefs, something that neither Sudan nor Britain is able to provide them with. One of the most important results of the research is that the place to which the protagonists of the two novels long and belong represents a significant role despite the spatial factor, and that the identity of the two characters is not affected by the place and culture of the former colonizer with the presence of freedom and the ability to make decisions without supervision or accountability. The researcher recommends that since literature is enriching, entertaining and educational it should be taught to students at different levels as well as providing university and public libraries with version of Leila Aboulela's books in low prices.

Key words: *Anglophone Arab fiction, cross-cultural conflict, alienation, migration, diasporic settings, former colonizer, The Translator, Minaret*

المستخلص

تستكشف معظم أعمال الروائية ليلى أبو العلا المفاهيم الثقافية المعقدة بين الشرق والغرب في المهجر، وغالبًا ما تناقش هذه الأعمال تحديات الهجرة، لا سيما في محاولة منها لخلق فضاء للانتماء. عندما ينتقل المهاجرون من وطنهم إلى بلد جديد، فإنهم يحملون ذكرياتهم ومعتقداتهم وتقاليدهم ومشاعر الانتماء إلى تلك البلد. الأدب العربي المكتوب بالإنجليزية هو نوع من الأدب يتعامل مع المحن والصعوبات التي يعاني منها المهاجرون العرب والأفارقة، بما في ذلك الصراعات بين الثقافات والتصورات الغربية والمفاهيم الخاطئة التي يستبطنها الغرب عنهم، مما يؤدي إلى الشعور بالانفصال والغربة والاكتئاب. تناقش هذه الدراسة روايتين معاصرتين وهما "المترجمة" (1999) و"منارة" (2005) اللتين كتبتهما الروائية أبو العلا. تقدم هاتان الروايتان محتوى أصيلًا وغنيًا لاستكشاف صراع المرأة العربية المسلمة من أجل خلق هوية حديثة، ولكن تقليدية دينياً. ما يميز هاتين الروايتين هو حقيقة أن بطلتيهما مسلمتين قادرتين وناجحتين في التغلب على الاغتراب والتشريد من خلال خلق هوية جديدة، ويرجع ذلك إلى حد كبير إلى التزامها بالإسلام. تصور الروائية كيف يمكن للأعمال الدينية مثل الصلاة والصوم أن تساعد في تسهيل هذه العملية. وبالتالي، تهدف الدراسة إلى مناقشة المكان والثقافة والهوية في تشكيل هاتين الروايتين والتحدي الذي تواجهه بطلتيهما، وحرية تقرير هويتيهما خاصة في محيط الشتات هذا. ما وجدته الشخصيتان في الروايتين هو أن عبارة "مسلم" تمثل هوية لا تتمتع فقط بالقدرة على تجاوز الحدود الوطنية، ولكنها تشير أيضًا إلى مجموعة مجتمعية من المعتقدات، وهو أمر لا يستطيع السودان ولا بريطانيا توفيره لهما. ومن أهم نتائج البحث هي أن المكان الذي تتوق وتنتمي إليه بطلتا الروايتين يمثل دورًا مهمًا رغم عامل البعد المكاني، وأن هوية الشخصيتين لم تتأثر بمكان وثقافة المستعمر السابق مع وجود الحرية وإمكانية اتخاذ القرار دون رقيب أو حسيب. يوصي الباحث بضرورة تدريس الأدب للطلاب في مختلف المستويات، لأن الأدب يثري القارئ وممتع وتعليمي، بالإضافة إلى تزويد المكتبات الجامعية والعامة بنسخة من كتب ليلى أبو العلا بأسعار مخفضة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب العربي المكتوب بالإنجليزية، الصراع بين الثقافات، الغربة، الهجرة، محيط الشتات، المستعمر السابق، "المترجمة"، "منارة"

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

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Introduction

1. Overview

Contemporary British fiction has started showing concern about themes of multicultural relations, identity formation and diaspora. Additionally, the rise of movement of migration has paved the way to the intrusion of new ethnicities, religions, and races into the British society. When Muslim British writings have emerged (see Kempf (2001) who gives several novels written by Muslims.), British fiction witnesses a rise of concerns about creating a new understanding of the Muslim presence in the western scenery. Moreover, when new geographical borders are drawn, Muslim communities find themselves politically split, yet they retain cultural and symbolic links with coreligionists through a transnational and modern communications. They have not become migrants moving constantly across and within national borders, rather it is their geographically flexible identity that oscillates between origin and diaspora that characterizes Muslim identity. As members of a world community, Muslims think transnationally while retaining deep connections with a specific place, whether it is of birth, of choice, or of compulsion.

Having lived within this diasporic environment, Aboulela started writing the intercultural dilemmas between Muslims and the West once she arrived in Britain. She has made waves in mainstream literary market by bringing an Islamic worldview in her novels, short stories, radio plays and semi-autobiographical articles. Aboulela's novels *The Translator* and *Minaret* represent some of the Arab-Islamic cultural symbols such as the veil, *hijab* and mosque that are commonly associated with a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchy. Her works foreground the importance of Islam in shaping the experiences of her characters. The two novels reflect a tendency by Arab British women writers to go beyond cultural borders and engage in trans-cultural dialogues. These novels are also chosen as examples of the fiction

specifically dealing with issues of Islam and contemporary life, which are further complicated by the experience of migration, while at the same time exploring the issues of negotiation of British Muslim identities in a nuanced way.

The literature produced by Arab/Muslim novelists conveys the struggle of Arab/Muslim characters who move from their hometowns to Britain and engage in a cross-cultural dialogue that revolves around socio-political themes such as marriage, love, friendship, academic research, work, religion, immigration, and exile (Al Maleh 2009:17). More recently, this literature has started to show an interest in second generation Arabs growing in a chosen or imposed exile. Al Maleh (p. 3) also described Arab British literature as "mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness and political in character". It is argued that Arab British women writers tend to foreground and advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification strategies in a more pronounced approach (Awad 2011:5). Those female writers found themselves in a host-land that bear outwardly political, social, economic, religious, traditional, geographic, and historical differences from their homelands. So, they are compelled to live in places where difference and diversity are not welcomed and rarely celebrated as if they felt that the colonizer should pay back his debts to the colonized.

There has been a number of reasons that made some Arab Muslim writers, who use the English Language as a deliberate choice to convey their ideas, to live abroad (Britain for instance). Some of them have decided to live there after completing postgraduate studies; others are siblings of Arab immigrants who settled there, and yet others are compelled to live there as a self-exile for political reasons. Briefly, these reasons can be summed up in socio-economic, political, or educational reasons. Some critics paid special attention to those authors and wrote a number of publications that, as Awad (p.11) states, "contributed to unveiling the intersectionality of religion, ideological affiliations, class, gender, nationality, identity and diaspora in the

works of Arab writers". Among those authors, there is a considerable number of women writers. The choice of a woman writer has its significance as Dimitriu (2014:76) states that women are viewed as "the transmitters of cultural values and identity" and "the standard-bearers of group's private and public dignity."

The choice to focus mainly on women stems from the fact that migration affects men and women differently and that women and men respond differently to the changes brought about by migration and the experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, Muslim female writers who live in Britain are not simply rooted in a religious identity but are produced across "a matrix of discourses", ranging from Western secular to the Islamist, as Mohammad (2005:180) contended. Nevertheless, a growing body of scholarly work has sought to destabilise essentialised representations of the Muslim female as a passive, submissive, highly regulated object (Hopkins 2009:24). I am particularly interested in female Arab Muslim characters since women's experience as immigrant is even more anxious than their male counterparts: women often cope with a more sever divide between the private and the public (Santesso 2013:4). Women also struggle to adapt to a new environment so as to balance the domestic with the public and to redefine the role of religion in one's life can be more difficult for women living in a traditional diasporic community, which can exacerbate, as D'haem, (1993:13) states, "an unease [and], a discomfort […] with one's own culture, [for] being held hostage to two cultures and yet not belonging to either".

Leila Aboulela was born in Egypt, raised in Sudan, and moved to Britain to study at the age of 21 (Santesso p.13). She carries different social and cultural values as a result of her Middle East background. She also uses the English language as a means of expression. Using the English language by "female colonised writers" as Ashcroft et al (2002:76) state, will enable the writers 'to gain world audience and yet produce a culturally distinct, culturally appropriate idioms that announces itself. Hassan (2008: 299) states that

Aboulela's works are classified as "Muslim immigration literature" because of its effort to "articulate an alternative episteme derived from Islam but shaped specifically by immigration perspectives". Other critics have gone as far as to label her and other writers as "*halal* writers".

The Translator and *Minaret* foreground the spiritual dimension of Islam and deep devotional relationship between female characters and Islam. Aboulela was working as a translator when she wrote *The Translator*. In the interview with Chambers, Aboulela says that one of the misconceptions about the Islamic Sharia in the West is that it is seen as a law enforced by the government or by an authority whereas in reality, the Sharia for true Muslims is "something personal and that cannot be forcefully implemented on them". In fact, the two novels mainly explore the principal characters' sense of (interior) self in relation to Islam or the inner component, rather than the social component, of the Muslim identity of the characters. Both novels depict the main characters' religious states of mind and the practice of religion in their daily lives. In this way, the novels represent Muslim identity for Muslim women as far from imposed but central to their lives and well-being. The main characters' religious states of mind even align the narrative logic of Aboulela's fiction to a religious one. Ghazoul (2001) states that there is "a certain narrative logic in Aboulela's fiction where faith and rituals become moving modes of living". Hassan (p. 310) also argues that the narrative logic of Aboulela's fiction "expresses a religious worldview that does not normally inform modern literature". The selected novels do not represent Muslim women as either victims or escapees of Islam, but as committed to Islam and spiritually, emotionally, and morally connected to it. Moreover, they challenge the stereotype of a victimized, oppressed Muslim woman. Although her two novels may share the stated commonalities, the researcher believes that there are some specialities that make each novel a unique work due to the experience of the writer, which will ultimately influence the way she tackles the question of place, culture, and identity. The two novels are chosen as

examples of the fiction specifically dealing with issues of Islam and contemporary life, which are further complicated by the experience of migration, while at the same time exploring the issues of negotiation of British Muslim identities in a nuanced way.

On the other hand, 'place' here carries the idea of the coloniser and the colonised place. These two places contradict which necessitates the contradiction of the two cultures that belong to these two different places. The author belongs to one place, or culture, and strives hard to diverge from or converge to another place, environment, and culture. Her endeavour to assimilate the 'Other' culture, to disassociate herself from it or at least to cope with it will colour the identity of the author/character, positively or negatively.

The characters of a novel reflect an author's consciousness (or unconsciousness) of his/her environment. So, judging characters of a novel should stem from the author's cultural and geographical background. This is true when a study is directed to Leila Aboulela's novels. As Dimitrova et al explained, as cited in Santesso (2013:5), that "It is important to explore how authors have imagined and re-created in their works cultural identity as well as their vision of the narrative of the nation." On the other hand, using the English language as a means of expression has its significance since these authors needed this medium to "write back" in order to discuss the challenges of Muslim self-identification in the West. Writing in English, the authors consciously embrace the role of a mediator, Santesso (p.13) states that: "depicting their own culture and religion has become a site of truth-telling".

It is important to note that the term 'Muslim' does not denote a monolithic consciousness, but rather an assemblage of ethnicities, nationalities, and cultural heritage since people are often grouped under this umbrella without differentiating between 'belief' and 'affiliation'.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although there is an increasing number of a publication addressing diasporic literary productions, little is known about Leila Aboulela within the

Sudanese scholars' circle. The researcher had some discussions with some PhD holders whose major field of study is Linguistics or Literature. The researcher was surprised that those scholars had never heard of Aboulela. Moreover, post-colonial concept of identity crisis becomes an ever-growing issue during this flux of the current wave of illegal immigration and Islamophobia. The researcher intends to find out how Islam and Muslims are received in the Western secular world, and how Muslims themselves represent their religious identity.

1.3 Objectives of the research

The purpose of this study is to compare two novels of Aboulela: *The Translator* and *Minaret* to find out how she managed to identify her Arabic Islamic identity through the manipulation of the characters in these two novels.

1.4 Research Questions

The study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the significance of place in Leila Aboulela's two novels?
2. How are the culture of the ex-coloniser and the culture of the ex-colonised expressed in the two novels?
3. To what extent is the identity of the characters mirrored in the two novels?
4. To what extent is the identity of the characters affected by the place and culture of the ex-coloniser?

1.5 Significance of the research

The researcher hopes that this study will provide a wide range of discussion about and shed some light on the works of this Sudanese writer and provide Sudanese university libraries with these novels. Moreover, the researcher attempts to analyse religion as a vital cultural signifier in the formation of post-colonial identity. At the same time, the researcher expects that this study will raise some self-reflexive questions about a specific field of

enquiry that is diasporic literary studies and to encourage researchers to delve in this panoramic domain.

The researcher hopes to probe into some of postcolonial themes that are perfectly interwoven and subtly interrelated in these two novels. The rationale behind this choice is that a person naturally belongs to the culture that represents their nationality or that identity embodies a culture to which someone belongs, and culture bears the seeds of identity. In fact, researching postcolonialism is, most often, a combination of some or all of these topics.

1.6 Limitations of the research

Although the Sudanese novelist, Leila Aboulela, has many novels and a short story collection, this study is limited to two of her novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, which were written in English.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Out of the many Sudanese novelists listed on the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, a few are females, as far as the researcher can tell: Malkat Ed-Dar Mohammad (1920 –1969), also a short story writer; Rania Ali Musa Mamoun (1979 –), journalist, novelist and writer; Leila Aboulela (1964 –), two of her novels are going to be discussed in this study. Aboulela is also amongst a few Sudanese authors who write their creative composition in the English Language. Moreover, according to the previous reference, ten out of 47 Sudanese who write short stories are females. Few of the ten short story writers compose their literary art in English; Leila Aboulela is one. From the above-mentioned facts, it can easily be seen the place of Aboulela among the elites who express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the English Language.

Leila Aboulela's fiction has raised considerable scholarly interest over the last two decades and her works are received with concern and mounting appreciation worldwide. Many newspapers, local and international, had interviewed the author. This interest has come from perspectives of migration and religion, and the themes and topics her works cover participate in debates surrounding such issues.

In this chapter, the researcher gives a background to Leila Aboulela's literary works with some emphasis on and elaboration of the two novels under scrutiny: *The Translator* and *Minaret*. The researcher discusses the terms of identity, culture and place (where people belong physically and emotionally). Some ideas are given about diaspora and postcolonial literature in addition to previous studies about Leila Aboulela's literary achievement in general and the two novels in particular.

2.1 Leila Aboulela

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 from a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother and raised in a very progressive environment. She learned English while going to an American primary school in Khartoum. Adding to her Western-oriented education, Aboulela also later attended a private Catholic school before pursuing an undergraduate degree in statistics at the University of Khartoum. She attended the London School of Economics after finishing her undergraduate education in Sudan. In 1990, she moved to Scotland with her husband and their three children, the setting of most of her writing. In an interview with The Guardian in 2005, she discussed the years she spent abroad following her undergraduate education and how these years made it possible for her to reconcile Islam, modernity, education, and women's empowerment (Eissa 2005).

> *She was awarded a degree in Economics at the University of Khartoum and then travelled to Britain to study for an M.Sc. in statistics at the London School of Economics…. She started writing in1992 while lecturing in Statistics and working as a part-time Research Assistant.*

In 1992, while living in Aberdeen with two young children and a husband working off-shore, Leila found comfort through writing about her home city. She attended creative-writing workshops which helped broaden her reading and introduced her to Scottish writers. https://www.birlinn.co.uk/Leila-Aboulela/

In an interview, Leila Aboulela describes herself, in an interview with Eissa (2005):

> *as a creative writer [attempting] to answer the need for self-representations on the part of the younger generation of Muslims. Islam is the epistemological force in the people's lives and the West is their home and yet they don't see an adequate representation of themselves in contemporary fiction and daily television programs and radio*

She started writing because she “was homesick for Khartoum. People around [her] did not know much about Sudan or about Islam, the two things that made up [her] identity.” And partly in reaction to anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiment expressed after the first Gulf War, she set out to write fiction showing the “state of mind and the emotions of a person who had faith,” she said, “I wanted to write fiction that reflected Islamic logic.” When Aboulela published her first novel ‘*The Translator*’, it was hailed in the Muslim world as "the first *Halal* novel written in English "(*Halal* ["permissible"] is the opposite of *haram* ["forbidden"].) (Eissa, n. p.). Nevertheless, Chambers (2010) contends that some commentators are uncomfortable with the idea of using religious identity to categorize literature (P. 389), it is argued that this term, i.e., *halal*, is no less problematic a signifier than race for mapping a literary field. the common feature between these terms is that both are political categories formulated in response to a term that is imposed upon its members from outside (Chambers p. 390).

Aboulela’s personality appears to have been influenced by her mother and her western education: “My mother is a wonderful person, very open-minded and progressive, and she taught me a lot of things that I still use, even though literature is not her field at all ... She was one of the few women in Khartoum who worked, one of the few women who could drive” (Aboulela, 2002). Aboulela’s mother does not therefore seem an oppressed woman and this has inevitably affected her daughter who takes for granted her freedom to work and drive. In addition to her mother’s influence, Aboulela’s personality is built upon her western education. Apart from her years in Khartoum University, she was exposed to the western educational system from the age of seven through her study in the American school and then a Catholic girls' school, ending her study at the London School of Economics. Putting her daughter in American and Catholic schools, the mother does not conform to a stereotypical conservative Muslim outlook which normally prefers the local and Muslim schools in order to protect daughters from western culture. It

could be argued that Aboulela's family and education are in harmony, and both help shape the western side of her personality.

Together her mother and her eastern education provided Aboulela with her first cultural impressions concerning Islam; however, her deeper, spiritual understanding of Islam came after arriving in London. As when she saw Islamic values in western novels, now she discovers Islam in London. The turning point was wearing the *hijab*. "'I didn't know anybody. It was 1989 and the word 'Muslim' wasn't even really used in Britain at the time; you were either black or Asian. So, then I felt very free to wear the *hijab*'" (Sethi, 2005). Aboulela "felt very free" in London. It provided her the freedom and the opportunity to decide for herself without outside influences. Strikingly, under the pressure of her progressive friends, she could not wear the *hijab* when she was in Sudan. "I held back out of fear that I would look ugly in a head scarf and that my progressive friends would make fun of me" (Aboulela, 2002). In London, though she might still fear looking ugly, this was not, apparently, her main consideration.

Khartoum was a city little known for its tourist value and Leila wanted to introduce the world to its unique beauty. She wrote about the Sudan, exploring the psychology, state of mind and the emotions of people of Islamic faith. Her writings look at what it means to be a Muslim, not just as a cultural or political identity, but as something that transcends – but does not deny– gender, nationality, class, and race. She contends that:

> *When I write I experience relief and satisfaction that what occupies my mind, what fascinates and disturbs me, is made legitimate by the shape and tension of a story. I want to show the psychology, the state of mind and the emotions of a person who has faith.* https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/leila-aboulela

She also states that her, "idea of religion wasn't about a woman not working or having to dress in a certain way. It was more to do with the faith"

(Eissa, n. p.). She became more involved with her religious faith while living in London as a graduate student and turned, at that time, to wearing the veil and went to mosque regularly (Ramadan 2004:58). Although there were negative attitudes from Westerners towards Arab Muslim women who wear the veil, this did not prevent her from becoming a published author and eventually one of the most prominent Arab Muslim writers in English today. Leila Aboulela continued to live a life belonging to the East and the West because she lived and travelled between Abu Dhabi and Aberdeen (Chambers, 2009:78).

Aboulela's desire to "write herself into Britain" originates from the experience of migration as a result of which she finds herself in a position where she struggles with the discourse that privileges the West as the best, while subordinating the East. It is not like Aboulela was not aware of this dichotomy, but in leaving Sudan, she becomes more and more exposed to the ways through which Orientalism works. While in Sudan, she was in a privileged position, thus avoided intriguing remarks about her identity; whereas while in the West, she finds herself in the position of the Orient, just because she is wearing the *hijab*. The centre freezes Aboulela's identity as the oppressed Oriental female; her westernized upbringing, university education in London hardly ever becomes visible to western eyes.

London hardly ever becomes visible to western eyes. Aboulela's writing has often been defined under such titles, as African writing- her short story collection was published by Heinemann African Writers Series- Muslim writer, and halal fiction. According to Sadia Abbas (2011), this is a formal puzzle because Aboulela's halal novels do not really deal with religion. Divine representation, Abbas argues, is absent from them. While Abbas' point of view is partially true, it is mostly incomplete. Aboulela deals not with God, heaven, theological questions on a metaphysical level because she prefers, perhaps the easier, yet more relevant way, and writes about how religious faith is experienced by common people in their everyday lives. Therefore, as

Ghazoul expresses "what makes her writing 'Islamic' is not religious correctness or didacticism. Rather, it is a certain narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living". Islam in Aboulela's novels, in Abbas' words functions a "socio-psyhic tranquilizer" that makes it possible for the person in exile to overcome the trauma of migration and other losses. Islam provides meaning and order in a world that is otherwise governed by chaos. While the motto of the day is chaos and fusion, Aboulela's characters reject the promises of chaos for an orderly life. Life regulated around faith and rituals facilitates the process of integration into Britain, but significantly not through positioning the subject as a British citizen but through negating the signifying power of any national identity marker. Aboulela's characters reach out for the global ummah that connects all Muslims to each other as the citizens of the world, thus making it possible for all Muslims to feel at home anywhere on earth since "home is where the faith is" (Ameri p.114).

Leila Aboulela's name is listed under Islamic Fiction writers along with others such as Irving Karchmar, Jamilah Kolocotronis, Samina Ali and Pamela Taylor as "Islamic Fiction Authors". Aboulela's first novel *The Translator* (1999) was deemed by The Muslim News to be "the first halal novel written in English". When asked by Claire Chambers (2010: 400-1) about this halal novelist label, Aboulela says:

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

As this extract reveals, titles like *halal* fiction, *halal* novelist have become a signifier of authenticity, used and/or abused by writers, publishers, and readers. For instance, Chambers also mentions how many works by female Muslim authors who choose to wear the *hijab*, including Aboulela, are marketed accordingly. Almost always, they feature *hijab* wearing portraits on

their covers even if the theme is not directly related to it. While a young woman in pink *hijab* might be a suitable cover for Aboulela's second novel *Minaret*, given the importance of *hijab* as a part of the protagonist Najwa's identity, there could be thousands of other images than the *hijab* wearing young woman to be used in her first novel *The Translator*, and her last novel *Lyrics Alley*. Thus, the tag of halal novelist is both an empowering title, granting the author the right to authenticity and also a useful tool in the marketing of literature to certain groups of readers.

She lived many years, with her husband and three children, in Aberdeen, Scotland, where she wrote most of her literary works. She currently lives and lectures in Abu Dhabi. Aboulela's writings have won praise from critics and writers, including Ben Okri and J. M. Coetzee. Her first novel, *The Translator*, was published by Polygon in 1999 and was short-listed for the Saltire Society First Book of the Year and long listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction and the IMPAC prize. It was also chosen by the BBC and adapted into a five-part drama serial for BBC Radio Four in 2002. A book of short stories entitled 'Coloured Lights' was published in 2001 by Polygon. One of its stories, 'The Museum', was again dramatized for BBC Radio Four and won the very first Caine Prize for African Writing. Her second novel, *Minaret*, was published in 2005 by Bloomsbury, and this too was long listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction and the IMPAC prize. Her work has been translated into nine languages. https://www.birlinn.co.uk/Leila-Aboulela/

Like *Minaret* and *The Translator*, *Coloured Lights* deals with questions of cultural misunderstanding and mistranslation. In her prize-winning story, 'The Museum', an unlikely relationship develops between Shadia, a wealthy visiting student from Khartoum, and Bryan from Peterhead, Scotland. Both are studying for an MSc in Statistics, both from marginal, 'unknown' locations beyond each other's immediate reality. Despite the charming association that emerges between them, and which culminates in a visit to a Scottish museum exhibiting 'Africa', Bryan can't understand Shadia, and

Shadia can't understand Bryan. The coloured lights of Aboulela's collection share a fragile proximity that gives off a temporary warmth, but they never ultimately join up. Like all her works to date it dwells on the synaptic spaces between languages, words, images, identities, and cultures.

In *The Translator* (1999), Sudanese-born Sammar falls in love with Scottish Rae, and the story culminates with his conversion to Islam towards the end of the novel. The novel *Minaret* (2005), for its part, focuses on the complexities of being a Muslim in London, as the main character Najwa, another Sudanese immigrant, rediscovers her faith in the city. A somewhat similar outcome concludes a more recent novel, *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), in which it is implied that the protagonist Natasha will attempt to rekindle and relearn her faith. Yousef Awad (2018: 76) argues that this novel "captures the sense of alienation" emerging from the treatment of Muslims in the West, and such alienation is at the core of Aboulela's earlier novels too. *Bird Summons* (2019), in turn, follows three Muslim women on their quest to rediscover themselves and their purpose in life and to take stock of previous decisions made. Religion and migration emerge here as well but do not take centre stage to the same degree as in earlier texts, and the women's search for meaning and guidance is not solely defined in religious terms. In an interview with Keija Parssinen (2020), Aboulela explains: "With regard to my writing, I found that with time my characters started to feel more at ease in Britain. They experienced homesickness less and less and started to behave as if they were citizens of the world". This development can be detected in Bird Summons but also in Elsewhere, Home as the analysis will show, and Aboulela's comment also justifies the present study.

In addition to her fiction, Aboulela has also written several radio plays. These include 'The Lion of Chechnya', a BBC Radio 3 play about Imam Shamyl (1797–1871), a religious and political leader, or Imam, of the Muslim people of Daghestan and Chechnya; 'The Mystic Life', an adaptation of a story from *Coloured Lights* for BBC Radio 4; and the original drama, *The Sea*

Warrior (also Radio 4). She has also written one short stage play, entitled 'Friends and Neighbours', which was performed in Aberdeen in 1998. Most of these plays are not published in print form, but *The Sea Warrior* can be found online at www.african-writing.com/aboulela.htm. Aboulela's fictional work has been translated into twelve languages. (Chambers, 2009:88-89).

Geoffrey Nash (2007) in his essay entitled 'Leila Aboulela: Islam and globalisation', gives a description of Aboulela's writing as one that is situated, as Nash (2007:138) states, "within the feminized space which may be said to operate between the continuing pressures of Western cultural imperialism and conservative, antimodernist cultural Islamism". Whether her protagonists identify with the Western culture or refuse it, Aboulela's narratives remain, as Hassan (2008) states:

> *Individualistic representations of the Arab Muslim woman's experience without being ideological, squeezed between the secular and Islamic worldview. What characterizes her writings is that they are concerned with the individual experience of the diasporic Arab woman subject and the way she negotiates this identity with the Western settings she encounters. What her fictional project accomplishes is the articulation in English fiction of an immigrant Muslim woman's worldview*.

2.2 Identity and Culture

The concept of identity is regarded as one of the most important concepts in contemporary literature. It receives the lion's share of diasporic and postcolonial writings. Identity is a key concept in the contemporary world. Since the Second World War, the legacies of colonialism, migration, globalization, as well as the growth of new social movements and forms of identity politics have put the question of identity at the centre of debates in the human and social sciences (Weeden, 2004:1). Moghissi (2006: XV) believes that identity "is about our relation with the 'others' who share our experience or values and those from whom we are differentiated because their experience

and values are different from us." Taylor and Spencer (2004: 4) regard identity as

> *a work in progress, a negotiated space between ourselves and others; constantly being re-appraised and very much linked to the circulation of cultural meanings in a society. Furthermore, identity is intensely political. There are constant efforts to escape, fix or perpetuate images and meanings of others. These transformations are apparent in every domain, and the relationships between these constructions reflect and reinforce power relations.*

Identity as 'psychologically regarded' refers to personal and group identification. Accordingly, "identity is concerned with self-definition, and the self is conceptualised as a fairly stable, internal identity that is rarely modified to fit the context". In fact, as Hetcht et al. (2003:6) state, "the self is a core sense of who one is. That is, you are who you are; shifting is indicative of a problematic, deficient or disengaged identity". Haraway (1991: 193) contends that "[t]he knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simple there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another." All identities have their 'others', as Weeden (2004: 19) assumes, from which they mark their difference, although the assertion of difference is often at the expense of similarity. "The 'other' is essential to the realization of self-consciousness" (Hegel, 1971:153) as cited in Weeden (p. 20).

Identity and culture are key issues in the post-colonial, post-modern literature. Weeden (p. 18) asserts that identity as a way of life "is made visible and intelligible to others through cultural signs, symbols and practices". As Stuart Hall contends that, "identity is shaped at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history and culture." Cultural identity is often defined, as Weeden (p. 102) states, in terms of "one shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the

many other, more superficial or artificial imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry held together". Therefore, cultural identity, judging by this definition, reflects the shared cultural codes and universal historical experiences which provide us, as one unified people with stable, "unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our cultural history" (Hall, 1990:51). To understand culture and society, poststructuralist theory maintains that the most fruitful way is to, as (Weeden 2004:26) contends, "see meanings, values, individual subjectivities and as produced within language and other signifying practiced and as sites of context between compelling interests". Weeden (p. 85) also sees identity as "[t]he desire to be from somewhere, to have a sense roots and a feeling of belonging are key features of the guest for positive identity in postmodern, post-colonial societies".

Similarly, Stuart Hall proposes that there are two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, a unifying one, i.e., common historical experiences shared cultural codes which provide us with fixed and unchanging frames of reference. The second position of cultural identity is that we undergo deep differences which determine what we really are (p. 38).

Christou (2006) finds identity in the individual person or object, and in the culture to which they belong. He (p. 35) believes that identity "is not static and unchangeable but varies as circumstances and attitudes change; and it is not uniform and undifferentiated but has several components and forms." Identity manifests itself in different forms; social, cultural, institutional, etc. Therefore, these forms of identity are often internalised by the individual who takes them on. This process can be seen through, as Weeden (p.18) contends "what Judith Butler has called 'performalitivity'. This refers to the repeated assumption of identity in the course of daily life". Identity in all its forms, even national identity, as Weeden (p. 20) states, "is never single but plural, fractured and reconfigured by gender, ethnic and class relations". Taylor

(1992) as cited in Spencer (2006:46) states that “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others. Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm can be a form of oppression imprisoning someone in a false distorted and reduced mode of being.”

A notion of identity that sees it as unified and fixed is no longer acceptable, and especially based on the views of poststructuralists, identity now is conceived as 'becoming' rather than 'being', evolving, and always in a state of being re-constructed. According to Spivak, identity is not predetermined but is multifaceted and variable. In Spivak`s words, 'there are many subject positions that one must inhabit; one is not just one thing' (Spivak 1999: 60). Hall is also against an essentialist model and argues for a discursive model of identity formation, in which discourses have a significant role in the construction of identity. As he (p. 4) states that, “identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions”. Hall sees a very close relationship between identity and representation. According to him (p. 4), “identities are … constituted within, not outside representation”. Identity is both the result of internal processes, such as self-reflection, subjective perception, and external circumstances such as the social environment (Peek 2005).

Identities in Hall’s (p. 6) view are “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us”. Being always in a flux, identities are made and remade and constantly negotiated in accordance with the changing circumstances of a certain era. A brief look into human history reveals how every era had its own concerns and concepts on the identity formation issue, which eventually produced a discourse that functioned as a reference point in relation to which identities are formulated. For instance, referring to beginnings of the twentieth century, Du Bois (2006) argues that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the

colorline, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea". While this sense of "being a problem" (Du Bois, p. 7) due to one's cooler is still very much relevant in many aspects, the grounds on which the experience of being referred to as a problem, "peculiar even for one who has never been anything else" (Du Bois, p. 8) has changed significantly towards the end of the century as a result of "margins coming into representation- in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in social life generally" (Hall, p.183). The cooler line of the twenty first century is not only a signifier of race, anymore. That is to say, in the twenty first century, Du Bois' color line has been transformed into a concept that has more to with representation, namely "the presence and circulation of a representation" (de Certau xiii). Being represented as the more recent debates embodied in Spivak's famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" manifest, is not the solution, as how and by whom one is represented inevitably determines the representation to the extent that a misrepresentation might become the currency, since "identities are … constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall, p. 4). Considering the importance of the interdependent relation between identity and representation, it can be argued that representation determines not only the way a certain group of people are represented and perceived by a certain audience, but also influences the mechanisms that shape an individual's perception of self and the other. Du Bois' double consciousness explains this situation as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (9), as a result of which "one ever feels his twoness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (ibid). This double vision or hyphenated identities, carries the history of this conflict, "this

longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (ibid).

To write of 'culture' in relation to Muslims at the present time is, inevitably, to invoke their silent but nonetheless defining Others, non-Muslims. It is also to enter a debate that can be characterized by a sense of creeping paralysis, (Ahmed et al 2012:2). Malak (2005:3) finds that "many Muslims regard religion as a key component of their identity that could rival, if not supersede, their class, race, gender, or ethnic affiliation".

Muslims, in the West, and culture are not always seen as synonymous. The attempt to make sense of what to take from their culture and what to leave behind, and what to take from the dominant culture and other subcultures and what to leave out, can be a particularly challenging everyday task (AKman, 2014:2). Muslim communities in modern western societies are often read through the lens of race and politics, filters that frequently cast them as silent objects or a problem to be solved. Literature offers an interesting counterpoint to challenge some of these stereotypical views (Ahmed et al, 2012:1). Malak (p. 3) sees identity as

> *a protean thing that is constantly being refashioned, and one's religious affiliations as a Muslim intersect with other signifiers - such as gender, socio-economic status, age and national origins – that assume various degrees of importance in different situations.*

After 9/11 incident, Muslims had witnessed a severe and continuous attack in the West. This change of attitude towards Muslims necessitated a move to establish "a new kind of Muslim identity in the Western societies (Ramadan, 2004:4). A new generation of writers from different countries such as the USA, Britain, Australia and some other countries had started making distinct features of their Muslim identities through literature. This type of literature had emerged as a reaction towards the needs of this young Muslim generation who were trying to remain faithful to the teachings and principles

of their own religion as well as to the Western societies to which they belonged and were deeply rooted in it.

With the publication of Salman Rushdie's, *The Satanic Verses* in the late eighties, the images of Islam and Muslims began to take a shape that has lasted up to the present. Inspired by Rushdie, a hero after Khomeini's fatwa, fiction, arguably, was used to assimilate British Muslims. Under this umbrella, writers have seemed free enough to image British Muslims as victims to a religion which cannot match with western values. Rushdie, Kureishi's *The Black Album* and Ali's *Brick Lane* present a similar depiction of Islam and Muslims supporting in the process their reputations for being brave enough to tackle this contentious topic. They articulate the message that Muslims should be more westernized, that Islam without essential renovation and Muslims without serious assimilation will remain uncivilized. On the other hand, the emergence of Leila Aboulela's fiction might be said to represent a turning point in relation to the depiction of Islam and Muslims in contemporary British fiction. Aboulela's writing challenges the stereotypical images created by Rushdie, Kureishi and Ali. In a sense, she attempts to give voice to those Muslims who for some times were depicted negatively in British fiction. Unlike those previous writers who attempt "to 'explain' or satirize Islam from a western perspective", she tries to, as Philips (2005) states, "write from inside the experience of growing up and living with a network of customs and beliefs". Writing from the inside, Aboulela has created a new image of Islam and Muslims; once the perspective is changed, the positions of the Self and Other do the same. In the first phase, Islam was the Other, but now, in the new phase, it is the Self. Writing about Islam and Muslims, for Aboulela, is writing about herself. The image of Islam is hers and in defending Islam she is defending her own beliefs. That is why, for of all she has written about Islam and Muslims, she can report, as Majed (2012:196-7) states: "I have so far written close to my autobiographical situation".

Saba Mahmood (2005) stands against the trend of downplaying Islamic revivalist movements as mere expressions of identity politics. For instance, she points to the common scholarly view that interprets *hijab* as an expression of resistance against Western politico-cultural domination but disregards any religious implications (Mahmood, p. 24). Nonetheless, many British Muslims, especially the youth, found a valuable resource and alternative forms of identification in "religion." There was a conscious effort to move away from ethnic and national identifications towards being defined first and foremost as Muslims. The *hijab* debates that dominated much of the discussion about minority women in the 2000s seem to have disappeared recently, replace by new debates about niqabs and burkas, veiling that fully covers women. On the other hand, Bhavnani et al (2003) cited in Moghissi (2006:171) states that although "nationalities may be defined as masculine, there is tendency to see culture as the domain of women, and an effective means of securing a sense of community and ethnic identity.

Zine (2007:116) asserts that "being a Muslim is not simply a label divested of any associations to the religion of Islam". Of course, not all people who have the identity label of Muslim are religiously observant. Ake Sander, for example, talks about There are four categories of people who are identified as Muslims according to Sander (1997): ethnic Muslims, cultural Muslims, religious Muslims, and political Muslims. An ethnic Muslim is one who considers herself Muslim because of her Muslim parents and ethnic Muslim background; ethnic Muslims are, thus ethnically but not religiously oriented. A cultural Muslim is one who acts and socializes according to her Muslim ethnic and cultural origins, so a cultural Muslim is also culturally but not religiously oriented. Religious Muslims are those who actively practice Islam and who believe in specific religious ideas; they are religiously rather than ethnically or culturally oriented. Finally, political Muslims are the ones who believe in Islam, but this belief for them is mainly used for socio-political

purposes (Sander, p. 187). Of course, Muslims can belong to more than one of these categories.

To retain a sense of wholeness, people assert only one of many possible identities which is tied to birthplace, to language, to community, to religion and to gender. Most recently, religious identification has taken on political significance in postcolonial Arab countries and religions construct transnational identities within virtual communities committed to values that transcend time and space. Historically, religions have played a key role in determining identity at both the national and the transnational levels and often assumed primary importance in indigenous self-identification, as Cooke (2001: xxi) states that, "Religion conferred or denied civic rights. A transnational identification became an ethnocultural affiliation that coincided with geography and history. In other words, religion was the key element in indigenous identity. . . . Islam served as a kind of spiritual, cultural nation, which then provided the site of resistance to the West".

Identity and religion are among the major components that contribute to shape identities of characters in Leila Aboulela' stories; self-definition is likely to be achieved through religion. It is by relying on religious faith that characters identify who they are, once separated from the major constituents of their identity including the geographical zone of origin, they start reconstructing their selves upon a religious principle which his (faith), for faith is a thing they can carry anywhere they go, and doing so in a diasporic periphery, means establishing a hybrid identity. The exploration of religious identity, mainly in the selected novels, is one of the key areas of focus in this thesis. Peek (2005: 216–217) states that, "Identity is generally used to define and describe an individual's sense of self, group affiliations, structural positions, and ascribed and achieved statuses". The question of identity in our contemporary world where culture clashes are a fact of life for many people has been one of the important topics of investigation in cultural studies and postcolonial criticism, and a number of theories about identity have evolved in

recent years. Baum (2006) argues that religious identity is important and meaningful in the lives of a great mass of people. He (p. 1077) contends that "it is a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for the agents who enact them". Malak (2005) defines Muslims' adherence to Islam as spiritual, theological, intellectual, and emotional. He (p. 152) states that "Islam, however one conceives it, commands affection even from its dissenters". He (p. 153) refers to Islam's values of justice and generosity, courage, and creativity, which give it "endearing and enduring loyalty", loyalty, he contends, "many outsiders miss, misunderstand or misinterpret".

In Diaspora, even though Muslim image is mutilated, Muslims and specially women, are involved in presenting and implementing Islamic faith in their daily lives. Cesari (2013:1) in "Religion and Diaspora: challenges of the emigration countries" explains that: "Muslim immigrants are more religious on the three accounts (prayer, religious attendance, and self-declaration) than other immigrants". Muslims have proved to be considerably active at the level of religious practices, for them religion and faith are substantial elements that has always been relevant to spiritual, personal, and social life.

2.3 Belonging and Place

Jeffrey Weeks (1990:88) argues that identity

> *is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. As its most basic, it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about social relationship, your complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become more and more complex…At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others*.

The absence of a clearly designated frame of identity manifests itself in the idea of rootlessness and unbelonging, an idea that gives an authentic

testimony to identity crisis. so, Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core of your individuality. But it is also about your relationships, your complex involvement with others and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing (Weeks, 1990:88 in Weeden, 2004:1). The theme of belonging and a search for roots have been raced with insight and received prolonged critical treatment in post-colonial literature. The individual's identity is not complete, as Krasner (2002:18) states, "without knowing one's roots". McDowell (2008:7) believes that "the return to the roots is an important mindset to formulate identity independently out of the effect of the other." Moreover, national identity is also defined, in Weeden (2004:20), "in an exclusive relationship of difference from others that is most often tied to place or lack of it. It is also linked to language, history and culture." He (p. 20) continues to confirm the role of history and tradition in the formulation of a national identity stating that "yet history and tradition have another tole to play: the interpellation of subjects and the inducing of a sense of identity and belonging. Individual constructions of identity are affirmed by seeing something of oneself and one's forebears in representations of history of the nation"

Moghissi (2006: xiv-xv) observes that the sense of identity often arises as reaction to an imagined or experienced threat to "a dignified sense of selfhood. It speaks to an individual's psychological need for a sense of belonging and a constructed connection to people who share one's values, or some parts of them". The question of identity and belonging was expressed in a number of novels (See Weeden, 2004:74-83). He also states (p. 81) that "These novels not only bring to life a little-known history, drawing on period source material, but also raise the complex question of culture and identity in [an] historical context". Fictional characters express the values and

experiences that affirm identity and identification. Weeden (2004:62) sees fiction as:

> *an important medium for exploring questions of identity and belonging. ... through processes of empathy and identification with fictional characters, novels life stories and other such texts can initiate the development of new forms of identity for readers. They are important sources of ways of understanding both contemporary society and history, and serve as repositories of social and cultural values.*

Diasporic people are often concerned with the obsession of roots that lead them to think of the place from which their forebears originally come and sometimes even for an original, authentic identity (Hall, 1990:56). Weeden (2004:86) states that "Part of the appeal of that other place to which diasporic people look for their roots is often the belief that, there, one would not be treated as different or as an outsider". Mercer (2002:43) states that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty." On the other hand, "The absence of a clearly designed frame of identity" Weeden (2004:3) states, "manifests itself in the idea of *rootlessness* and *unbelonging*, an idea that gives an authentic testimony to identity crisis". However, Spenser (2006:44) states that, "culture is also prone to reification and correlates, at times, closely to more physical attributes. And as Frederickson (2002:169) states, it is "difficult in specific historical cases to say whether appearance or 'culture' is the source of the salient differences because culture can be reified and essentialised to the point where it has the same deterministic effect as skin colour."

Entrikin (1991) as cited in Christou (2006:42) emphasises that

> *Place serves as an important component of our sense of identity as subjects. The subject's concern for this sense of identity may be no different in kind from that of the geographer, in that the*

> *geographer's aim of accurately representing places can also be tied to concerns for social action and cultural identity.*

Place in post-colonial literature does not simply denote a geographical location. Apart from the physical surroundings, place also represents a non-material environment which comprises sounds and scents, legends and beliefs, manners, and customs. In fact, there are places which are only spiritually present in people's lives. Even so, they have a considerable impact on the individuals' sense of selfhood. I argue that place acts as a catalyst for the protagonists' development of self and is central to their search for identity. By exploring the various facets of place, I will show what effects this multi-layered concept in post-colonial literature has on the characters. On the other hand, migration is a phenomenon which has brought about unprecedented changes not only in the movement of peoples but also in their identifications, which, although negotiable, are at the same time intimately and ultimately connected to the notion of *place* (Christou, 2006:15). She (p. 35) also contends that "It is not just the identity *of* a place that is important, but also the identity that a person or group has *with* that place, in particular whether they are experiencing it as an insider or as an outsider" (italics in the original). It is also notable that Brah (1996) has coined a term to be added to diasporic study and place. She argues that the study of diaspora can be seen in what is known as 'diaspora space'. Brah (p. 181) contends that:

> *Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It addresses the global condition of culture, economics and politics as a site of 'migrancy' and 'travel' which seriously problematizes the subject position of the 'native'.*

The identity of the diasporic imagined community, as she (p. 181) states, "is far from fixed or pre-given" because it is constituted within the crucible of everyday experience; in the daily stories "we tell ourselves individually and collectively".

2.4. Diaspora and Postcolonial Literature

Diaspora is related to the Greek gardening tradition referring simply to the scattering of seeds and implying some description of dispersal. The etymology of seeds and sperm as carriers of both culture and reproductive capacity is central to this description of diaspora. The expulsion of Jews and their subsequent exile to Babylon has become one of the central Jewish cultural and political narratives. Nevertheless, the association of the term 'diaspora' with loss or exile or some sort of suffering has meant that the Jewish experience was seen as the prototype diasporic experience. Diaspora, as Moghissi (2006:3) contends, "means loss and dispersion as a result of forcible displacement of people from countries or regions defined as their cultural and historical centres". The classical form of diaspora, then, relates to forced movement, exile and a consequent sense of loss derived from an inability to return. It is noted that it is only through the work of African studies scholars in the 1960s that the term 'diaspora' comes into academic use, and this is specifically in relation to the Jewish and African experiences. Forced exile creates a sense of belonging for home when diasporas feel it difficult or even impossible to return home. The displacement of people as asylum-seekers and refugees also brings with it the difficulty of returning home.

The notion of exile common to most diasporas is historically a formative experience in shaping Muslim identity. In the Islamic context, the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina that marks the beginning of the *Hegiran* calendar is a period during which the model of Islamic citizenship is laid down with specific guidelines for migrants and their host community. Sardar (2011:159) argues that in the Quran migration is seen as a 'beneficial exercise'. It is not an escape from oppression but is a necessary pursuit of knowledge. More generally migrants and refugees are looked at favourably as those who add to the economy and intellectual capital of the new home. Thus, travel and exile have been, from the start, essential

components of the Muslim sense of self (Ahmed et al 2012:9). The term exile here means people in diaspora who have fled their homelands to seek refuge and protection elsewhere. Diaspora, on the other hand, is not limited to any particular historical period in that we have examples of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial diasporas.

Robin Cohen's 'Global Diasporas' (1997), builds upon the framework developed by William Safran (1991) to provide a list of conditions which, when satisfied, allow for the application of the diaspora label. He spends a lot of time describing groups of people, their movement, their subsequent settlement, and social engagements. Another framework is offered by Steven Vertovec (1999), as cited at Cohen (1997), who approaches the subject of diaspora not so much through the categorization of peoples, but with attention to the ways that multiple meanings of diaspora are generated through ethnographic work. From his work in Trinidad and Britain, Vertovec offers three definitions as types:

1 diaspora as social form;

2 diaspora as a type of consciousness; and

3 diaspora as a mode of cultural production

Diasporas, as they have been studied in the humanities and social sciences, incorporate refugees, migrants, guest workers, expatriates, the exiled and self-exiled. For Muslim diasporas, whether in the US or the UK, there is a complexity in the formation of identities which can be seen to structure themselves in distinctive ways. Moghissi et al. (2009:8) define the key factors in diasporic formations to be inclusive of an 'internal configuration' that incorporates 'ethnicity, nationalism, culture, language, sectarian and class diversities' as well as the significant 'external characteristics' of the host society such as "immigration and settlement policies, political system, social, economic and cultural development". They suggest that when these internal and external factors come into play, they can lead to a polarization of positions resulting in an 'us' and 'them' divide between the western and the

Muslim worlds. This in turn leads to a heightened sense of separate Muslim identity in the diaspora, which need not always be a reflection of an increasing turn to fundamentalist religious belief, but instead is part of a reaction toward a negative scapegoating of Muslim individuals and societies. In short, Ahmed et al (2012:9) contends that "Muslim diaspora is recognized as articulating a minority discourse underwritten by the historical experience of an Islamic civilization and defined around ethnic identities". While a substantial Muslim diaspora in Britain began to form in the second half of the twentieth century, especially with the post-Independence flow of migrants from the Indian subcontinent, Muslims from all walks of life had been arriving in Britain from its former colonies and protected territories for centuries. This situation leads Britain to be a multi-cultural society and, as Weeden (p. 23) states, "one of many societies in which the question of cultural and ethnic diversity, multi-culturalism, nation and identity have come to the fore in the recent years". One of the concerns of this study is to find out how migration affects the identity and culture of characters. Hague, in Daily Telegraph of October 3, 2000, felt proud and expressed positive attitude towards the newcomers. Weeden (p. 37) states that "together we have created one of the most exciting, diverse, prosperous, democratic and tolerant nations on earth". Also, in an article in *Sun* of October 11, 2000, the writer contends that Britain "has a proud record of fairness and tolerance". He adds "It is home to people from around the world who fled persecution or seek to better themselves". No wonder that this allegation is tested and found contrary to the fact after the 9/11 attack which marked a turning point in the treatment of Muslims and the idea of Islam. Moghissi et al (2009:23) asserts this by stating that, "[t]he events of 11 September 2001 worsened this situation, as it subjected Muslims and peoples from the Middle East and Islamic countries to intensified racism and Islamophobia". Al Maleh (2009) sees that "Arab students, who were mostly the products of missionary and foreign schools that were flourishing in the Middle East, began trickling into British universities or seeking

employment on British soil. Al Maleh (p. 6) also believes that many were the subjects of cultural colonialism; "imbued with love of the language of their education, fascinated by the English life-style reflected in their textbooks, reared in and formed by Western norms and values". She (p. 6) proceeds to give a shocking fact that these students "yearned to express themselves creatively in the language of the 'superior' Other and to internalize the 'Other' in every possible way". Awad (2011:15) has a different idea about the role of language in this context. He sees that the language enables, "the writer to gain world audience and yet produce a culturally distinct, culturally appropriate idiom that announces itself as different even though it is 'English'".

Diaspora, as a complex social process, is characterized by two major elements. The first is a homing desire and a need for 'home' and belonging that occupies a central place in people's daily lives and identities (Akman 2014:109-10). The second is the formation of a collective identity and collective actions around issues of home(land) and community formation. Awad (p. 15) contends that, "the works of post-colonial writers are nevertheless often mis/used within Western academic circles and popular culture machinery". During (1995) cited in Spencer (2006:122) states that "[p]ost-colonialism is regarded as the need, in nation or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts or images.

Ashcroft et al (2002) contend in their seminal work "The Empire Writes Back" that "more than three- quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism". This life shaping experience was conducted not only through a physical practice, but also through a "textual exercise" of the empire (Boehmer p.14). For this reason, the literature produced both in colonial and postcolonial eras is highly informed with the knowledge and the experience of living in and after an empire, understanding of which as argued by Suman Gupta in Contemporary Literature: The Basics (2012) can facilitate the perception of the world we live

in and reflections of it in contemporary British literature. British Empire as Boehmer puts forward in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literatures* was also a textual practice, expressing colonial settlement, metaphor of travelling, politics of possession textually through diaries, administrative records, memoirs, reports, letters and of course literature. Both colonial and colonialist literature, though the former might seem more innocent compared to the latter which is, as Boehmer (p. 3) states, "written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them" resulted not only in empire's expansion and self-justification politically, but also contributed to creation of a world that is divided into two, as East and West; the West being the superior, rational, protective, civilizing party, overwhelmed by "The White Man's Burden". Ashcroft et al also assert that during the imperial period, literature in the language of the colonizer was produced by the literary elite who identified themselves with the colonizing power; hence produced texts that were representative of colonial power. Even though such works were about a native community and narrated the experiences of the colonized peoples, they still privileged the center, "emphasizing the 'home' over the 'native', the 'metropolitan' over the 'provincial' or 'colonial', and so forth", mainly to "hide imperial discourse within which they are produced" (ibid). Given these noteworthy aspects, defining the postcolonial literature only as this literature which is produced after the collapse of the empire is to undermine its extent and scope. Boehmer defines postcoloniality as "that condition in which colonized peoples seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world", and separates it from the hyphenated word post-colonial, which implies temporality and refers particularly to the period beginning with the 1950s, as former British colonies began to gain independence. Based on Boehmer's definition, this study takes postcoloniality as a condition seriously affecting the lives of displaced immigrants as reflected both in *Minaret* and Maps for Lost Lovers, through characters who are coming from ex-colonies, Sudan, and

Pakistan, and now trying to define an identity position for themselves as exilic subjects located in the colonial center.

2.5 Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonialism is a contested term; the difficulty of defining which arises from the problematic and challenging issue of defining difference without undermining diversity and the potential for solidarity. Moore- Gilbert et al.'s definition of the term reiterates this idea while at the same time warning against the essentialist approaches and attitudes. Postcolonialism, Moore- Gilbert et al assert, is "not a question of choosing, but of negotiation and transgression", and thus what it promises is "a way of deconstructing, or negotiation of the difference between consent and descent".

Ashcroft et al identify four critical models that have shaped postcolonial literatures: First one is the 'national' or regional models which underline distinct qualities about a certain culture. Second is the race-based models that identify shared characteristics of different national literatures, an example of which is black writing. Third one is comparative models, which look for particular linguistic, historical, cultural features in two or more postcolonial literatures. Fourth are the more comprehensive models that seek for characteristics such as hybridity, which is a prevalent theme in the postcolonial works produced today. As these four different models have evolved over time, postcolonial theory, too, underwent gradual transformations. From the 1980s onwards, postcolonial criticism has taken a more interdisciplinary shape, as it made use of other theories such as post-structuralism, feminism, diaspora criticism, new historicism, and eco-criticism both thematically and methodologically. For instance, Spivak, bell hooks and Homi K. Bhabha are the cases in point. Spivak's renowned essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she extends the term subaltern which she borrows from Gramsci, to include the "Third World," particularly the female subaltern who is doubly in shadow, is a significant intervention, as it criticizes not only the discourses that create the subaltern, but the postcolonial critics themselves

who think it their right to speak for the subaltern, without questioning their own positionality. Consequently, from the 1980s to the present day, postcolonial literature has changed, as Boehmer (p. 225) "from national bonding to international wanderings, from rootedness to peregrination" as "many writers' geographic and cultural affiliations became more divided, displaced, and uncertain". Boehmer (p. 227) sums up this condition as follows:

> *In the 2000s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an 'extra-territorial', then a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'Third World' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, she or he works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national, ethnic, or regional background*

As Boehmer (p. 230) further articulates, literature produced by such writers is a literature that is "*necessarily* transplanted, displaced, multilingual, and, simultaneously, conversant with the cultural codes of the West: it is within Europe/America though not fully of Europe/America" (original emphasis). The novels narrate the painful state of displacement through foregrounding the binary opposition between the East and the West, to expose how postcolonial subjects longing for belonging negotiate British Muslim identity positions. While postcolonial condition as defined by Boehmer is a feature that profoundly characterizes the whole atmosphere, there are some other issues emerging from the novels, in dealing with which postcolonial literary theory might remain inadequate. In the first place, as argued by many critics such as Wail S. Hassan, Amin Malak, Gayatri Spivak and Kenan Malik, and partially expressed by Boehmer in the above extract, postcolonial theory is intrinsically Eurocentric. Secondly, more related to the purpose of this study, as Malak argues, it is highly secular. Malak believes postcolonial literary theory involves a "marginalization of religion as a force or factor with its own complex dynamics that reflects privileging a secular, Europe-

American stance that seems to shape the parameters of postcolonial discourses". Even though, in Fredrick Jameson's (1986) view, religion still holds an important place in the lives of many people, shaping their experiences of immigration, even becoming the most solid identity marker with which immigrants identify.

Postcolonialism refers to the long-term influences of some European powers on the regions they formerly colonized. The term is intended to look at the broader interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized by dealing with issues such as identity (including gender, race, and class), language, representation. Every culture uses signs and symbols to represent concepts, ideas, values, and feelings (Hall, 1994), and history. Wail Hassan (2002:46) believes that "postcolonial studies profess to make the balance of global power relations central to its inquiry yet seems to inscribe neocolonial hegemony by privileging the languages … of the major colonial powers, Britain and France". Majed (2012:3) argues that "Islam is among the first to benefit from postcolonial theory". He adds "[t]he writings of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, which provide the solid foundation of postcolonialism, include many of the themes and ideas that Islam calls for". In Majed's work, it is found that Fanon criticizes racism and colonialism and calls for equality and freedom. Moreover, Fanon pays more attention to the psychological aspects of colonialism. On the other hand, Said, in Majed' work, writes about Islam paying a special attention to the cultural aspects of colonialism. Majed (p. 3) states that "Fanon's psychologically and Said's culturally oriented writings aim at freeing the colonized people from the inside so as to enable them to feel and think independently".

Amin Malak (2005), Anouar Majid (1996) and Wail Hassan (2002) have written about the complicated contemporary relationship between Islam and postcolonialism. Malak refers to the "oddness" of the relationship. And while Majid seems to prefer the Islamic alternatives to the postcolonial ones, Hassan calls for the theorizing of the postcolonial limitations and horizons.

Malak (p. 17) in his book "Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English", contends that, "it is odd that 'postcolonial theory' cannot offer insights about the activism of Islam, despite the fact that one of its seminal texts, Edward Said's "Orientalism" … is prompted and permeated by a challenge to the colonial representations of Islam as biased constructions whose corrosive corollaries are discernible today in multiple insidious fashions across diverse domains of power". In fact, Malak thinks that postcolonialism fails to take religion into account due to its secular stance. He (p.17) believes that postcolonialism involves a "marginalization of religion as a force or factor with its own complex dynamics [which] reflects privileging a secular, Europe-American stance that seems to shape the parameters of postcolonial discourses". The limitations of postcolonialism in relation to Islam are discussed by Anouar Majid (1996) in his article "Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak? Orientalism and the Rushdie Affair". He (p. 7) thinks that although Islam is a major part of the Rushdie affair, postcolonial critics' knowledge of Islam is very limited. Hassan (2002:51) adds to that point that "postcolonial theory seems sometimes to deploy a sort of reverse Eurocentrism. The almost complete reliance on the western tradition of anti-humanist critique of metaphysics has meant that the 'non-western' *Other* remains inaccessible and unknowable". It is noteworthy that "postcolonial theory is a production of imperial power, meaning British and United States academics, and is therefore self-serving in its agenda (Hall, 1994). Postcolonial literature, as Childs (2005:280) states, "has brought to the British novel ... new styles and Englishes as well as new issues such as decolonization, diaspora, and cultural diversity". One of the debatable and most controversial novels that set critics into two extremes is Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* because relationship between Islam and postcolonialism was challenged after the publication of that novel (Majed, p. 4).

The interest in Islam both in daily life and literary domain, occurred as a result of the processes which Nilufer Gole (1996) describes as decentering

of Europe appearing co-terminus with re-centering of Isla. According to Gole, postcolonial and post bloc forces are having significant transforming effects on Europe. Through masses of Muslims practicing Islam in secular European spaces in visible ways, public performance of Islam comes under scrutiny. That is to say, today, Islam cannot be marginalized and exempted from the public space, and its presence causes Europe to question its own positionality. Regarding the presence of Muslim actors in secular European spaces, Gole further maintains:

> *That newcomers and foreign-born individuals enter the same physical spaces (schools, cities, and so on) without sharing the same values and narratives can antagonize native-born Europeans who lay claim to anterior status and hegemony over a time-space matrix. This matrix as it governs European public life, is not a neutral, value-free structure that is open to all, but is rather restrained by the disciplinary powers of secular modernity. The confrontation with Islam brings forth and exposes these tacit rules and regulations and thus opens up the doxa of European ways of being-in-public to debate.*

As the debates around issues such veiling, gender discrimination and freedom of expression show, even if the aim might be to contain the visibility of Islam, there is still emerging a zone of contact in which Europe is stepping out of its hegemonic apprehension in an effort to understand Islam and Muslims, who are now inhabiting European spaces. In other words, with the re-cantering of Islam in public debates, Europe is becoming decentred, as a result of which it will be possible to think "beyond" Europe, and thus challenge the binaries through a reversal.

There has been an increase in the number of Arab women writers who write in English over the past thirty years. Some of them are academics who have decided to live in Britain or in the US after completing their postgraduate degrees like Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir and Laila Lalami. Others, like Diana Abu-Jaber, Susan Muaddi Darraj and Laila Halaby, are daughters of Arab

immigrants who settled in the US. Academics such as Geoffrey Nash, Layla Al Maleh and Rasheed El-Enany have produced analytical articles and books about the Anglo-Arab encounter and the voices of Arab writers (males and females) in diaspora. Anastasia Valassopoulos, Lindsey Moore and Amal Talaatal Abdelrazek have written specifically about Arab women in the Middle East and in diaspora. These publications have placed the works of Arab writers within carefully contextualized frameworks and have examined in detail the socio- and geopolitical cultural contexts that encapsulated the productions of these writings.

2.6 Previous Studies

Aboulela's writing has, as far as the researcher can tell, received relatively little critical attention. Although limited, the response from critics, literary prize boards, and research students has been varied and diverse, reading her as an Arab, Muslim, African, or diasporic woman writer. The researcher was able to identify a few writers who criticised and evaluate Aboulela's works, mainly *Minaret* and to a lesser extent 'The Translator'. Four books discussed topics and themes related to *Minaret*. The first book discussed, among other things, transnational feminism which is manifested in *Minaret*; the second also discussed feminist postcolonial criticism in *Minaret*; the third dealt with migrants' sense of home portrayed in *Minaret*, whereas the fourth cast light on Islam and Muslim identity in four Contemporary British Novels, among which is *Minaret*. These books are described below:

1. Layla Al Maleh (ed.) (a book). (2009).

In this book, Marta Cariello writes an article entitled "Searching for Room to Move: Producing and Negotiating Space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*". Cariello states that "the first two lines of Leila Aboulela's '*Minaret*' opens with 'conjure up two of the fundamental themes articulated in the novel: movement ("I've come own") and space ("a place where the ceiling is low"). Marta contends that the movement from Khartoum to London marks 'one life literally stops and replaced by a completely different one. The

Minaret as a religious symbol is clear and visible and reassuring as the ceiling of a house of sense and self, as Najwa contemplates, "I look up and see the *Minaret* of Regent's Park Mosque visible above the trees". Religion as the place for identity formation is very interesting and undoubtedly fundamental theme in '*Minaret*'. Religion thus becomes a 'place' in the sense that, following David Harvey, places are constructed and experienced as material artefacts. The writer contends that religion is, in this sense, dispersed, transitional, interconnected, and global and yet constitutes a local, always and – if not individually- constructed and experienced place. The writer believes that De Certeau's viewpoint 'offers the key for tracing of unstable (social) borders that build the space in *Minaret*. Space, she contends, is produced, performed, and experienced by members of different groups within society through diversified cultural discourse. She believes that Najwa's space becomes religious space. She contends that Aboulela performs a space through the construction of London as the inclusive s[ace of dislocation. She also contends that the city of London in *Minaret*, a space where the rhythm of migrant moving, working, searching for, and reconstructing a home, hearing the call for prayer, leading a parallel social life, intrudes in the urban fabric of the city.

Najwa is employed as a house cleaner and a babysitter. In this household, the migrant, working class woman negotiates her sense of 'home'. The 'kitchen' is also regarded as one of the privileged places. As Lidia Curti states, "the workplace offers a space for nostalgia… a sort of involuntary substitution'. The domestic kitchen is seen as both intimate and socially significant space although 'the kitchen' as seen by Janet Floyd, 'remains the site of dirty work of transhistorical, transcultural symbolic meaning". The writer concludes that, 'in the end, Najwa will find her own 'place' in a renewed spiritual identity.

2. Yousef Awad (2011). (A thesis)

The second chapter of the thesis has the title ‘Arab British Women Writers and Transnational Feminism: Fruitful Dialogues? The witter chooses one of Leila Aboulela’s novels, *Minaret*, to introduce the issue of feminism under the subtitle “An Oxymoron Demystified: Islamic Transitional Feminism in Aboulela’s *Minaret”*.

In comparing Arab British female novelists to their Arab American counterparts, the writer agrees that there is “a tendency among Arab British novelists to for ground advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification strategies in a more pronounced approach…” (p. 5). The writer also contends that the works of Arab female writers, quoting Amal Amerih, “are manipulated to meet the expectations and assumptions of western writers” (p. 15). He also reiterates that the interest of the West in the works of the Arab female writers is due to their interest in Arab women as part of its interest in and hostility to Islam.

Awad contends that Leila Aboulela’s engagement with feminism is clearly informed by Islam. Comparing Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* to another Arab woman writer’s novel *The Map of Love* of Ahdaf Soeif, he believes that both novels foreground ‘cross-ethnic and trans-cultural alliances’. Those two writers “uphold boundary-crossing and seeking common ground for transnational dialogue” (p.147). He contends that the novel, *Minaret*, presents Islam as the basis for a feminist movement which the protagonist, Najwa, to fight off the anonymity of being a migrant in Britain (p. 150). He also argues that the novel highlights the dilemma of uprooted Muslim woman who has slipped the social ladder in a capitalist society. He asserts that *Minaret* presents practical example of what “an Islamic feminist movement is capable of offering its adherents to subvert capitalist forces of hegemony” (p. 151). The novel also portrays how Islam provides a ground for feminist solidarity and support network. Awad, quoting Cooke, contends that Islamic feminism “does not describe identity, but rather an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women” (p. 151). Awad contends that *Minaret* can

be seen as performing an Islamic feminist standpoint, based on Cooke's statement, that Islamic feminists link their religious, political, and gender identities to "claim simultaneous and sometimes contradictory allegiances" (p. 153). He also believes that Aboulela's fiction endows women with the power to resist and transform certain lived experiences through their Islamic faith. He also contends that Leila Aboulela, in an interview, has said that '*Minaret*' is intended to be a kind of Muslim feminist novel, and girly and womanly as well. He concludes that *Minaret* draws the reader's attention to the fact that religion overcomes language barrier and paves the way for solidarity, friendship and coalition among women (p. 172).

3. Firouzeh Ameri (2012). (A thesis)

Ameri states that Obsession with Islamic terrorism perhaps parallels obsession with Muslim women's veil in the West. A Muslim woman's veil both disgusts many Westerners and arouses their pity as we will see in "*Minaret.* As a result of negative attitudes toward Muslims in the West, they become the targets of racist attitudes and behaviors. Iconic Muslim symbols such as *hijab* and mosques have been controversial issues in various European countries.

Chapter Five of the thesis focuses on two novels by Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005). These two novels introduce the most Islamically-orthodox principal characters and the most orthodox views about Islam and Muslim identity. She contends that these novels "mainly write back to Western discourses through depicting the centrality of Muslim identity in the lives of Muslim women and how they represent experience with Islam as much more satisfying and nourishing for the main characters than their experiences in the secular realm." (P. 19). Nevertheless, she criticizes Aboulela's "all-too-positive representation of Muslim culture, experience and communities, and her not engaging with the complexities, contradictions and/or problems that Muslim women face in their understanding of and dealing with their Muslim identities and/or communities." Aboulela's two

novels delve into the lives of Muslim women in the West, offering insights difficult to find in Western hegemonic discourses. The novels thus invite Western readers to reconsider Muslim women's lives in light of these narratives, and to witness the tensions and complexities inherent in these women's experience of Islam. Ameri argues that "the discourses about Muslim women that these memoirs embody are not really very different from dominant Western discourses that stereotype Muslim women." (P. 40). Through the discussion, the researcher argues that Aboulela's fiction suggests that Muslim identity can be so central to Muslim women's lives that it 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 Islam-centered lifestyles and experiences and denaturalize secular experiences for Muslim women." (P. 96). Undoubtedly, such stereotypical representations of Muslim identity are especially opposed to those Western representations which suggest Muslim identity as imposed on Muslim women and a Muslim life as one from which women from Muslim backgrounds wish to escape. The novels also naturalize a devout Muslim lifestyle and identity, denaturalize secular experience, and emphasize the centrality of religion in the well-being of Muslim women through showing how living a religious life can be satisfying, nourishing and energizing to the characters. Ameri (2012) contends that these two novels suggest the salience as well as the positive effects of religion in Muslim women's lives. The researcher states that "the rootedness of Muslim identity and the 'naturalness' of a Muslim way of life for Muslim women have been suggested in Aboulela's works by the narratives' depictions, in an almost unprecedented way in English literature, of the states of mind, the minutiae of lives and experiences of devout Muslim women with religion." (P. 97). The narratives depict a devout Muslim life as spontaneous and joyous for Muslim women through the way they represent various positive effects on their lives and the experiences they enjoy.

4. Hasan Majed (2012). (A dissertation)

Majed contends that after Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses', some writers, namely, Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali, in their novels 'The Black Album' and 'Brick Lane', respectively, are encouraged to image British Muslims as victims to religion which cannot match with western values' (p. 196). Those writers propose that Muslims should become more westernized, that Islam without essential renovation and Muslims without serious assimilation will remain uncivilized (p. 196). The writer contends that the emergence of Aboulela's *Minaret* "might be said to represent a turning point in relation to the depiction of Islam and Muslims in contemporary British fiction. That is, her writings challenged these stereotypical images made by Rushdie, Kureishi and Ali (p. 196) because these writers adopted the western perspective of Islam. On the other hand, Aboulela represented a woman who, as quoted by Majed from Philips (2005), "writes from inside the experience of growing up and living with a network of customs as beliefs". Thus, creating a new image of Islam and Muslims. The writer stated that Aboulela's portrayal of Islam and its relationships with the West, does not only challenge the western image but also the eastern ones (p. 170).

The writer, quoting Sethi (2005), states that "instead of yearning to embrace western culture, Aboulela's characters seek solace in their growing religious identity" (p. 170). It could be argued that Aboulela's family and education play an essential pole in shaping the western side in her personality (p. 198).

Aboulela felt free in London where she gained the opportunity to decide for herself without outside influences. This feeling contradicts with the fact that as an educated female author, she wears the *hijab*, which is seen, in the eye of the western civilization as a image of the oppressed woman in Islam (p. 199). Writing three novels, at the time of the writer carried out his research, and a collection of short stories, the writer contends that Aboulela "attempts to negotiate the controversial issues between Islam and the West in

the present world" (p. 201). The topic of Islam is always present in her writings.

The writer argues that Aboulela is successful in two things: the representation of issues concerning Islam and Muslims in the West and building a constructive spirit which attempts to facilitate better understanding of both cultures: the Eastern and the Western (p. 202). the writer, quoting Wail Hassan's (2008) beliefs that Aboulela's fiction emerged at the same time as "the Islamic resurgence that has attempted to fill the void by the failure of Arab secular ideology of modernity" (p. 203).

The writer contends that the complete image of wearing the *hijab* is divided between her two novels: *The Translator* and *Minaret*. There is an attempt, in *Minaret*, to represent the hidden side of the picture of Islam by focussing on Islam's capacity to effect self-realization and spiritual consciousness in an individual (p. 214). Regarding postcolonial perspective of Islam, *Minaret* can be read as a reaction to the depiction of Islam and Muslim women in colonial discourse (p. 215). The writer argues that "the strong affiliation to Islam demonstrated by Aboulela is a postcolonial act. "She 'writes back' to the western centre making visible those marginalised Muslims who are frequently subject to malignant prejudice (p. 216).

Minaret is written to refute the stereotype of Islam as a religion of violence and oppression to women (p. 220). The portrayal of the *hijab* is a clear example of Aboulela's attempt to challenge the colonial assumption regarding the position of women in Islam. The writer contends that "one of the postcolonial features of *Minaret* is the rejection of the superiority of western culture (p. 222). Islam is also portrayed in *Minaret* as a global religion, postcolonial idea, due to its implication of the capacity of Islam to compete with western culture and limits its global domination (p. 223).

The writer concludes that *Minaret* resists colonialism identity. He states that "since culture is the field of battle, *Minaret* resists the assumed inferiority of Islam and the assumed superiority of the West" (p. 225).

5. Christina Phillips (2012). (An article).

Phillips contends, in her article, that *The Translator* belongs to a body of work, "variously referred to as 'Muslim fiction', 'Muslim Narrative', 'Muslim Immigrant fiction' and similar epithets, which explores Muslim experience in a globalized world for the benefit of an English-speaking audience". The novel is particularly concerned with deconstructing some of the stereotypes that prevail in Western Mass Media. Some Muslim writers, she contends, have attempted to bridge the gap in understanding between the West and Islam by creating ordinary Muslim characters "neither fanatical in their faith nor repressed by it, undergoing everyday trials and tribulations and negotiating issues of identity in a transnational context". She states that "In addition to the central action of the novel - the evolving love story between Rae and Sammar- several secondary actions and episodes serve to promote Islam as a way of life". Challenging much contemporary gender discourse, the main character tries hard to preserve gender roles that, in the West as, indeed, in much of the Muslim world, are considered outdated, she contends. The researcher concludes that "the variety of themes at play in *The Translator*, besides the over-arching religious one, clearly enriches the reading experience". The novel as the researcher finds, fulfils *complexity*, *intensity* as well as *unity*. (Italics are original)

6. Esra Mirza Santesso (2013). (A book)

The book, as the writer states, is an 'attempt to address the gap' that is set by some scholars to warn the West of the danger of the 'influx of Muslim immigrants to England,' assuming that 'this hostile populations' represent a threat to the British society and that it endangers the core values of European identity' (p. 2). The book studies the challenges of 'British Muslims a s a vial form of identity for those immigrants- particularly women- who imagine themselves as "traditionally faithful but desirous of fitting in with secular western life" (p. 2). The writer focusses attention on a new generation of authors who investigate various configurations of the Muslim women in

Britain. The book also attempts "to complicate the discussion of gender and immigration by adding religion as a significant component of postcolonial identity for the displaced women, whose spiritual choices are often misread as purely political" (p. 5).

Chapter 3 of the book analyses Aboulela's '*Minaret*' and engages with feminist postcolonial criticism. Whereas chapter 2 and 4 discuss three different authors and their selected novels: Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane', Fadia Fagir's 'The Cry of the Dove', and Gamilla Gilbb's 'Sweetness in the Belly'. Santesso asserts that some critics are "sensitive to and suspicious of the secular feminist argument that Muslim women can only gain their rights by distancing themselves from faith and culture, are perhaps too quick to celebrate Najwa's conversion" (p. 92).

A great part of chapter 3 is dedicated to Najwa's decision to embrace the veil. For Najwa, Santesso contends, who is in an alien space in London, "the full dress of the *hijab* is a marker of her separation from London culture and her commitment to a Muslim identity" (p. 94). Najwa's disorientation is inspired by her inability to resolve her issue with power. Her only solution is to move to the other extreme. She embraced a religious identity that demands humility and modesty. She also associates 'power' with 'veil' (p. 100). He contends that Najwa is not a subaltern subject- since her initial class position, social standing and educational background disqualifies her from such identification- she chooses to act like one: she adopts the 'silence', the 'invisibility' and the marginalization of the subaltern subject (p. 101).

The writer concludes that Aboulela neither criticises patriarchy nor advocacy for female empowerment through Islam. The writer believes that Aboulela's depiction of Muslim female subjectivity fails to present a vial alternative to the western colonialist discourse and ultimately restores the very conjecture it seeks to dismantle (p. 106).

7. Alghamdi, Alaa (2014). (A paper)

In a published paper, Alghamdi (2014) refers to the challenges and impediments that face female postcolonial writers. She contends that those writers "face multiple obstacles in expressing authentic viewpoints to a multicultural world, yet, despite having to face down racial, cultural, and gender-based privilege, they repeatedly meet the challenge of devising new forums of identity and voice in which nothing can be taken for granted." (p. 23). In the importance of translation, as she takes Aboulela's *The Translator* as a domain of her paper, she states that "translation is the dynamic through which cultural differences are spanned and communication occurs; however, the nature of this communication is not immediately transformative." (P. 24). A translator is needed to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap. Nevertheless, "[t]here are aspects of culture and religion that cannot be translated or accurately transmitted from one culture to the other." (P. 25). So, in order to ensure understanding and initiate communication, one should attempt to transfer them "wholesale". She states that "The essence of cross-cultural communication, then, is not translation, but multiplicity and the willingness and ability to enter into multiple norms." (P. 27). Alghamdi contends that "Aboulela's character [Sammar] bravely attempts to build bridges where none exist, and in so doing she continuously strives to perform a thankless and ultimately largely fruitless task." (P. 25). A love story, as *The Translator* reveals, culminates in the marriage of Rae and Sammar, who have two different cultures. Alghamdi states "the cross-cultural marriage, unless it involves assimilation into the western culture can be read as an affirmation of multiculturalism, of the hybridity between cultures, and of "new blood" coming in from across borders and boundaries to supplement existing strains." (P. 30)

Alghamdi concludes that Aboulela would have written such a narrative today, even following the hardening of polarized opinions and viewpoints regarding Islam and the West in the post-9/11 era. Indeed, one might argue that such narratives and their ability to 'translate' cultural biases, in the broad

sense, are needed more than ever to address the Islamophobic campaign wildly launched in the aftermath of 9/11.

8. Koç, Nesrin (2014). (A dissertation)

The researcher takes '*Minaret*' as a representation of a novel that shows 'a very monolithic and closed understanding of religion.' She contends that although 'liberal, secular authors seem to be dominating the literary scene and thus determining the representation of British Muslim identities, reading '*Minaret*' … shows how British Muslim identities are in fact nuanced, complex and fluid.' She states that "*Minaret*' represents a challenging perspective through offering counter narratives to these "traditional accounts;" and thus reversing the binary oppositions between the West and the East, center and margin through reverse migrant stories, characters who feel neither confined nor oppressed, but liberated through *hijab* and a love story that has faith in Allah at its center. Aboulela deals not with God, heaven, theological questions on a metaphysical level because she prefers, perhaps the easier, yet more relevant way, and writes about how religious faith is experienced by common people in their everyday lives. She quotes Ghazoul who expresses "what makes [Aboulela's] writing 'Islamic' is not religious correctness or didacticism. Rather, it is a certain narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living". Islam in Aboulela's novels, she argues, functions a "socio-psyhic tranquilizer" that makes it possible for the person in exile to overcome the trauma of migration and other losses. Islam provides meaning and order in a world that is otherwise governed by chaos. While the motto of the day is chaos and fusion, Aboulela's characters reject the promises of chaos for an orderly life. Life regulated around faith and rituals facilitates the process of integration into Britain, but significantly not through positioning the subject as a British citizen but through negating the signifying power of any national identity marker. She concludes that 'Najwa depicts how in contemporary Britain, Islamophobia is as prevalent as, perhaps even more than color racism, and how in multicultural, multi-faith London, Muslims

experience hostility, and how they are forced to negotiate between their Muslim and British identities as attachment to the former is regarded as a barrier to the total loyalty to the latter.'

9. May Raad Al-Abed & Nadia Hamendi (2018). (A paper)

The research deals with *The Translator* as an implicational example of Islamic feminist theories and its most important ideas. The analysis of Sammar's character, her life, and her relationship with other characters helped in discussing and combining all these perverse issues of labeling, Islamic feminism, and western control, through providing relative examples from the novel to support the discussion. Also, supporting the analysis of the text is three of the most important theories in the field of literature and research: power relations, deconstruction, and the other theory. The researchers contend that Aboulela successfully blended the twin issues of power and labeling that greatly affected the identity of Arab/Muslim women. Sammar, being herself a part of this classification, whether in her job as a translator, her origin as an Arab and Muslim, her gender as a female, and even in her seemingly inappropriate relationship with Rae, expresses her frustration with labels saying that "In this country [England] everything was labeled, everything had a name…". (1999, p. 4). In relation to labeling the researchers state that Aboulela also includes in her discussion a male character, Rae, who is a Middle-East historian and a lecturer on Third World Politics, to give another example on labeling the East. Even though he was not a Muslim, nor a believer in God, yet he was referred to as an Islamic expert, "a label that changes government policy and public attitude toward those that come under its umbrella." They conclude that Aboulela intelligently succeeded in portraying and recreating an identity for Arab/Muslim women through her prose, on all the feminist, ideological and literary levels. She succeeded through her balanced narrative style to leave an Arab/ Muslim mark in the western literature and at the same time transfer what she wanted them to see about the ability of Arab women to overcome all the imposed western labels,

and all through a modern and balanced intellectuality that expresses a great desire to establish an independent identity.

10. Amrah Abdul Majid. (2019). (A thesis)

The aim of this study, as the researcher contends, is to explore how religious beliefs, rituals and practices shape the personal growth of the leading female character in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. She states that "contrary to the general understanding of Islam as a restrictive religion, particularly for women, its rituals and practices can more properly be understood as tools for achieving self-actualization and self-improvement." The novel presents a female protagonist who puts Islam, its teachings, and practices, at the core of her individuality. The woman carefully performs religious rituals, such as praying, fasting and the wearing of the *hijab*, on a regular basis.

The researcher argues that *The Translator* carries a deeply spiritual undertone that marks the central position of Islam in the protagonist's life as she subscribes loyally to religious actions in her quest to overcome the challenges of life and love. What makes this novel different from most other Western romantic fiction is Aboulela's central deployment of Islam and its practices through her protagonist. The researcher argues that Aboulela presents an alternative insight into the idea of romance, where desire for one's would-be partner is pushed aside in order to adhere to one's religious observances. Sammar's problem with their romance does not stem from her being a Muslim but rather, from Rae being a non-Muslim. The researcher concludes that the title of the novel itself suggests a reflection of Aboulela's attempts to translate Islamic faith and tradition, not only so as to be understood by non-Muslim readers but also to be situated as an alternative insight into Western perceptions of romance. on the other hand, painting Sammar as a committed Muslim, Aboulela highlights the much more important relationship that Sammar tries to maintain and improve - the relationship with God.

11. Asma Benguesmia and Oumbarka Refice. (2019).

The dissertation explores how Hybrid Identities are constructed in relation to Muslim Faith through Leila Aboulela's two selected novels, *The Translator* (1999), and *Minaret* (2005). The two literary works depict Muslims' quest for identity in western Diaspora, the construction of hybrid identities in the framework of Islamic religion and the role of faith in this process. The study offers another perspective of identity construction since it discusses hybrid identity formation with the interference of a significant religious element: Muslim faith. It also stresses the influential relationship between religion, faith and identity. The selected novels are studied thematically; the study makes recourse to the theory of hybridity in postcolonial studies by Homie Bhabha and in cultural studies by Stuart Hall.

In Diaspora Muslims prefer to identify themselves by their Islamic faith considering Islam as an important foundation of their spiritual as well as daily life. In the international literary scene, Anglophone fiction has highlighted issues of this type, many novelists have become concerned with reflecting in their works social issues of Diaspora, migration, and ethnic minorities. The state of diasporic Muslims in the western world is one of the most intensively explored topics of the twentieth century literature, chiefly in British fiction. Leila Aboulela's selected novels has helped the reader explore hybrid identities rising in paradoxical spaces within western locations, the emergence of this kind of identities is deeply connected to the individual religious faith. This drives the readers to meditate in the narrative representations of Muslims in Diaspora. However, the research aims at highlighting the details the author has elaborated in order to depict the formation of hybrid identities in relation to religion, and faith sustaining in intercultural atmosphere. The study concludes that it can be affirmed that Leila Aboulela's selected novels; "*The Translator*" and "*Minaret*", have provided a detailed exploration of hybrid identities, and the role of Islamic faith in shaping these 'mixed entities'. Aboulela has portrayed Faith as an integral part of a person's identity, in the

case of Muslims, religious faith is more than a mere tool of identity representation, it is a lifestyle, an ideology and a law.

Leila Aboulela's literary works, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, have successfully attracted wide attention from literary critics; however, there are not many works dealing with both of the novels and reading them as examples of British Muslim Fiction. Most critics and researchers wrote about Aboulela's novels tackling topics such as feminism, the veil, hybridity, subalternity, cultural identity, Islam and Muslims by taking one novel as a basis of scrutiny. Nevertheless, the present research is carried out to discuss some topics and themes in two novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, asking questions about place (belonging), culture, identity, and language. In Ameri (2012) and Benguesmia and Refice (2019) studies, they discuss *The Translator* as well as *Minaret*. The first study investigates the iconic Muslim symbols, and the animosity Muslims receive due to the practice associated with these symbols whereas the second study discusses hybrid identity formation in relation to Muslim faith. The studies conducted by Phillips (2012), Alghamdi (2014) Abdul Majid (2015), and Al-Abed & Hamendi (2018) discuss *The Translator* from different perspectives. Phillips explores the variables that might be used to determine the cognitive and emotional force of religious fictions, which Leila Aboulela exploits for dramatic effect in *The Translator*, whereas Alghamdi contends in her study that the 'cross-cultural' marriage at the end of the novel affirms multiculturalism and hybridity between cultures. In Abdul Majid's study, the researcher investigates the protagonist's religious practices that should be directed to God for the salvation of oneself and the accomplishment of one's pity since a life that is completely devoted to God is a life that can never disappoint. Al-Abed & Hamendi studies, *The Translator* is discussed from an Islamic Feminism perspective. On the other hand, Awad (2011), Majed (2012), Santesso (2013), and Koç (2014), study *Minaret*. Awad's study coincides with Al-Abed & Hamendi study since both studies discuss *The Translator* and

Minaret from an Islamic Feminism standpoint. These studies grasped Aboulela's statement, who, in an interview, declares that she regards her novel, *Minaret* to be "a kind of Muslim feminist novel, and girly or womanly as well." Chambers (2009:99). On the other hand, Majed's study looks at *Minaret* as a criticism of the secular discourse that undermines Islam in the East and the West, while, at the same time, it endeavours to place Islam in a stronger position in its dialogue with the West. Santesso discusses Najwa's decision to wear the *hijab*. The researcher contends that the gesture, Najwa's wearing the *hijab*, is a sign of escape to conceal the physical being in "a defeatist way". Koç (pp. 36-7) contends that Aboulela's literary work inserts Muslims into British Fiction to hint that religion can be the best alternative to face Western hegemonic social and cultural values, for it organizes social life and "subordinates other markers of identity such as gender, race, and class, and becomes the dominant tenet of identity that renders the others irrelevant".

2.7 Conclusion

The studies which are conducted to discuss Aboulela's literary works tackle various postcolonial issues each from a different perspective. This shows that the author's fiction is a fertile terrain that is open to diverse interpretations. Aboulela, in a dominating Western stereotyping landscape tries to represent Islamist discourse which seek to dominate and control her women characters. Moreover, these studies which are written mostly by Muslim women are significant to portray Muslim women's struggles against patriarchal or colonial forces, an experience these women, more or less, undergo. In other words, the thrust of the works are anticolonial and/or feminist, in the mainstream understanding of feminism as upholding the rights of women against the rule of the patriarchs. There are legitimate concerns on the Western side since some practices such as patriarchy and female oppression are peculiar to their secular societies which have a predominant Muslim population, let alone colonialism which has afflicted suffering in the

lives of Muslim women. In most of the literary works about female Muslims in diaspora or in their homelands, the label of 'Muslim' has been taken as a cultural attribute, and a Muslim woman in them is to be understood as a woman from a Muslim background and Muslim culture. 'Muslim' as a religious designation does not come out as especially significant in almost any of them. With the setting of most of the works being in Muslim countries, perhaps the Muslimness of the characters, with its religious significance, does not really stand out as important compared to other issues, such as the fact that they are women oppressed by colonialists or patriarchs. However, these characters are still most often and most conveniently referred to as Muslim women.

The researcher believes that Islam today and Muslim identity, especially in the West, face major challenges. One of these challenges is the degradation of Islam by Muslims who claim devotion and yet perform horrendous terrorist acts, which are taken by the Western media and publishing industries to create negative images of Islam and Muslims. Another challenge is the modern life complexities and the flux of social media with its diffusion of information; this challenge necessitates that Muslims should evaluate their religious identities and experiences against different discourses and ideologies to which they are exposed. Therefore, religious identity should be renewed and redefined, a burden which is laid upon female Muslims since they are viewed as the most vulnerable link in this circle. Aboulela, in an interview with Eissa (2005), clearly refers to her intent in writing back to such representations: “I started writing more or less as a reaction against the Gulf War and the anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the media”.

The researcher also believes that some novelists fail (intentionally or unintentionally) to express the real essence of Islam and fail to show how Islam gives the freedom of choice to a Muslim man or woman to decide. Islam as a religion carries morals and teachings to a better live in this world

and in the hereafter. It also sets the best path for the believers to take. Nevertheless, some Muslim extremist groups who hold Islamic dedication, interpret the religious texts to suit their ideological and fanatic thinking thus, they stigmatize Islam with their violent deeds and outrageous reactions.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

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3.0 Introduction

It is necessary for the researcher to know not only the research methods/ techniques but also the methodology. Researchers not only need to know how to develop certain indices or tests, how to calculate the mean, the mode, the median or the standard deviation or chi-square, how to apply particular research techniques, but they also need to know which of these methods or techniques, are relevant and which are not, and what would they mean and indicate and why. The scope of research methodology is wider than that of research methods. Thus, when we talk of research methodology, we not only talk of the research methods but also consider the logic behind the methods we use in the context of our research study and explain why we are using a particular method or technique and why we are not using others so that research results are capable of being evaluated either by the researcher himself or by others.

The researcher adopts the analytical descriptive approach to find similarities and/or differences between two novels of Leila Aboulela, which are *The Translator* and *Minaret*, in relation to place, culture, and identity. On one hand, descriptive research is used to obtain information concerning the current status of a phenomena. The purpose of this method is to describe 'what exists' with respect to situational variables. The steps which are taken to perform this method ranges from stating the statement of the problem, identification of information, selection or development of data gathering instruments, identification of target population and sample, design of information collection procedure, collection of information, analysis of information and generalization and/or predictions. On the other hand, analytical research uses existing information to explain a complex

phenomenon or to perform a critical evaluation. The identified hypothesis can be accepted or rejected depending on the analysis; from experience the hypothesis can be redefined. It summarizes and evaluates the ideas in historical research for accessing both witness and literature sources to document past events. The descriptive-analysis method of research describes a subject by further analysing it.

The Translator was published in 1999 by Grove Atlantic, New York; the number of pages is 203. It consists of two parts: part one is fifteen chapters, part two eight chapters. *Minaret* was published in 2005 by Grove Atlantic, New York; the number of pages is 276. It consists of six parts. Part one is set in Khartoum between 1984 and 1985, the events of part two take place in London in 2003, part three takes place also in London and goes back to the year 1989 and 1990, part four opens with the Eid Party in the mosque and takes the reader to the years 2003-4, part five is in 1991; it witnesses the development of relationship between Najwa and Anwar as well as the Gulf War as an important, whereas part six ends in 2004 and depicts Najwa's devotion to Islam, more reassured about her religion and faith in Allah.

3.1 Data Collection

This research employs primary data which are collected from the chosen literary works of Aboulela, *Minaret* and *The Translator*, to compare and contrast, in addition to secondary data which are available in books, journals, articles, and websites.

3.2 Research design

The research consists of five chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the introduction of the research, the second is the literature review, the third is the research methodology, and the fourth is the study analysis; the fifth is devoted to the conclusion, findings, and recommendations.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion and Analysis

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Discussion and Analysis

4.0 Introduction

Leila Aboulela's two novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), are about Muslim Arab immigrant experience in Britain. This chapter discusses these two literary works, which portray cross-cultural encounters and the complexities of living in the secular West with different, non-Western, ways of knowing and thinking. In order to delve into issues of migration, Aboulela confronts Orientalist and Islamist hegemonic discourses which both stereotype and predetermine the Muslim woman in particular ways. Aboulela presents narratives of complex negotiations of identity which turn to Islam for affirmation in order to free up a space for her female characters, in which Western stereotypes have no signifying power, in which cultural memory is validated and incorporated into the present. Islam provides the characters with a frame of reference, regular rituals (especially the daily prayers) and a community of believers, and the narratives often refer overtly to these aspects of Muslim identity and practice. Migration is a phenomenon which has brought about unprecedented changes not only in the movement of peoples but also in their identifications, which, although negotiable, are at the same time intimately and ultimately connected to the notion of place. The absence of a clearly designated frame of identity manifests itself in the idea of rootlessness and unbelonging, an idea that gives an authentic testimony to identity crisis.

This chapter considers both female protagonists to be part and parcel of a displaced experience that is far more complex than the simple choice of west over east paradigm. Islam is seen as a shaping social force in the lives of practicing and non-practicing Muslims is used to shed light on Muslim

women migrant experiences as the complex product of multiple factors with the cultural encounter with the West as one of these factors. The resultant distance from home brings with it a certain scrutiny with which the past is assessed and incorporated into the present. The displacement of transcultural writers, such as Aboulela, forces them to revisit their culture of origin by questioning their relationship with their body, faith, rituals, and languages. In Aboulela's texts this revisiting happens by affirming the culture of origin in nostalgic memories which are stirred by an unfamiliar environment in Britain. Longing and belonging, nostalgic yearning, to a place is also discussed. This sentiment of loss and displacement which represent a key factor to establishing an identity could also be described as essential phase in the process of identity negotiation and formation. In Aboulela's fiction, the strange, and fragmented world of exile is countered by nostalgic dreams of rootedness and cultural tradition, which stem from the culture of origin and are fueled by sensual memories of a youth spent in the Sudan. The chapter also depicts the characters adherence to religious sites and the decision to wear the veil as a visible marker of an identity and an important symbol in the search for self-understanding. The *hijab*'s 'inner quality' is the focal point of the characters' conscious choice to hold on to it not just as a marker of identity but also on a deeper level as a reminder of commitment to Islam. The chapter explores how both her religious and cultural backgrounds, represented through the *hijab*, and her position within the Australian community, affect this advancement of the self at communal, spiritual, and moral levels. Religious rituals, particularly the performance of prayers, recitation of the Qur'an, and fasting during Ramadan, are used to overcome the previous sorrow and grief that the protagonists have suffered. These protagonists find comfort in the structures of these actions and view their adherence to them as a connection to God who helps shield them from further depression. It was her faith in Islam that provides strength to Sammar throughout the novel whether it was her husband's death or when Rae was not willing to convert. Najwa's

commitment to Islamic principles and her solidarity with other Muslim women has rescued her from a state of loss and despair. Moreover, it is the universality of Islam and not ethnicity or nationality that becomes the major defining element of Najwa and Tamer's relationship. Cross-cultural encounters and freedom are also discussed in relation to the available space of decision making in the absence of a patriarchic system. Cultural encounters and ensuing complications, particularly the challenges of remaining a practicing Muslim woman, function as an important thematic inspiration for both these novels. In this context, Aboulela develops the social relation between lovers to a bond of marriage in order to align with the concept of "Halal fiction" which arises from her Islamic vision of male-female relationships. It is not Islamic to have friendship between males and females, and a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim unless he converts. So, the Islamic logic of the narrative necessitates Rae's conversion to Islam to facilitate the happy ending of the romance.

4.1.0 The Two Novels: Plot and Analysis

The Translator and *Minaret* are two important literary works, written by Leila Aboulela, which depict Muslims' diasporic journey and immigrants' experiences in the western world, specifically in Britain. The phase between the publications of the two novels has been a critical point in the history of Islam relations with the rest of the world. Muslim image has faced deformation and misrepresentation, which ignited negative stereotype affecting therefore the lives of thousands of Muslims living in the West.

Aboulela's female protagonists, in the two novels, carry the burden of confronting the West. Najwa and Sammar both attempt to reach compatibility with the western community and seek to co-exist within the opposing environment avoiding prejudice to both their Islamic identity, and to the identity of the other. In this context, the characters are involved in a process of making up an identity that suits their choice even though the odds are against them.

Identity construction and reconstruction has long been a debatable field of research in literary criticism. However, studies that have been conducted cover a large number of issues within identity, including its nature as well as the conditions and factors that contribute to shaping this identity. Interestingly, Aboulela novels' have been subject to debate because they have covered themes and issues that have an eminent influence on the making of principles underlying societies that know the emergence of minorities and complex individual's identities.

Aboulela builds a unique representation of Muslim women in the west who do not embrace Western culture or attempt to find a middle ground to rest there. Her female characters, rather, seek solace in their firm religious identity. In portraying a powerful, independent, and moderate character for Muslim women, Aboulela distinctively combines between the love of God and the love of man and at the same time presents an example of balance and moderation in how these women preserve their beliefs.

Arab women novelists write about Muslim woman's struggles against Islamic custom and male oppression, establishing the feminist theme as an inter-text but Aboulela swims against the tide and open up new vistas between Muslim female and Islam. Cultural encounters and ensuing complications, particularly the challenges of remaining a practicing Muslim woman, function as an important thematic powerhouse for both these novels. In her narratives, religion has the power to heal the fragmentation and alienation experienced by Muslim women in the western societies.

I argue that Aboulela's fiction suggests that Muslim identity can be so central to Muslim women's lives that it 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 Islam-centered lifestyles and experiences and denaturalize secular experiences for Muslim women. Such representations of Muslim identity are especially opposed to those Western representations which suggest Muslim identity as imposed on Muslim women and a Muslim

life as one from which women from Muslim backgrounds wish to escape. Aboulela's works, in showing the rootedness of religion in the lives of many Muslim women, thus fill a gap in Western representations of Muslim women.

4.1.1 *The Translator*

Aboulela's novel *The Translator* (1999) is a narrative of a Muslim woman's personal struggle between love and religious commitment in an environment full of sadness and loss. *The Translator* tells the story of Sammar, a young British-born Sudanese Muslim widow living in a self-imposed exile in Aberdeen after the death of her cousin husband, Tarig who had been killed in a car accident in Aberdeen - where she once lived with her husband and their son, Amir- four years ago. She returned to Khartoum with Amir hoping of starting afresh but a quarrelsome life with her mother-in-law led her to leave her son behind in Sudan and return to Scotland. To support herself in Aberdeen, she works as translator of Arabic texts into English and is employed by Rae Isles, a twice-divorced Middle Eastern and Islamic political studies scholar at the University of Aberdeen. Sammar and Rae fall in love over one Christmas break, as their loneliness leads them to share intimate and personal stories with each other. Sammar, gradually, becomes hopeful that Rae will convert to Islam so that they can get married. Despite Rae's understanding and interests in Islam and his love for her, he expresses no interest in becoming a Muslim. This is a problem for Sammar who, as a devout Muslim woman, believes that a believer cannot marry a non-believer. However, Yasmin, Rae's Asian British secretary, doubts Rae's conversion to Islam for it will cause him professional suicide, as she calls it. Despite her insistence, Rae refuses to convert to Islam, so she ends the relationship. Consequently, Sammar resigns from her job and decides to return Sudan. In Sudan, her mother-in-law, Mahasen does not show any affection towards Sammar because before leaving for Scotland, Sammar and Mahasen had a dispute over the issue of Sammar's re-marriage. Being lonely and alienated she wanted to get remarried but due to her mother-in-law's objection she left

her son with her mother-in-law and went to Scotland. This time, when Mahasen finds that Sammar has come to settle down permanently and has left her job, she avoids Sammar. On the other hand, Sammar also confronts poverty, disorder, political corruption, starvation, and wars in Sudan, and eventually realizes how privileged and lucky she has been. Apparently, she begins to understand the Islamic values of compassion and benevolence and reviews her relationship with Rae. She discovers that she wants Rae to convert for his own advantage and this becomes a turning point in Sammar's attitude towards him. She abandons her personal aspiration and prays for him to convert to Islam for his own salvation; this claim will be refuted within the coming discussion. The complexities faced Sammar are resolved when Rae converts to Islam at the end of the novel, which Aboulela carefully highlights as a conversion done out of his own decision instead of the result of Sammar's influence on him. The novel therefore focuses on Sammar's devotion to her beliefs, which allows her to undergo a self-transformation by finding meaning and focus on life, and to translate Islam, its practices, and experience to the man that she loves.

Aboulela presented the binary of the white male savior and the helpless Arab/Muslim woman and replaced it with Rae's character, a conflicted man in terms of his religious beliefs, his identity, his look and attitude. These qualities made him a questionable subject as a hero and more a representative for the theme of identity loss. Sammar, on the other hand, is presented as a character with religious maturity, intellectual independence, and moderation, making her the more appropriate character to play the role of the savior hero. Rae can be viewed as an example of the civilized Western male that saves Arab women from ignorance and backwardness. That is to say, the mission/missionary has been deployed to shoulder the burden of the white man: educate and civilize the 'barbarians'.

4.1.2 *Minaret*

The plot story told in *Minaret* begins with Najwa's life in Sudan's capital, Khartoum. Starting with a prologue titled "*Bism Allahi, Ar- rahman, Ar- raheem*", a praise to Allah, which might be translated as with the name of Allah almighty, the first part of *Minaret* is set in Khartoum in the years 1984-5 and depicts Najwa's life before the 1985 coup that will irreversibly change everything in Najwa's and her family's life. In Khartoum, her rich family maintains a Westernized way of life and traveling abroad on holidays has been their regular schedule. Her house is a grand one looked after by six servants. Her father is a high-ranking government official and very close to the president of Sudan. Being a daughter of upper-class Westernized Sudanese family, Najwa's focus drops on pop music, western clothes, and parties. She studies at the University of Khartoum.

Najwa and her family do charity work, fast in Ramadan and enjoy the atmosphere, but none of them prays regularly nor wears the *hijab*. However, the flashbacks narrator Najwa presents to the reader lay bare how her experience with her surroundings at Khartoum University reveals the anxieties she was having about her position as a secular female elite girl while most of the students were practicing Islam, through their dresses, veils and praying habits. While she wore miniskirts because everyone around her did so, referring to this "misspent past," she says she felt uneasy wearing them. She often refers to how she felt there was something bothering her when she saw the servants of the house waking up early to pray in the morning while Najwa and her family were not praying even when they were already awake returning from a night out. As the 1980s political upheaval emerges, her father is arrested and later executed for embezzling government money, while the rest of the family members- her brother and mother- is put on the next plane before the airports are closed and sent to London where they live in exile for some time to escape possible dangers. Coming to London, Najwa faces a series of catastrophes: her brother is arrested and sentenced to a long

imprisonment due to drug related offences and stabbing a policeman, and the only remaining link to her past, her mother suffers long sickness and dies.

Najwa's troubles extend when she meets her former lover Anwar in London, who is brought to UK by another coup in Sudan. Even though Anwar's accusations towards Najwa's father continue all along and break Najwa's heart, Najwa continues the relationship. While Najwa changes into a religious person in London, the self-professed left activist Anwar continues to remain a very irreligious person to whom *hijab*- wearing women are "disgusting" and "depressing". Despite establishing an intimate relationship with Anwar, she realizes that Anwar is not honest and has no intention to marry her. Having understood this, she gets the courage to break up with him. For the first time, she and her brother feel that they are alone and helpless amid crowds of London city, when they get to know that their father is executed, and his assets are confiscated. She then re-discovers the beauty of her faith in Islam when she encounters a group of women at the Regent's Park Mosque. As time goes, her love and allegiance to Islam increases. She finds peace and solace in her faith in God. In the meantime, she has become a housekeeper for a rich family. Her employer, Lamya, a PhD student with a mixed heritage of Sudanese and Egyptian and young mother with a daughter, who lives the life Najwa once enjoyed in Khartoum. However, things take a different turn as there develops a love interest between Najwa and Lamya's young brother Tamer.

The second part of the novel is about the change Najwa undergoes after embracing Islam. She becomes a practicing Muslim and starts wearing *hijab*. Thus, the female world she is introduced to in Regents Park Mosque, activities such as daily readings of the Qur'an, daily prayers, first of all help Najwa retrieve the lost bonds with Khartoum while at the same time provide her with the sense of belonging, and she had been longing for as a lonely immigrant woman in London. The religious space helps her to breathe peacefully with satisfaction, as she says; "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 ..." (p.74-5).

At the end of the novel, Najwa agrees to break up with Tamer and accepts the money Tamer's mother Doctora Zeinab offers to her in return for Najwa's leaving Tamer. As the novel closes, Najwa is seen in a state of fever, sick with love, yet hopeful everything will be all right as Allah is looking after her, and she will go to *hajj* with the money she received.

The researcher examines literary representations of the religious lives of fictional devout Muslim characters. Nevertheless, no claim is made to judge the competence of Islamic knowledge, or the degree of belief the characters have. Thus, the light is shed on the subjective interpretation of religious identity and its manifestation in Muslim lives and how these notions are represented in literary genre. Although the protagonists present different ways of defining and practicing Islam, other issues are negotiated such as love, affection and respect for the beliefs, the sacred texts and spirituality of Islam. The main characters show emotional attachment to their faith, its symbols, and its rituals as well as exercising self-independence in a secular environment.

The feeling of peacefulness of mind is related in the narrative to the protagonists' being religious and devout. The narratives show, especially using free indirect discourse, how religious beliefs are there to console them at the most critical moments in life. Speech is presented in a form of free indirect discourse which, as Rimmon-Kenan (2002:110) states, is "grammatically and mimetically intermediate between indirect and direct discourse". In free indirect discourse, therefore, there may be, as (Rimmon-Kenan 2002:110) states, "the co-presence of two voices, the narrator's voice and a character's pre-verbal perception or feeling". Free indirect discourse can have different thematic functions within the fictional texts: it can enhance the 'polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes'; it is a

convenient vehicle for stream of consciousness because of its , as Rimmon-Kenan (2002:113–114) states, "capacity to reproduce the idiolect of a character's speech or thought … within the narrator's reporting language", and assists the reader "in reconstructing the implied author's attitude toward the characters involved

To the protagonists, God is a loving protective being with whom they feel secure. This is shown in the narrative through the language they use when thinking about God, a language that ever reflects intimacy and security. The language which is used for expressing such feelings in the novels is similar. Visceral or poetic language and stream of consciousness techniques are variously used to articulate spiritual moments for whose expression prosaic language is shown to be inadequate. The emotional attachment that Muslims have to their religion, represented through the selected novels, can also explain why and how Islam has inspired literary creations such as the novels discussed here.

The writing style which is used by Leila Aboulela revolves round the sound of words, the subtle word choice and diction, in addition to word combination. She uses different types of rhetorical devises and figures of speech to evoke emotional responses in the readers. The function of rhetoric is to direct readers towards a particular point of view or a particular course of action, to dye the situation with emotive changes and to provide a rational argument for the frame of view or course of action. The rhetorical devices as a literary technique used to achieve specific effects: to create an artistic diction full of flavor, rich in taste and smell, and to convey to the readers a sense of incongruity. Some of these rhetorical devices relate to the sound of words to create musical effects. This literary device gives the effect of unpremeditated multiplicity, of an extemporaneous rather than a labored account. Aboulela's style has a sense of integrity which manifests itself in unity of ideas and unity of writing in terms of cohesion and coherence. Coherence comes from

thinking about the sequence and integration of ideas, whether one is writing or speaking. (Albashir and Alfaki, 2015; leech and Short, 2007).

4.2.1 Place as Home: Longing and Belonging

Aboulela started to write so as to eliminate her anxiety and overcome her feelings of homesickness when she moved to Scotland with Tarig, her cousin and husband, and it is Aberdeen which provides the setting for much of her early fiction. Hopkins and Gale (2009:23) contend that home is a place that is both lived and imagined, with material characteristics and symbolic significance. "Experiences and understandings of home are likely to be underpinned by social differences, such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, sexuality etc., and to vary with social, political, and cultural contexts". Home is a theme that dominates most of Aboulela's narratives and no wonder that it is one of the themes that can be discussed in the two selected novels. British Muslim female subjectivities, Mohammad (2005:180) contends, are not simply rooted in a religious identity but are produced across 'a matrix of discourses', ranging from the Western secular to the Islamist. Women, she argues, select from these to combine values and ideals of womanhood in the process of renegotiating a sense of self, whether this be in the context of the workplace, the neighborhood, or the home.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela expresses this aspect of Islam, showing that Sammar's faith is also a connection to community and landscape. Despite Sammar`s decision to go back home to experience the belonging and attachment of which she is deprived in exile, following Rae`s refusal to convert, she is confused regarding her feelings toward home: "[A]ll she had now was reluctance and some fear" (*The Translator* p. 95). However, the first thing that Sammar yearns to do is to join her people in a group prayer at the mosque, which links her with spirituality and the faith that is rooted at home:

> *When she stood her shoulders brushed against the women at each side of her, straight lines, then bending together but not precisely at the same time, not slick, not synchronized, but*

> *rippled and the rustle of clothes until the foreheads rested on the mats. Under the sky, the grass underneath it, it was a different feeling from praying indoors, a different glow. She remembered having to hide in Aberdeen, being alone. She remembered wanting him to pray like she prayed hoping, for it. The memory made her say, Lord, keep sadness away from me* (pp. 155-6).

This scene is disrupted by the hostility Sammar suffers at home from her family, particularly her mother-in-law and her aunt, Mahasen. This animosity is quite similar to the situation she has witnessed in Aberdeen. This shows Sammar's inability to bring her nostalgic dream to reality. It is at this point in the narrative that the nostalgia for the left-behind place of the exile changes to become a longing for a different life. This new life is centered around faith and Sammar's union with Rae rather than the absence of home in its geographical sense, suppressing feelings of nostalgia:

> *"I thought you were homesick," he finally said, "and this anti-terrorist project would be a chance for you to go on to Khartoum, see your son. Maybe I made a mistake in suggesting it…" "It wasn't a mistake. I was homesick for the place, how everything looked. But I don't know what kind of sickness it would be, to be away from you."* (113)

When Sammar travels to Khartoum to visit her family, the image of the nurturing home cannot be maintained, and the reader is left with the fragments of her earlier nostalgia: "She thought of going home, seeing home again, its colors again and in spite of years of yearning, all she had now was reluctance and some fear" (87).

Sammar's self-identification and de-alienation in her homecoming is exemplified in the following passage:

> *Her homesickness was cured, her eyes cooled by what she saw, the colours and how the sky was so much bigger than the world below, transparent. She heard the sound of a bell as the single, silly light of a bicycle lamp jerked down the pitted road. A cat*

cried out like a baby and everything without a wind had a smell;
sand and jasmine bushes, torn eucalyptus leaves. (146-47)

Sammar realizes that "her life was here", at her home country, where her son lives. She is no longer a stranger, alone, and alienated. She has decided to forget about Rae, "the sun and dust would erode her feelings for him" (160). She intended to ignore "the bottle of perfume he had given her", and "pull his words out of her head like seaweed and throw them away" (160). Instead of loving Rae, "she fell in love with Amir", who became the focus of her life (163). For the first time in her life, she yields to the social norms. In short, Sammar "was rarely alone. Almost never alone" (163). Besides, her homecoming "serves as a prelude to Rae's soul-searching, which will lead him to his own "leap of faith": from his secular, professional involvement with other cultures, to a more private commitment and immersion in faith" (Dimitriu 2014:77).

The attempt to cover past and present, reality and dream fails, the text questions restorative nostalgia: "Is this homecoming a potential solution for a nostalgic longing for a home?" It is a question that can be answered by shedding a spark of light on Boym's point of view. Boym (200: xiv) points out that nostalgic love for a place "can only survive as a long-distance relationship", and that when images of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life are forced together into a single image, "it breaks the frame", meaning that homecoming shatters the nostalgic dream of the past, i.e., nostalgic dreams abroad fall apart.

Sammar's longing for Sudan, which she refers to as home, is mainly attached to the idea of Tarig. While this portrays her desires to relive those happy days, leading her to mainly remember the young version of him "like the elderly who remember the distant past more clearly than the events of the previous day" (22), it insinuates that she views Sudan as home only because of the memories she has of Tarig. Home, therefore, is a vague concept- an existential and psychological element rather than a physical and spatial one, or

"a mythic place of desire" (Brah 1998:192) that leads to the feeling of "homing desire." It simply feeds on Sammar's desire to belong, which is a feeling that is highly connected to the sense of familiarity and comfort that comes with it. For Sammar, then, the idea of home brings about emotional attachment and personal relationships- particularly with that of her deceased husband.

The return to Khartoum also allows Sammar to face the mother-in-law who has caused her to run away from Sudan and from Amir, her son. This is not an easy task as Mahasen remains critical of Sammar's attitude and finds fault with everything that she does. Mahasen blames Sammar for the death of her son, and she expresses this with looks of resentment and an attitude of contempt:

> *'You killed my son,' Mahasen had actually spoken those words out loud...*
> *The denial stuck in Sammar's throat.*
> *'You nagged him to buy that car... day and night and he sent for money.'*
> *Sammar shook her head. She hadn't known... that he was short of money, that he had asked his mother. 'He didn't tell me,' she said breathing through the fear, the fear that her mind would bend, surrender to this madness, accept the accusation, live forever with the guilt.*
> *She wanted to say to her aunt that no one killed Tarig, it just happened, it was his day. She wanted to say that Allah gives life and takes it, and she had no feeling of guilt for wanting Tarig to buy a car. She was not to blame. If he had told her he was short of money, she would have understood and accepted. But he hadn't told her. She wanted to say to her aunt, be careful when you speak of the dead because they are not here to defend themselves...*
> *It was time for Sammar to talk now, say what she wanted to say [but she did not]* (156-158).

Although this baseless accusation leaves Sammar speechless, her thoughts suggest a more mature growth of her emotional well-being. Through this, she sees that, like herself, Mahasen has thrown herself too deeply into her sorrow over her son's death and is unable to move forward in her life. Interestingly Sammar seems to internalize Mahasen's attitude: "how long would it be before she started to look like she should look, a dried-out widow, a faded figure in the background?" (135). Instead of retaliating the way she did four years earlier, Sammar remains patient and strong. She manages to rise above Mahasen's accusation so as not to further complicate their fragile relationship. Furthermore, in her quiet stand against Mahasen, Sammar experiences a renewed sense of acceptance of her own destiny. After years of struggle, she is finally able to convince herself to accept what God had laid out for her. Almost as an immediate after-effect of this acceptance, she notices that the years of animosity between herself and Mahasen are slowly dissipating (162-163).

Sammar's return to Khartoum allows her to reassess her attitudes to many things. For one, she is about to resume her responsibility towards Amir. As the days pass, she comes to realize that despite the years of her disconnection from him, he has begun to steal her heart again:

> *She fell in love with Amir again. She carried him around the house, like... [a] baby. They played a game, they pretended Amir was a baby again and she had to carry him. Only in this game could he be sweet and clinging. At all other times, he was aloof, independent, never afraid. He neither remembered nor missed his father. He had lived quite content without his mother. There was something unendearing about her son, a strength, an inner privacy she knew nothing about, shut out by guilt and her years away. Only in this game of baby and mother were they close. Carrying him around the house, not minding that he was heavy* (145-146).

Here, Sammar's guilt and the realization that she has missed out much of his childhood finally makes her to take action to improve her relationship with him. She realizes that there is joy in the mother-son relationship – one that she was not aware of when Tarig died. Although she knows that their relationship will not improve immediately, the promise of joy from a small child creates a sense of patience that did not exist in Sammar previously. Furthermore, this improved relationship with Amir is also a necessary step that she must undergo in order to become a mature woman. This foreshadows the fact that Sammar is to marry Rae at the end of the novel, and that this reconciliation works as a training ground for her future position as a wife, a mother and also a stepmother to Rae's daughter.

Being at home is not without challenges and it does not provide a caring and nourishing community. Shortly after her husband's death, Sammar is willing to marry the old Ahmad Ali Yassen who claims to feel a duty towards widows and is an old family acquaintance (12). But her mother-in-law intervenes and shouts at Sammar:

> *An educated girl like you, you know English…you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for? He started to talk to me about this and I silenced him. I shamed him the old fool. He can take his religiousness and build a mosque but keep away from us*. (12)

It is quite evident that Sammar is not going to find solace in Sudan since her mother-in-law continues to disapprove and criticize her in Khartoum. Mahasen believes that the newly widowed Sammar should not remarry after her son Tarig's death because "life is different now" - widows don't need men's protection, and Sammar can support herself with work in Britain. At this point, patriarchal structures embedded in religious tradition are manifested. Aboulela asserts female autonomy through Sammar's economic and educational situations which are different and therefore the old rule does not apply. Sammar can't lavish nostalgia on Khartoum, in part because her

mother-in law Mahasen blocks Sammar's ability to practice her beliefs to their fullest extent - even in her Southern home where that possibility should stay open.

While Sammar successfully manages to improve her relationships with Amir and Mahasen, she still nurses a broken heart over Rae. Thus, she is determined to put any memory of Rae behind her, but as the days pass, she finds herself still burdened with dreams and memories of him. In those dreams, he often ignores her and treats her coldly (149). This is a sign of Sammar's regret and shame at her attitude towards him, with the realization that "she had tipped over, begged him, just say the *shahadah*, just say the words and it would be enough, we could get married then. It was not a story to be proud of" (151). These dreams push her to begin re-evaluating her attitude towards Rae, and she concludes that his refusal to convert to Islam is caused by her own weaknesses:

> *There were people who drew others to Islam. People with deep faith, the type who slept little at night, had an energy in them. They did it for no personal gain, no worldly reason. They did it for Allah's sake. She had heard stories of people changing, prisoners in Brixton, a German diplomat, an American with ancestors from Greece. Someone influencing someone, with no ego involved. And she, when she spoke to Rae, wanting this and that, full of it; wanting to drive with him to Stirling, to cook for him, to be settled, to be someone's wife.*
>
> *She had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone. If she could rise above that, if she would clean her intentions. He had been kind to her and she had given him nothing in return. She would do it now from far away without him ever knowing. It would be her secret. If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more* (160).

In Aberdeen, cultural barriers loosen the moment she falls in love with Rae. He is the cause for some of Sammar's nostalgic visions, and Aboulela suggests that he offers a sense of home in the foreign environment. It is directly after visiting his flat with Yasmin that Sammar has a moment of realization: "Home had come here. 'Rae is different,' Sammar said. 'He is sort of familiar, like people from back home'" (19). This comment paves the way to the consequences that will ultimately lead to the happy ending of the novel. Nevertheless, Yasmin's disagreement and opposition add more realistic evaluation of Rae's situation. Her voice plays as a warning siren in the path Sammar intends to tread. Since Yasmin's cautious remark lacks any nostalgic tone, it is no surprise that Sammar does not want to hear it. Sammar also sees their difference as "they lived in worlds divided by simple facts – religion, country of origin, race – data that fills forms" (29), but she always emphasizes Rae's ability to join exile and home:

> *From the beginning she had thought that he was not one of them, not modern like them, not impatient like them. He talked to her as if she had not lost anything, as if she were the same Sammar of a past time. (29- 30)*

Being disappointed at not finding a solution to her union with Rae and to feel like she belongs in Aberdeen, Sammar decides to move back to Khartoum. When Sammar comes back to her home country, she feels "not like a storm- swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots" (135). Her homecoming is the vital cure of her alienation, where she feels the warmth of her son, her family, and her relatives. In this respect, Home become imbued with different emotions and meanings at different times, depending on the intersection between ideas of self and family, community and other associations which help to shape a sense of connectedness and belonging (Hopkins and Gale 2008:23). So, in her homeland everything is vivid and attractive: the sun, the trees, the birds, the children, the roads, and the stars (146). Spiritually, Sammar resorts to diving

“into the past” (30), “at the back of her mind” she sees memorable things that would liberate her from incurable nostalgic feelings. Steiner (2008) contends that “the fragmented world of exile is encountered by nostalgic dreams of rootedness and cultural traditions, which stem from the culture of origin and are fueled by sensual memories of a youth spent in the Sudan” (9-10). These “shimmering things” include the home where she was born, the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, her aunt's house, laughter on their wedding, stray dogs on streets, the airport, fortune-tellers, and, most important, her son Amir and “feel guilty that she rarely thought of him, never dreamt of him” (113). Thus, in this “idealized picture of the past” or “invention of a mythical landscape”, Steiner (2008:11) contends that, she finds “the recovery in limbs and parts of the mind that had not been used for a long time” (33).

It is worth noting the meeting Sammar and Rae hold at the “Winter Gardens”. The Winter Gardens recall the image of cold weather that Sammar avoids; however, this garden is designed as a greenhouse where several tropical plants have been uprooted and transferred from their original place and treated in specific conditions to maintain their survival. What is significant about these plants is their adjustment to survive in the new environment and how they, as Ball (2010:118) contends, “set down their roots in order to flourish; a deeply symbolic gesture towards the natural and generative need of all living things to find a terrain, whether literal or spiritual, in which to root themselves, and so to grow.” For Sammar, this familiar scene of plants creates a nostalgic moment when her past, which is related to home and to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences, is recalled. Connecting her sense of home and landscape to her emotional state is not adequate for Sammar to get a complete sense of belonging in exile or feeling at home. Sammar realizes that cultivating her spiritual faith with her emotions toward Rae will help her to find a sense of belonging in exile.

When Rae decides to come Khartoum and fetch her, she knows that it is easier to travel to Scotland and be with Rae than to stay in Khartoum without

him: “She had been given the chance and she had not been able to substitute her country for him, anything for him” (179). However, this situation is only possible because of Rae’s conversion. Only then can they share a discourse and an identity. Ironically, and maybe against the author’s anticipation is that the ‘happy ending’ sits at odds with Aboulela’s politics since it suggests that Sammar needs Rae to convert, that Islam on its own is not enough to provide her with a sense of home. A sense of home is not complete, as the end of the story suggests, without the fulfilment of the protagonist’s needs. The novel creates a diasporic space which questions not only Western cultural imperialism but seeks to define an Islamic discourse that enables the woman protagonist to find a highly unconventional home. Home, as can be seen, is a state of mind rather than a geographical location (Steiner 2008:21).

4.2.2 The Quest for Home

Home, imagined or real, becomes an possession for the protagonists so they sought for it by every means possible. Chambers (2011:184) contends that, “*Minaret* opens as a typical novel of migration, but ends leading into another journey, one that is bound up with notions of belonging and coherence”. *Minaret* presents, the protagonist and narrator, Najwa, by expressing her present status in the world and continues by telling of her life back home in Sudan and her early displacement in exile with her family. After being forced to experience exile and being deprived of her social and financial privilege, Najwa narrates her sense of anxiety and isolation in the place she lives: “I’ve come down in the world. I’ve slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn’t much room for me to move” (*Minaret*, p. 1). These words describe the physical and spatial space within which Najwa moves. The description emphasizes a downwards movement: Najwa has “come down” and “slid” to a place that is “low”, and her movement is restricted because of the limited space she occupies. The narrator clarifies later that this place where “the ceiling is low” is a small flat in London purchased by her mother because of a lack of sufficient income to live well. Najwa’s expression “come

down in the world" represents her awareness of her degraded social and financial status after losing her family. She was born in Khartoum to a wealthy family but living in exile makes their financial resources dwindle. Her brother becomes an addict and goes to prison and her mother suffers from blood cancer and spends what is left of her money on her medication.

Najwa's reconnection to Anwar is considered her only attachment to her past and home. Confusion and instability define their existence:

> *'What's wrong with us Africans?' I asked Anwar and he knew. He knew facts and history. But nothing he said gave me comfort or hope. The more he talked, the more confused I felt, groping for something simple. Everything was complicated, everything was connected to history and economics. In Queensway, in High Street Kensington, we would watch the English, the Gulf Arabs, the Spanish, Japanese, Malaysians, Americans and wonder how it would feel to have, like them, a stable country. A place where we could make future plans and it wouldn't matter who the government was ... A country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams* (165).

Once her sense of belonging has been fragmented, Najwa's identity is fragmented along with it. At a certain moment, she envies the Londoners their sense of belonging in their own city and contrasts it with her sense of alienation, saying "I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused" (89). In contrast to the fluctuation her country suffers from, stability in London provides its people with a sense of belonging. Despite her Westernized upbringing and secular worldview, Najwa does not experience a sense of belonging to London and remains detached from her surroundings. She experiences the sense of loss and alienation, which proves that London is not the place that provides her with a sense of belonging and identity. She connects her sense of displacement and alienation with her color and her migrant position, "For the

first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused. For the first time, I was conscious of my shitty-colored skin next to their placid paleness" (174). Displacement and alienation in this sense are associated the lack of stability, lack of a home country, and a colored skin. The dark-colored Najwa living in London resonates Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely" which regards migration as "a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize" (Bhabha 1994:5). Thus, Najwa's attachment to Anwar becomes deeper and stronger, since he is the only person who can give her a partial sense of belonging.

A new homeland is established for Najwa through a collective practicing of the Islamic faith. At the mosque, waiting for time of prayer, Najwa feels home:

> *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 small back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, [and] a quiet room to rest in* (P. 74-5).

At this religious site, Najwa goes beyond her present and reconnects with a time of peace and quiet similar to her homeland where she has once experienced with her family. Her attachment to the mosque becomes a way to gather her fragmented pieces of self. The ailment she suffers from after her uprooting from the "fractured country" and "broken home". Thus, the mosque becomes the religious replacement where Najwa can find the sense of home, family, and community she has lost. Najwa's experience at the mosque and gathering with Muslim women from various social classes, ethnicities, ages, and degree of religiousness offers her a space for identity negotiation.

At the mosque and during the religious lessons, Najwa gradually realizes her personal identity and expresses her own voice among these Muslim women. Her early sense of destruction and alienation is replaced by the sense of inclusion and relatedness. Those women can provide Najwa with

a sense of security and guidance as she constructs her personal relationship with Islam:

> *My guides chose me; I did not choose them. Sometimes I would stop and think what was I doing in this woman's car, what was I doing in her house, who gave me this book to read. The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it. Refresh my memory. Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me. Explain to me why I am here, what am I doing. Explain to me why I came down in the world. Was it natural, was it curable?* (P. 240)

By representing the series of violence that ruin the political life in Sudan and their consequences on the lives of women, Minaret presents Islamic sisterhood as a house of social stability and emotional nurture. Displaced from her homeland, Najwa finds social and psychological security in the Regent's Park Mosque. Najwa's respect for the Muslim women of the Regent's Park Mosque stems from the support and help they offer her following the demise of her mother. For instance, Wafaa, one of the four women from the mosque who washed and shrouded Najwa's mother, frequently phones Najwa and enforces Najwa's sense of belonging to a community of Muslim women of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

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 Eid, women put on new clothes and take off their *hijab* s in the women's section of the mosque. Najwa reflects: "This one look 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" (p. 186). 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" (p. 186). Najwa also finds comfort in keeping company with Aunt Eva, the

Syrian Christian neighbor, because she feels so nostalgic for Khartoum, and she needs "to sit within range of her nostalgia" (p. 143). Aboulela contends, in an interview with Sethi (2005), that Najwa's relation with Aunt Eva is based on a 'pointless' sense of homesickness and nostalgia (Sethi 2005:3).

Towards the end of the novel, Najwa tells her friend Shahinaz, a South Asian British woman with three children, that she wants to be a concubine of the family of her lover, Tamer:

> *I wish we were living centuries ago and, instead of just working for Tamer's family, I would be their slave . . . I would like to be his family's concubine, like something out of The Arabian Nights, with life-long security and sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom in this modern time* (215).

Shahinaz rebukes her for these unhealthy thoughts and strongly believes that no one in their right mind wants to be a slave. Over and over again, Najwa indicates her willingness to abandon her freedom and hopes that her subjugated position will eventually arouse pity in others' hearts, "There was a time when I had craved pity, needed it but never got it. And there are nights when I want nothing else but someone to stroke my hair and feel sorry for me" (117). In her relationship with Anwar too, she consistently expressed her desire for pity more than love and there is similar yearning in her relationship with Tamer, "I think he could pity me, one day, at the right time, in the right place, he could give me pity I've always wanted" (118). For Najwa, who has suffered from instability and alienation, becoming a concubine is a solution that gives her security in a capitalist country that has little to offer an uneducated foreign housemaid. This point of view matches Kaplan's idea of considering the politics of location as a site of "historicized struggles" (Kaplan 1996:149).

For many Muslim women, the domestic space plays a similar function, in terms of socializing and worship, to the mosque for Muslim men. How the dwelling-place is experienced, and what it means to those who live in it,

however, is far from stable. On the one hand, the home can be a site for the performance and transformation of identity, and a place of resistance to religious, cultural, racialized and gendered norms and expectations (hooks 1990; Gregson and Lowe 1995; Fortier 2000). A home of one's own can be a place for young people to 'be themselves'. Conversely, as the feminist literature has explored it can also be a site of oppression and disempowerment (Hopkins and Gale 2009:23); a place where restrictive cultural traditions and patriarchal relations are re-inscribed, first by parents/in-laws and brothers, and then by husbands and other male family members. The home is viewed by many Muslims as a key space for the transmission of religio-cultural values and social practices to the next generation, a process in which women are expected to play a central role (Mohammad 2005). Afshar (1994:130) contends that women are viewed as "the transmitters of cultural values and identities' and 'the standard bearers of the group's private and public dignity".

4.3 Religious Site: The Mosque

The importance of a major Islamic symbol in the novel, i.e., the mosque, should be evaluated. By narrating some of the scenes at the mosque, the reader senses how happy Najwa is and how self-fulfilled she feels. Describing her participation in a *Tajweed* class, she states that the "concentration on technique soothes; it makes [her] forget everything around" (p. 74). At the mosque, Najwa celebrates the Eid with her fellow Muslim women. She has a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of a group: "I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant" (p. 184). She is glad to forget her past and to become a member of a new group that cherishes her and emotionally supports her:

> *What they could see of me was not impressive: my lack of religious upbringing, no degree, no husband, no money. Many warmed to me because of that, they would talk about themselves and include me as someone who lives on benefit or came from a disadvantaged home* (p.239).

Najwa's conversion and her first visit to the mosque is neither because of her mother's death nor her brother's imprisonment but is due to her failed relationship with Anwar. Anwar does not understand that Islam means a lot to Najwa at present and unable to see that she has formed a strong bond with other Muslim women in the mosque to resolve the chaos in her life, "Now when I heard the Qur'an recited, there wasn't a bleakness in me or a numbness, instead I listened and I was alert" (243). She avoids Anwar and when he comes to meet her, she intentionally wears ankle-length skirt, long-sleeved blouse and headscarf to tease him as he is used to seeing her western clothes and then they never meet again. When her Aunt Eva moves to Brighton Najwa is again displaced and has to pick up a job as maid to a Syrian family.

Najwa receives warm feelings of several Muslim women from the Regent's Park Mosque. They also volunteer to wash and coffin her mother upon her death. This provides her with new insight, and she begins to listen to a distant voice that she identifies with her home country, Sudan. She begins to visit the mosque and befriends new Muslim women of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. In a word, Islam ends Najwa's dilemma of being isolated and alienated through providing her with a new network of friends whose companionship is constructed on faith. Aboulela here explores the possibility of an Islamic sisterhood against the allegiances based on nationality and social class. Becoming a better Muslim is the common interest that ties Najwa to other Muslim women at the Regent's Park Mosque. It is significant that Najwa's personal and first-hand experience of slipping down the social ladder plays a fundamental role in her understanding and appreciation of the appealing power of Islam in an age of advanced capitalism. Najwa observes Ramadan fasts, celebrates Eid in the mosque and realizes the true sense of her Islamic identity which inspires her to wear a headscarf fulfilling her desire to settle into another version of herself. The teachings of the Qur'an provide her strength to cope with the most difficult

time of her life. It is within this space of the *Minaret* that she gathers courage to take the final decision, "No matter how much you love someone they will die. No matter how much health you have or money, there is no guarantee that one day you will not lose it. We all have an end we can't escape" (243). She finds spiritual and emotional stability by accepting Islam which gives her a sense of wholeness in contrast to her earlier experience of migrant and family disintegration.

Still, Najwa is aware of the differences among Muslim women: everyone has her own experiences and views on life. She compares herself to her Qur'an teacher, Um Waleed and finds that their natures are not harmonious because they orbit in different paths (p. 185). Nevertheless, it is their interest in religion that brings them all together. It is in the mosque that the social hierarchies and class differences appear insignificant. Najwa speaks warmly about the wife of the Senegalese Ambassador whose driver used to drop off Najwa at home during the month of Ramadan. This woman knows nothing about Najwa other than her name. She does not know her past nor her family's history because this is unimportant in this context of friendship. Najwa finds 'no need' to tell her because they "had come together to worship" and that is enough (p. 188).

Najwa wants to marry Anwar, but he criticizes Arab society for its hypocrisy and double standards though he himself is a hypocrite and has no intention to marry Najwa because he doesn't want her father's blood to flow in his children's veins. While Anwar is interested in Sudanese politics Najwa thinks she does not want to look at these big things because they overwhelm her, "I wanted me, my feelings and dreams, my fear of illness, old age and ugliness, my guilt when I was with him". It wasn't fundamentalists who killed her father", she contemplates, "it wasn't fundamentalists who gave my brother drugs. But I could never stand up to Anwar". Anwar is unable to see or comprehend Najwa's change. He only sees Najwa as an ahistorical figure who is incapable of change and lives outside time:

> *His first impression of me was the one that had endured. The university girl with the tight, short skirt who spoke private-school English, who flirted and laughed, was daring and adventurous.*
> *'I've changed, Anwar.'*
> *'No, you haven't. You're just imagining.'* (224).

Anwar does not understand that Islam means a lot to Najwa now. He does not see that through her relations with other Muslim women at the mosque, Najwa has escaped social isolation. She wants a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence. She yearns to go back to being safe with God. She continuous, "I yearned to see my parents again, be with them again like in my dreams" (241-242). Therefore, she turns to the mosque as the most available resort to a broader unified community that provides her with a stable support group and offers her a new sense of belongingness. At first, Najwa saw Wafaa, a woman she met during her mother's funeral rites and other Muslim women through Anwar's eyes; as backward, unprivileged women who were deprived of economic stability and social class. But eventually under the guidance of Wafaa, Najwa decides to become a devout Muslim and starts regularly attending the prayers in the mosque. It is in this sacred space that Najwa decides to move away from her old and muddled life to begin a new one, "In the mosque no one knew my past and I didn't speak of it. What they could see of me was not impressive: my lack of religious upbringing, no degree, no husband, no money. Many warmed me because of that, they would talk about themselves and include me as someone who lived on benefit or came from a disadvantaged home" (239). Najwa likes the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men in the mosque,

> *The absence of the sparks they brought with them, the absence of the frisson and ambiguity. Without them the atmosphere was cool and gentle, girl and innocent with the children around us . . . What I was hearing, I would never hear outside, I would*

> *never hear on TV or read in a magazine. It found an echo in me; I understood it* (243).

Najwa's best friend in the mosque is Shahinaz. They communicate in English and Najwa is very happy to maintain this relationship with her:

> *Why Shahinaz chose me as a friend, and how Sohayl approved her choice, is one of these strokes of good fortunate I don't question. We have little in common. If I tell her that, I think she will say, very matter-of-fact, 'But we both want to become better Muslims'* (104-5).

The little in common they have is enough for setting up a friendship that is based on mutual interest; in this case, it is religion. In this sense, the novel draws the reader's attention to the fact that religion overcomes language barriers and paves the way for solidarity, friendship, and coalition among women. In an interview, Aboulela asserts that she intended *Minaret* to be 'a kind of Muslim feminist novel, and girly or womanly as well' (Chambers, p. 99). "The female protagonist", Aboulela contends, in Chambers (p. 99), "is disappointed in the men in her life . . . relies on God and on her faith". In fact, faith comes to Najwa through the other Muslim women she meets at the mosque. In this sense, the mosque is not only a place to practice faith, but it is also a place to make social connections that bypass social class divisions, language barriers and ethnic borders. In this sense, the novel is drawing our attention to the importance of a very Islamic institution from which women have been excluded and to which Islamic feminists are increasingly gaining access as Ahmed (1992:101) explains:

> *Now that women in unprecedented and ever-growing numbers are coming to form part of the intellectual community in Muslim countries – they are already reclaiming the right, not enjoyed for centuries, to attend mosque – perhaps those early struggles around the meaning of Islam will be explored in new ways and the process of then creation of Islamic law and the core discourse brought fully into question*.

The movement of sisterhood in Egyptian mosques, Mahmood (2005), became very significant in some Arab countries during the nineties of the twentieth century. This movement is presented in the relationship between Muslim women at Regent Park Mosque which helps Najwa in her process of becoming a devout practicing Muslim.

The mosque is also of great spiritual significance to Sammar. Upon entering a makeshift mosque on campus, "she felt eerily alone in the spacious room with its high ceiling," but as soon as she recites the first verses of her prayers, "the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together" (*The Translator* p.66).

4.4 The Veil: Reveals or Conceals identity?

The stories of lived experiences of Muslim women who wear the *hijab* and face multiple challenges for adhering to this outward expression of faith and how they grapple with them especially in non-Muslim-majority contexts are in short supply. Therefore, Aboulela seeks to find a space to establish a narration platform to tell the untold stories of Muslim women. In an interview with Rashid (2012:622) Aboulela states:

> *I still have lots and lots to say about the lives and dilemmas of ordinary Muslims. There are still very few examples of Muslims in contemporary literature and most of these examples are those of the 'Islamic terrorist', the 'oppressed Muslim woman' or on the other side of the spectrum examples of liberal Muslims whose lifestyles and ways of thinking are not different from non- Muslims. I agree whole-heartedly that all these variations do exist in Muslim society and should be represented in fiction. And I do admire the many deep, complex and insightful novels that have tackled these subjects. But what about the thousands of men who crowd mosques, the thousands of women who go on Haj, the teenage girls who wear hijab? They are the ones who*

fascinate and compel me and they are the ones whose stories I am motivated to write.

This idea is clearly expressed in the character of Najwa, in Britain and after becoming a devote Muslim, wearing veil and praying in mosque, she can create a sense of belonging through the revival of her Islamic faith. In a very clear description of London, Najwa says:

> *I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look hack. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves. The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the Minaret of Regent's Park Mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn.* (*Minaret* 2005:1).

The choice to wear the *hijab* which is a necessary practice in Islam takes on a cosmic importance in the life narratives of these women protagonists in the novels, not only because it is a religious requirement but because it is a marker of identity. (Said (1981:64) elaborated in his book Covering Islam, that "For almost every Muslim, the mere assertion of an Islamic identity becomes an act of nearly cosmic defiance and a necessity for survival". This indeed applies to the struggle Muslim women launch to assert their Islamic identity.

For the first time Najwa sees her friends without the *hijabs* dressed up for the Eid party and even her teacher Um Waleed was also without her *hijab* in a tight crimson party dress that surprises her:

> *her hair tinted, her face brimming with make-up, she looks so Arab, so unsubtle that I think this is how she is, her secret self. She is not by nature a puritan, not by nature reserved or*

> *austere. It is only faith that makes her a Qur'an teacher with hardly any pay, pleading with us to learn, to change* (184-5).

Najwa realizes that there is another side to these personalities. Each woman is different from the other but their faith binds them together, "Our natures are not harmonious; we orbit different paths. . . When she says, "*Ya habibi, ya Rasul Allah*", I feel I love the Prophet as much as she does" (185).

Majid (1998) believes that whether these women are veiled or not their "conditions are determined not by the clothes they wear, but by the degree to which they manage to forge an identity for themselves that is not manipulated by the discourses of modernity or religious authenticity" (Majid 1998:70). But Najwa still views religion's strict rules as primitive; she adopts the headscarf as a sign of her devotion but continues to have an uncertain relationship with it and initially finds it unmanageable and unhelpful:

> *My curls resisted; the material squashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears. I pushed them back, turned my head sideways to look at the back and it was an angular lamp, a bush barely covered with cloth. . . . I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained; something was deflated. And was this the real me? Without the curls I looked tidy, tame; I looked dignified and gentle. Untie the material; observe the transformation. Which made me look younger? Scarf or no scarf? Which made me look attractive? The answer was clear to that one. I threw it on the bed. I was not ready yet; I was not ready for this step*. (245).

When Najwa decides to wear the *hijab*, she tries on a scarf. Putting the cloth on her hair, she looks at her image in the mirror and wonders whether this image was herself: "I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained; something was deflated. And was this real me?" (245). On the next page, Najwa is trying one of her mother's old *tobes* and describes wearing it as follows: "I tied my hair back with an elastic band,

patted the curls down with pins. I wrapped the *tobe* around me covered my hair. In the full- length mirror I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer" (246). Again, the undertone that *hijab* gives dignity is there, and in the second quotation, Najwa's determination to adopt the *hijab* becomes stronger. Once she decides she wants to "restrain," "to be invisible," she suppresses her past self, and as scarves conceal her hair, *hijab* as a way of life hides Najwa's past self.

Later, Najwa enjoys happiness which is derived from her sense of being visible and invisible at the same time. To this-self-satisfaction, is added to the inner peace Najwa feels: "When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not bad, not so bad'. Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore" (247).Through this account, in the place of the discourse that frames the act of veiling as women's oppression because supposedly *hijab* makes them invisible as individual subjects, Aboulela offers a case where *hijab* is desired by the female character and the very same invisibility attacked by the counter discourses becomes the very tenet of identity on which Najwa builds her selfhood. The following extract depicts how she rejoices upon realizing the builders cannot see her: "I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, 'Oh, so this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual." (247). The problem Najwa had with Britain, it turns out, was with how she looked. Before adopting the *hijab*, she wore what she referred to as short skirts and tight blouses, with which she says she felt uncomfortable. The male gaze she attracts with her looks disturbs her and she wants to avoid it. While covering her body, she thinks *hijab* also gives her the dignity she has lost.

Regents Park Mosque is a place where *hijab* unites Muslim women. Najwa feels that *hijab* is like a uniform which has the function of, as Gole (1996:142) states, "marking their collective recognition of belonging to a global Islamic community or *ummah* and contributing towards the creation of such a community in the process". Nevertheless, through this effect, *hijab* gains significance and helps the formation of group solidarity. The prominence of *hijab* also helps to provoke feelings of hostility, where "irritation is too narrow a word" (Gole, p. 123) to describe the protagonist feelings about this head cover.

Minaret exemplifies cases where Muslims may be subjected to abuse due to carrying such visible signs of their religious identity, as the veil and the beard. For example, once Najwa is attacked on the bus she takes home. Three young men throw a can of soft drink to Najwa spilling it over her head, calling her a "Muslim scum" (81). It is significant that the assailants do not use one of the derogatory words associated with color racism. The veil is a religious identity marker, which has become politicized and used against a woman only because she is expressing her religious affiliation through her Islamic dress. At another instance, Najwa tells the following sentences in relation to Tamer, again reflecting the fear of Islam in British society: "His voice is a little loud and, as we walk towards St John's Wood, I sense the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" (100). Najwa always sees herself and the people around her not only through her own eyes, but also through the eyes of the others as well. Najwa repeats the same idea that their visibility disturbs some people: "Tamer looks up at the sky. He seems more relaxed than the other day when we met in the Street. He might not know it, but it is safe for us in playgrounds, safe among children. There are other places in London that aren't safe, where our presence irks people. Maybe his university is such a place and that is why he is lonely" (111). Saying there are unsafe places for Muslims in London, and speculating even

Tamer's university, a place which ought to be liberal might be one of these dangerous places, Najwa depicts how in contemporary Britain, Islamophobia is as prevalent as, perhaps even more than color racism, and how in multicultural, multi-faith London, Muslims experience hostility, and how they are forced to negotiate between their Muslim and British identities as attachment to the former is regarded as a barrier to the total loyalty to the latter.

In *The Translator,* Sammar is presented as an emigrant Muslim woman who wears the veil and follows Islamic doctrines which bring harmony and moderation to her life. The choice of wearing the *hijab* allows her to stay within the space of her own values, beliefs, and culture without falling into the trap of having to recreate a suitable identity for herself based on the western model. These details in the life of the protagonist were specifically chosen by the author to counter at the established image of the labeled Arab/Muslim woman as backward, terrorist, and *different.*

Sammar's belief in Qur'anic teachings governs her social behavior at home as well as in Scotland. She sticks to religion and has "a sheet of paper from the mosque with the times of prayer for each day" to do her daily five prayers (32). At the end of a fast day, she "would eat a date first, drink water, pray, and then she would eat the rice she had made earlier" (32), strict Islamic rules. She gives a definition to the Sacred Hadith as "that which Allah the Almighty has communicated to His Prophet through revelation or in dram and he, peace be upon him, has communicated it in his own words" (42). Her appearance is also Islamic, she covers her head wherever she goes and tries to "look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerizing as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing *hijab,* the daughter of an exiled leader of the *mujahideen*" (9). These descriptions are intermingled with those of the ordinary stranger women, less educated and less well dressed who come to her assistance right after she loses her husband. They cook for her, take care of her son, spend the night with her and pray for her not because of any

familiarity or friendship between them but believing that it is their moral duty. Sammar is humbled by their strength of belief and generosity that puts them spiritually in a superior position, "Now the presence of these women kept her sane, held her up. She went between them thanking them humbled by the awareness that they were not doing this for her or for Tarig, but only because they believed it was the right thing to do" (9).

Islam offers her a humane set of rules and provides her strength during the mourning period for her husband, "Sammar had not worn make-up or perfume since Tarig died four years ago. Four months and ten days, was the Sharia's mourning period for a widow, the time that was for her alone, time that must pass before she could get married again, beautify herself . . . She thought of how Allah's Sharia was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves".

Her adherence to Islamic practices makes the English people surprised to see Muslims praying with heir "forehead, nose and palms touching the ground" (76). Even she herself wonders "how Rae would feel if he ever saw her praying. Would he feel alienated from her, the difference between them accentuated, underlined...? " (76). Although he asserts that Sammar has "no problem at all" with the way she dresses in Aberdeen (89), Rae points, as Steiner (2008:9) states, to "the often-hidden expression of disapproval, in that the patronizing assurance of acceptance is part of the covert hostility towards Summer".

The fact that Sammar is in a state of mourning and grief over her recently deceased husband does not signify for the employer as much as Sammar's *hijab* does: "Jennifer talked away fresh and brisk, reassuring her of how broad-minded and tolerant she was, not like so many people. 'For example,' Jennifer said, 'I have no problem at all with the way you dress'" (100). In such a context, where only her Islamic dress has significance, Sammar resorts to silence and enters into depressed state: "When Sammar

finally spoke, she managed, 'Thank you,' and went home and slept. She slept deeply and continuously until the next day" (100).

It is worth noting that the fact that Sammar wears a head covering, a marker of her Muslim identity, is mentioned in passing and only written into her thoughts, which implies its secondary role as an identity element, compared to her love for Tarig. Through this unobtrusive depiction, Aboulela gets away from what Kahf (2008:40) describes as "our era's obsession over the presence or absence of a veil".

To conclude, it is worth noting that Muslim Women who wear the *hijab* are apt to be targets of racist attacks because of their appearance which indicates their Muslim identity. *Hijab* which is a marker of Islamic identity dominates these narratives; it is the one most significant identity markers and the most attacked. The *hijab* is presented in the narratives as an identity contributor and in the same sense a vulnerable symbol to assault. There were many occasions were the protagonists experience aggressive acts due of their appearance which indicate their Muslimness. Religious identity as well as the veil issue racist sentiments appeared in Western media following the 9/11 attacks. The attitude towards Muslim women and the veil reveals the racism that shows itself in harassment of Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, racist verbal assault, and physical attack. The female characters in the novels, by depict a world where Muslim women dwell, bear the burden of these racist attacks especially after any attack that is ascribed to Muslim militants. It is one way of applying pressure to Muslim women to assimilate and exclude them from the public space and prevent them from interacting with society on their own terms. The two novels offer the reader an opportunity to look at the veil from a different perspective since this Islamic cultural symbol is misrepresented and misinterpreted in the Western culture. In this sense, the novels urge the Western reader to consider the socio-historical and political implications of the *hijab*, and consequently, they participate in the ongoing debates among feminists on the need to ground analysis in a carefully

constructed context that encompasses socio-historical, political, religious, and economic elements in addition to gender issues.

4.5 Assertion of Identity

Aboulela states, in her interview with Eissa (2005), that "I want . . . to write fiction that follows Islamic logic. Usually, the young Muslim girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me though I admire them. I always find myself trying to understand them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London. Some of them wear *hijab*, some don't. They have individuality and outspokenness" (P. 44). So, Religion is likely to be considered an essential factor that interferes in forming identity, it influences people's way of life, beliefs and view of God and the universe. It is seen as a spiritual tool which plays a fundamental role in sustaining and strengthening identity.

The Translator portrays how Islam is firmly ingrained in Sammar's life, and how religious convictions significantly affect her worldview and her way of life in the real world. Generally speaking, the narrative does not explain in detail the actions of Muslim faith but depicts them as innate parts of a Muslim woman's life. Sammar sits for *tasbih* (praising God, thanking God, and asking Him for forgiveness) after prayer; she switches off the light when she wants to look out so as not to be seen by men and she does not put on the perfume, a gift from Rae, in public. Aboulela only touches upon these actions without explaining or referring to their "significance in Islamic doctrines, indirectly elucidating a lifestyle naturally ingrained in the hero" (McEwan 2001:67). As some other examples, we can refer to the following instances in the novel. When, for example Sammar cannot sleep at night, she begins to recite religious sayings *"Ya Allah, Ya Arhaman El-Rahim*" [Oh God, the Compassionate, the Merciful] until she falls asleep (23), or when Sammar is having a driving lesson, at the sight of an approaching car, she turns away her steering wheel and instinctively goes over the *shahadah* (Islamic proclamation of faith, also recited by Muslims when they feel that this is the moment of

their death) (70). Moreover, for almost every situation, Sammar responds with a Muslim recitation from the Qur'an. These sayings and recitations usually have a consoling effect on her, an experience that arguably has been mediated by the Islamic ideology she, as a person from a Muslim family, has grown up with.

It's not hard to understand why so God-fearing a woman like Sammar is unyielding in her demand that Rae says the *shahada* as a prerequisite for them getting married. The ethics of courtship and marriage under Islamic law rest on a rock-solid fidelity to an identity marker: faith. Decades of living in Great Britain have not dented in any shape or form Sammar's adherence to the teachings of Islam. These doubtless accounts for her adamant but subtle refusal of any physical intimacy with Rae, however much she loves him: "He left his desk and came to sit with her, leaned to kiss her but she moved her head away. His chin brushed against her scarf. They laughed a little, embarrassed now, a nervous laugh like breathing" (124). As she prepares to fly to Egypt on an anti-terrorist project mission, she cannot help but take the plunge and plead with Rae to say the *shahada*.

As the narrative shows, Rae's scholarly pursuits of Islam and Middle Eastern politics are not the main reason for his conversion. Upon Rae's confession that he has romantic feelings toward Sammar and her mistranslation of this feeling into a desire to convert, he clarifies to her that his interest in Islam is confined to the academic field and does not stem from a personal quest for spirituality:

> *It`s not in me to be religious,' he said. 'I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I did not study it for myself. I was not searching for something spiritual. Some people do. I had a friend who went to India and became a Buddhist. But I was not like that. I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I*

wanted to be one of the few who were reasonable and right(p.123).

Rae is dedicated intellectually to researching Islam and the Middle East and his method is being "objective" and "detached," since his dedication originates from an academic not spiritual interest.

Sammar feels she is being rewarded for her patience and for her commitment to the teachings of the Qur'an and Rae states, "In the Qur'an it says that pure women are for pure men . . . and I wasn't clean enough for you then . . ." (196-197). Rae refers to verse 26 of Surah 24, which reads, "Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men are for corrupt women; good women are for good men and good men are for good women. The good are innocent of what has been said against them; they will have forgiveness and a generous provision." Sammar believes she and Rae are now both pure to be joined in marriage.

Qur'anic teachings are intensively infused in Aboulela's text mainly through highlighting how the Sammar-Rae love relation is predicated on a translation of verses from the Qur'an. These teachings guide Muslims‟ lives and regulate their social relationships with others, Aboulela skillfully portrays a modern image of Islam and its role in bridging communication in the diaspora, "The Qur'an was the miracle that Muhammad, peace be upon him, was sent with. And it's different from the miracles of the other Prophets because it's still with us now . . . it's still accessible . . . He said, translations don't do it justice. Much is lost . . . Yes, the meanings can be translated but not reproduced. And of course, miracle of it can't be reproduced . . ." (124).

Only Islamic prayers help Sammar to bear the pain of her husband's death, "The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes, Days in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were the only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of the day into night"

(16). Islamic concepts and rituals, such as the *azan* and the *Isha* prayer, permeate the picture she envisages of Khartoum in Scotland:

> *Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just of her. . . A bicycle bell tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the Isha prayer. But this Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. . . Sometimes the shadows in a dark room would remind her of the power cuts at home or she would mistake the gurgle of the central-heating pipes for a distant azan. But she had never stepped into a vision before, home had never come here before.* (20-21).

Islam, of course, is a component of that healing, giving Rae a purpose, a center, "balance", and "dignity" (198 -99). To Aboulela, this is a central part of the message, so much so that the author would very likely object, much as Sammar objects, to the notion that she is Rae's salvation. Rather, she is the vehicle through which Rae loses his objectivity – which for him, as established, is a form of social and economic power, through his role in the academic world – and embraces Islam. Sammar is quite surprised to read what is written in a postcard that Rae's daughter has given to her father, "Get well soon, Dad", the card said, and it had a picture of a bandaged bear. Sammar found the wording strange without "I wish" or "I pray", it was an order and she wondered if the child was taught to believe that his father's health was in his hands, under his command" (104). Another occasion in which Rae tells Sammar that her soup was the catalyst that made him recover, she reminds him that the only true healer is God. In Sammar's own words, "Allah is the one who heals" (102), and Islam itself is presented as a cure for the lonely and disconnected Westerner. Sammar has no doubt that her fate is designed by God and not by anyone or anything else: 'My fate is etched out by the Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be. To think otherwise was to slip

down, to feel the world narrowing, dreary and tight' (74). Aboulela summonses the centrality of Islam in her narrative by making the following comparison (Stotesbury 2004:31): I was often asked 'Why should Rae convert, why should religion be an obstacle…?' In my answer I would then fall back on Jane Eyre and say '… why can't Mr. Rochester be married to both Bertha and Jane?' In the same way that I, as a Muslim reader, respect and empathize with Jane's very Christian dilemma, I want Western/Christian readers to respect and empathize with Sammar's very Muslim dilemma.

Sammar`s Islamic religious subjectivity is rendered through articulation of her grief: she prays that she might be spared after this grief because she believes this life is temporary and only God is eternal. The community of Muslim women, her belief, and her spirituality help Sammar to survive and bear the loss. The protagonist can negotiate the sense of loss spiritually, even though she covers her head and body to cope with the Muslim women who support her and make it evident that they are stronger and more giving than her, while she thought of herself as "more educated, and better dressed." It is obvious from the above paragraph that Sammar wears the headscarf only after this tragedy of losing her husband, to express her obedience and submissiveness to God`s will and to express her grief over her loss.

There is also a vivid spiritual purity in Sammar's conception of Islam which draws her away from more personal or secular concerns, allowing her to transcend them, and thus bringing her a measure of peace. Sammar questions herself and her own motivations in asking Rae to convert, consciously renouncing her own concerns in the matter and focusing, instead, on Rae's own wellbeing. Sammar realizes that "… she had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not to be alone. If she could rise above that, she could clear her intentions" (175). Once Sammar does so, the religious content seems to peel itself away from the narrative, becoming not only an expression of any character's need or desire but also

something on a higher and more spiritual level. The views expressed by Sammar are very consistent with Aboulela's own idea which is expressed in interviews. For the author, a personal religious identity provides more stability than national identity, as, she states, "I can carry religion with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me" (Sethi 2005).

In *Minaret*, right from the beginning of the novel, the narrator's ideological perspective is manifested beyond doubt. Immediately after the first sentence, "*Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar- Raheem*", God is Almighty, the reader realizes that *Minaret* is an Islamic narrative asserting Muslim beliefs and teachings.

Najwa's strong religious consciousness is represented in her system of reasoning and justification. Najwa is also characterized in such a way that to her, modern reason is not the supreme ruler, and it is God's will that determines everything. For example, one day in the house where she is working as a maid, the pearl necklace belonging to Lamya, the woman she works for, is lost. Najwa feels that she is under suspicion, even though her employers do not directly accuse her. So, 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" (113). When, after a few minutes, the necklace is found somewhere in the house, she feels that a miracle has happened, and the finding of the necklace has not been accidental. She says, "[t]his is the kind of miracle that makes me queasy. … My stomach heaves. I can lose this job easily. Rely on Allah, I tell myself. He is looking after you in this job or in another job" (114). There are other instances in the novel which further show that Najwa's justification for what happens to her and to her family is based on the religious logic that divine will is operating in whatever happens to us. The disaster that has befallen her family, her father's execution, her mother's death,

and her brother's imprisonment are all, to Najwa, the results of their lack of faith and their disobeying God (95).

Sometimes, Najwa, a Sudanese elite, views religion slightly differently from her peers and admires the strength of devout Muslim girls, "I couldn't see the students praying anymore and I felt a stab of envy for them. . . found a girl wearing *hijab* sitting filing her nails. . . What was she doing here anyway instead of going out to pray? She probably had her period" (44-45) and at times also she feels guilty that she does not pray every day, "Still I could hear the *azan* . . . another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness" (31). She becomes amazed to see her servants praying at the back of their house, "They had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake and I didn't" (32) but never finds her family praying.

This view is also shared by fellow student Anwar who belongs to the Left-Wing Democratic Front, "He wanted rationale, reason, and he could not help but despise those who needed God, needed Paradise and the fear of Hell. He regarded it as a weakness and on top of that it was not benign" (241). Anwar and Najwa fall in love and he tries to draw her into student politics but because of her father she refuses to get involved.

Najwa decides to attend classes in the mosque choosing topics which do not inspire heated debates and stays away from the discussion of Shariah. The *Tajweed* class is her favorite because, "concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me. . . Here in the *Tajweed* class, all is calm and peaceful. We practise and practise until we can get the words right. I want to read the Qur'an in a beautiful way. After the class, I have a new energy" (78- 9).

Najwa befriends Shahinaz during Ramadan and prays shoulder to shoulder with the wife of the Senegalese ambassador, whose driver would drop Najwa home. It is their interest in religion that brings all the women together and all social hierarchies and class differences appear insignificant in

the mosque. Earlier Najwa observed Ramadan when her mother was in the hospital, but she did not understand the true essence of it but now her faith is driven by everyday practices and the sense of belonging offered by the Muslim women in the mosque:

> The more I learnt, the more I regretted and at the same time, the more I hope I had. *When you understand Allah's mercy, when you experience it, you will be too ashamed to do the things He doesn't like. His mercy is in many things, first the womb, the rahim, He gave it part of his name, Al-Rahman-the All-Merciful. . . It sheltered us, gave us warmth and food* (247).

When Lamya goes off to university she is all alone in the house, she reads books about Islam and watches Arabic channels on TV, "Don't worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this, all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end. . . "This kind of learning makes sense to me. That's why I go to talks and classes at the mosque" (98). She likes to watch *Kaabah* and pilgrims walking around it and she wishes to be there and when she sees teenage girls wearing *hijab* she wishes that she had worn it at their age.

One day Lamya accuses her of stealing her pearl necklace Najwa had tried because she too had a similar one in Sudan, "I started 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, I will never do that again, ever. I will never try on her scarves; I will never weigh myself on her bathroom scales" (113).

Within a few minutes of the prayer and repentance Mai comes out of the sitting room holding the necklace in her hands and Najwa's faith is again reinforced. When Najwa goes to meet Omar in the prison he does not want her to visit because he didn't want to bother her and secondly, she tries to convert him to Islamic way of life which he did not approve of. During this visit Najwa and Omar become nostalgic about their earlier visits to London during hot summers in Sudan, "How did we learn how to skate? I can't remember!" I

laugh– children from hot Khartoum coming to London every summer– walking into an ice-skating rink in Queensway as if they had every right to be there. Money did that. Money gave us rights" (94). Then Omar tells her that he is reading books about pop music and the biographies of film stars in the prison library, but Najwa advises him to read the Qur'an:

> *We weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious. . .Our house was a house where only servants prayed.. . "If Baba and Mama had prayed," . . . if you and I had prayed, all of this wouldn't have happened to us. We would have stayed a normal family." . . . "Allah would have protected us, if we had wanted Him to, if we had asked Him to but we didn't. So we were punished"* (95).

During her second visit to him in the novel after celebrating Eid with Muslim women in the mosque she wishes, "he had been punished the very first time he took drugs. Punished according to the Sharia- one hundred lashes. I do wish it in a bitter, useless way because it would have put him off, protected him from himself" (193). This time he tells her that soon he will be released from the prison and Najwa wants him to go back to Sudan to start all fresh, but he says, "I would only go back there for a visit" . . . to prove that Baba was innocent. They never had any hard evidence against him and I can prove it" (195). He wants to prove that it was all lies against their father which were motivated by malice and politics so that he might get their property back. On the other hand, Najwa always prays for their father's forgiveness for his sins and tries to convince Omar, "it is better if we pray, if we give money to the poor. That's what matters when you're dead" (195). Omar becomes furious but Najwa reminds him, "You are here because you broke Mama's heart. A son shouldn't his mother. She cursed you with bad luck and Allah listens to a mother's prayer" (196). Omar used to take huge amount of money from his mother when she was ill always asking "my money" and never

understood that they were going through financial crisis, so his mother used to curse him. Najwa being devout found peace in Islam and she wants the same for her brother.

However, in exile, Najwa turns to a religious woman; it was a means to acquire Allah's protection and forgiveness for her sins. Her faith started growing gradually, she prayed for God to fulfil her dearest wishes; she has also prayed to God when she felt threatened. In London precisely, Najwa was returning home by bus, and on her way, she encountered harassment and was bullied for being a Muslim; asking help from God was the only means to self-defense:

> *I start to recite say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak. I recite it again and again... I tell myself that Allah will protect me so that even if they hurt me. I won't feel it too badly; it will be a blunted blow, a numbed blow* (80)'

The first site of negotiating Najwa`s identity is Anwar`s flat in London. As Najwa becomes closer to Anwar, she starts visiting him at his flat which he shares with two Sudanese students. Anwar and his friends are living in London temporarily, unlike Najwa who has no hope of returning home. Najwa likes being at Anwar`s place, which becomes a site for her to reconnect with her Sudanese identity. This apartment provides her with a sense of security and cultural familiarity, especially with one of Anwar`s friends, who belongs to a Westernized upper class in Khartoum. Najwa enjoys chatting with him as he reminds her of friends from back home. This apartment offers Najwa a site of identity negotiation, especially when discussing politics and religion. During their discussions, Najwa realizes that she becomes interested when they exchange views about Sudanese politics. However, she is annoyed when they discuss Islam and religion, not only because she considers it a part of the tradition and culture, but she is also detached from because she feels that it is an element absent in her identity. Najwa is shocked when Ameen, one of Anwar's friends, tells them he must leave because he has been invited by his

relatives to a Ramadan breakfast. She realizes that Ramadan has been essential for giving her a sense of time in exile, just as Sammar feels in performing her five prayers. When she emphasizes how Ramadan is a special Islamic practice and she always fasts during this month in Khartoum, her friends comment on her as being "Westernized" and "detached from Sudanese traditions." It is significant that Najwa`s fasting in Khartoum has been a nominal Islamic practice like an inherited tradition without spiritual meaning or value. At this point, she knows that despite their companionship, she is "all alone." From this moment, Najwa feels emptiness inside her and this site fails in providing her with belonging or stability.

On the other hand, Tamer prefers to identify himself on a religious basis and so does Najwa, which confirms that the religious piety both of them have creates equal value or grace. Unlike his sister Lamya, Tamer talks to Najwa about his personal life and thoughts and asks her about hers. He appreciates her religiousness and trusts her. Whenever she is humiliated or blamed by Lamya, Tamer tries to calm her down. He accompanies her while going out with the baby. In general, he always tries to take care of her, and that is what Najwa is mostly in need of.

Najwa's religious consciousness is represented as strong and all-encompassing in such a way that it affects all aspects of her life, including the words and expressions she uses in her everyday speech. In depicting how religious consciousness is ever-present and pervasive for Najwa, she is represented as reciting the verses of the Qur'an and Muslim prayers in different instances: when she is happy about something she says *Alhamdullilah* , when she wants to wish for something she says *insha'Allah* (74), and when she is afraid of something she recites some verses of the Qur'an, such as Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak (80), recited by Muslims at times when they are scared. Again, it can be argued that the rootedness of her religious consciousness or her spontaneous use of religious sayings on different occasions is not as natural a process as it looks and there

are many mediatory ideologies and discourses that have caused Najwa to respond to different situations in the language of religion. Still, this lifestyle is the one that is narrated as meaningful to Najwa, the devout Muslim woman, and she is shown to be in her comfort zone when she lives a religious life. This choice does not mean that she is not going to think of others. Despite leaving Tamer, she is happy in the end because she is going on *hajj* and becoming "innocent again". The *hajj* is "the final stage in her process of completely getting over the past and becoming a new person" (p.213).

4.6 Representations of Religious Identity

More generally, as Metcalf (1996: 3) observes, religious practice as opposed to rigid distinctions between 'sacred' and 'profane', provide the key: 'it is ritual and sanctioned practice that is prior and that creates "Muslim space", which thus does not require any juridically claimed territory or formally consecrated or architecturally specific space'. On the other hand, Mahmood (2005) uses the concept of norms to refer to the repetition of both routine and religious acts in a believer's daily life. The repetitive actions provide a space for the creation of a specific model of the self. This means that these actions, which are carried out for the purpose of self-improvement and norms, become the method for the self to acquire specific desired qualities. Furthermore, they open an avenue for the self to establish qualities to connect and respond to one's specific environment, which suggests that there are, as Mahmood (2004:23) states, a "variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated". Norms must then be understood as a form of control of one's individuality. Thus, believers must be understood to have specific purpose in their performance of religious acts, which highlights their commitment to achieve moralistic aims and a positive personal potential. This moves away from the perspective of religious norms as a form of restriction that controls one's life.

Religious actions can be in danger of simply being a perfunctory repetition, although they may still represent one's beliefs. As long as these

actions are unthinking or automatic and are not accompanied with the purpose towards God, the believer will be deprived of the pleasure of having a relationship with God, of having a meaningful life that is not attached to worldly desires, and of an improved self. A Muslim must devote the physical and mental self to performing religious actions if he/she is to develop full potential. Despite Sammar's flaws that have marred her attitude and piety, she is rewarded when she focuses on God through her actions. Therefore, a life that is completely devoted to God is a life that can never disappoint.

In *The Translator*, Leila Aboulela has represented Diaspora as a place where one can have a new understanding of his or her religion, and a place where the negotiation of identity is inevitable. She has described, Sammar's ability to live in harmony with the new conditions: "Here in Scotland she was learning more about her own religion, the world was one cohesive place" (108).

Aboulela highlights the importance of religion in Muslims' life, and in constructing and sustaining balance of their identity. She has shown this through Sammar in *The Translator* "Only Allah is eternal, only Allah is eternal. Photo- graphs, books, towels, sheets. Strip and dump into a black bag. Temporary, this life is temporary, fleeting. Why is this lesson so hard to learn?" (9). Unlike Najwa, Sammar has always had a strong religious faith; her connection to religion has always been strong, and her faith always present in time of distress. She has also depicted the role of religious practices in bringing peace and stability in everyday life, and in critical times. Sammar has endured harsh times in which the only way to feel relieved was by adhering to the rope of God:

> *The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes. Days in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers...without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night* (16).

Rituals are described in Aboulela's texts to prove their effects on the believers. When Sammar breaks her fast with dates and water at sunset during Ramadan, she "felt herself to be simple, someone with a simple need, easily fulfilled, easily granted. The dates and the water made her heart feel big, with no hankering or tanginess or grief" (32).

Instead of presenting Muslim culture and its practices as alienating for women, the novel's depiction of fasting suggests them as a site for nurturing their subculture. The defiant fasting practices of Tarig's childhood were not limited to boys. Girls participated in them to express their strength at some times and to emulate their mothers at others. Sammar recalls, "But they all had been like that, even the girls. Are you fasting? A cool yeah, or just a nod, deliberately casual, like it was not a big thing. Though later they would copy their mothers, my head aches, I can't bear it. I have lost weight; I can hardly eat at night" (33). Implying its fluidity, the novel refers to how fasting is experienced differently in different places. With the days being shorter in Aberdeen, fasting Ramadan is totally different. It is "too easy, it doesn't count", Tarig used to tell Sammar jokingly. Likewise, the Muslim experience of the Qur'an is rendered through children's words and thoughts to convey their relevance and significance to them. As a child, Sammar had the words of the Qur'an to "recite in treacherous streets where rabid dogs barked too close. "Say: I take refuge in the Lord of daybreak . . .", "Say: I take refuge in the Lord of humans . . ." At night too, inside the terrifying dreams of childhood, she had said the verses to push away what was clinging and cruel" (102). For the novel's characters, Islam is like a second skin and a source of empowerment. By contrast, foregoing or adjusting these practices to fit the non-Islamic context proves painful. On days when her officemate, Diane, was not in, "Sammar prayed in the room, locking the door from inside. . . It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all that privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to seeing people pray on pavements and on grass" (75). At the airport, it was time "to pray and the saddest thing was that

there was nowhere to pray. . . Sammar prayed where she was, sitting down, not moving" (132).

Moreover, five prayers connect Sammar to reality physically and give her a sense of time`s flow when she is dislocated in exile as the only "last touch with normality; without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night" (6). Sammar's religious consciousness is confirmed while she recalls her experiences and memories of home and exile, which are narrated to Rae through flashbacks. Sammar`s journey to Aberdeen to apply for a job as a translator takes place during the Gulf War, when there is a high demand for Arabic, religious and political documents to be translated into English:

> *She had been lucky. There was a demand for translating Arabic into English, not much competition. Her fate was etched out by a law that gave her a British passport, a point in time when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply* (71).

In addition to the love story between Rae and Sammar, several actions are introduced to support the idea that Islam is a way of life as well. Hassan (2008:310-11) argues that Islamic ritual, is seen as a positive force in Sammar's life. When she goes to pray in the small university mosque one afternoon, "the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together" (72). It is prayer that helps her to bear the pain of her husband Tarig's death, four years before the reader meets her "without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of the day into night" (16).

Sammar realizes that she has been self-centered in her demand for Rae to convert, "There were people who drew others to Islam. People with deep faith, the type who slept little at night, had an energy in them. They did it for no personal gain, no worldly reason. They did it for Allah's sake" (175). She also comprehends that she wants him to convert for her benefit and not for his

salvation, "wanting this and that, full of it; wanting to drive with him to Sterling, to cook for him, to be settled, to be someone's wife" (175). This realization comes during the sacred month of Ramadan and gives her the feeling of peace in the middle of the spiritual chaos, and uncertainty, "because of eating and drinking after fasting all day when the sun was too hot and it was thirst more than hunger, and not wanting to speak to anyone, . . . A whole month free like that and looking up at the round moon, knowing that the month was halfway through, two weeks and the focus would be gone" (180). After realizing that Rae's conversion must happen for his own sake she gives up her personal aspirations and prays for him to find true faith, "The more she prayed for him, the more these moments came until they were there all the time, not only thoughts, not only memories but an awareness that stayed" (165).

Unlike Sammar, In *Minaret*, Najwa represents the aristocratic Sudanese adolescent who spends her life copying western women lifestyle, she did not wear a veil, and had the total freedom to attend night clubs and wear revealing clothes, in her description, the protagonist states: "The party at the American club was in full swing when Omar and I arrived .We walked into the tease of red and blue discount lights and the Gap Bandages 'Say Oops Upside Your Head...' My trousers are too tight.' An awkward twisting around to see my hips in the mirror" (23). It is worth noting that behaviors of this type are forbidden in Islamic religion because Islamic rules constitute a set of prohibitions and permission; these permissions do not include women's attending night clubs, imitation of the west clothing style, and unethical behaviors.

Connecting to the past and to the national identity come to nothing in vanquishing the sense of alienation. Najwa decides to search for a substitute in the Regent's Park Mosque after she is abandoned by friends and relatives in London and realizes that there is no hope of returning to Khartoum. This means that she will never try to connect or reconnect with the past, as her

former attempt has failed. She finds in the Regent's Park Mosque a site of negotiation to ground her identity in a specific location, enjoy the feeling of integrated selfhood and construct her new sense of spiritual home and belonging. This Islamic religious setting in London teaches Najwa how to reestablish a personal individual identity that belongs to the shared faith of multiethnic Muslim women. In this Islamic setting, she connects to the Muslim community of women, who help her to become grounded in time and place and provide her with a sense of stable identity and belonging that she has always been deprived of while in exile. Najwa feels comfortable enough to locate the site and place that provide her with a sense of stability and belonging which equals the sense of home. She says, "In the mosque I feel like I'm in Khartoum again." The mosque becomes the spiritual space where she can negotiate her subjectivity and ground it on a basis of faith. Attaching herself to the mosque and experiencing a sense of belonging to it assists Najwa to overcome her sense of deprivation from social and national belonging.

Tamer was born in Oman of a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother and studied in an American private school and then moved to London to study Business. During Ramadan he likes seclusion in the mosque which attracts Najwa, "to spend days away from it all, fasting and praying and reading Qur'an" (189). He says that he found the first two days hard but at the end he didn't want to leave and Najwa clearly makes out from his face which he did not tell, "I did feel spiritually strong. I did reach a kind of detachment, like things didn't matter" (191). Moreover, if Tamer cannot pray in a day for some reason he feels, "the whole day's gone out of balance" (199).

Prayer as well as other rituals are performed to strengthen believers and shield them from human weaknesses and encourage them to perform and sick to these rituals. In the same regard prayers are performed to provide emotional patience and strength to overcome daily challenges. Religious dress, practices, and organizational affiliations serve as important identity markers that help

promote individual self-awareness and preserve group cohesion (Williams 1988). The characters sometimes chose to assert their religious identity to reject ethnic, national, or cultural identities that they viewed as un-Islamic. the actions of the protagonists in the novels where religious rituals represent the varied behaviors that are constantly repeated, and do not remain isolated, singular, and static. Their actions are based on a desire for the formation of a pious self, and there exists a reciprocal process that connects the actions of worship with the individual. In Mahmood's study (2005), the significance of these rituals are expressed in two ways: first, the women recognize their desire for worship, based on the belief that Islam has requirements for worship. In responding to these requirements, the protagonists then perform religious actions, secondly, as a response to this repetition, the desire for further worship is induced and encouraged, creating a self that finds worship to be an essential aspect of the self that one cannot live without. However, what is required for these acts to take place, and consequently their specific goals to be achieved, is self-discipline, a process that Mahmood (p. 139) describes as "the role self-directed action plays in the learning of an embodied disposition and its relationship to "unconscious" ways of being". Thus, for many individuals, religion remains an important organizing factor in the hierarchy of identities that compose the self.

4.7 Language to Assert Identity

Aboulela prefaces the first part of *The Translator* with a verse by an old Arab poet Abu Nuwas. She shows that it is not only Western writers who may serve as authors of reference but that there is also a great indigenous Arab literary heritage and wisdom which can be drawn upon and are in no way inferior to their Western equivalent.

In *The Translator,* Sammar's sound belief in the teachings of the Qur'an regulates her social interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims in the diaspora. While speaking to a fellow Muslim in Scotland, Sammar enjoys talking in Arabic and words like *Insha'Allah* fitting naturally in everything

that she says. Sammar abides by Sharia and understands the wisdom behind its laws; she scolds herself when notions of luck seep into her mind and thinks, "No, . . . that is not the real truth. My fate is etched out by Allah almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be." To think otherwise was to slip down, to feel the world narrowing, dreary and tight" (73). Islamic values and teachings help her to orient herself and provide a set of rules she adheres to and a basis for her identification. Al-Adwan and Awad (2013) state that, "Sammar presents a modern and a diasporic dimension to the concept of a walking Qur'an which is usually reserved to glorify the principles of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad's behaviours and moral perfection" (353), meaning that every aspect of her life shows the manifestation depiction of Islamic teachings. Every afternoon she goes to pray in the university mosque since Islamic rituals give her positivity in life, "Now she stood alone under the high ceiling of the ancient college, began to say silently, All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful . . . and the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together" (72).

Moreover, at the gardens extensive language is used to define and describe the gardens to the public, implying the role of language in constructing place: "The door to the Winter Gardens was covered with signs. So, no prams or pushchairs allowed, sorry no dogs allowed, opening hours 9.30 till dusk" (4). Language, thus, not only helps define a place but contributes to its creation. Underlying this notion is a theory of place, which, as Ashcroft et al. (1995) note, "does not simply propose a binary separation between the 'place' named and described in language, and some 'real' place inaccessible to it but rather indicates that in some sense place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process" (132). Sammar also notes of Britain that "everything was labeled, everything had a name. She had got used to the explicitness" (4). Aboulela here alludes to the colonial history

implied in naming, as suggested by Ashcroft et al. (1995:143), ". . . language always negotiated a kind of gap between the word and its signification. In this sense the dynamic of 'naming' becomes a primary colonizing process because it appropriates, defines, captures the place in language".

Sammar offers Rae something that Western society is apparently lacking, Rae acknowledges, "And I learnt things I could not have learnt from books. . . You make me feel safe, I feel safe with you" (64). The word "Rae" is near a homonym to the Arabic noun "*Rai*" that means "opinion" as opinions of Rae about Islam has attracted Sammar towards him. Rae's knowledge of the Arabic alphabet foreshadows his religious identification. He enquires about the correct pronunciation of her deceased husband because he has lived in "her part of the world". He asked 'Tariq?', stressing the q. Sammar answered, "Yes, it's written with a *qaf* but we pronounce the *qaf* as a g back home." (6). The word "Sammar" in Arabic literally means "conversations with friends at late night" and is pronounced like "summer". Sammar's Islamic discussions with Rae and her commitment towards her Islamic faith attract them to each other. Despite spending years immersed in the language, Sammar feels "like a helpless immigrant who didn't know any English" where she imagines "English words lifting away from her brain, evaporating" (13). Aboulela signals the instability of Sammar's position in Britain.

Whereas in *Minaret*, the preface foregrounds issues of culture and language, beginning as it does with the opening of the first *surah* of the Qur'an (The *Basmala*), recited daily by devout worshippers of Islam: *Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem*. The use of expressions of this type indicates the writer's desire to pass a specific message and to evoke something in the reader's mind. That is to say, complete reliance and support should be asked direct from Allah. For Muslims, *Basmala* is said to be the source of blessings to all actions. It consists of an introduction and description of God 'Allah', it also serves at reminding Muslims of the presence of God's mercy, and to prevent them from sins.

Aboulela has sought to remind her Muslim and non-Muslim readers that religious belief, behaviour, and practices are an integral part of Muslims' identity and daily life. Throughout the story, the readers will realize how she managed to save some of the characters from falling into discouragement by reviving faith in characters and creating it for characters who represent the dominant or other culture.

The use of religious expressions abundantly is another sign of the author's integration of Muslim faith; this has been reflected in several lines in both novels. Even in casual speech and way of speaking with other, Najwa (in *Minaret*) has become accustomed to mentioning God "When someone picks up the entry-phone, I say, my voice edgy with hope, *"Salaamualleikum*, it's me, Najwa. . . She is expecting me, *alhamdullilah*." (2)

The prayer is given in Qur'anic Arabic, transliterated into Roman script, but not translated to foreshadow the dependance and reliance on the almighty Allah. The *surah* (the verse) hangs over a vision of London, seen from Regent's Park, in the early morning light -- a cityscape which is defined by the *Minaret* of the nearby mosque, and which is also a reflection of the narrator's psychological state:

> *The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the Minaret of Regent's Park Mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent* (1).

The *Minaret* (*manarah*), on the other hand, is considered to be the most distinctive feature of the Muslim mosques. The word *manarah* can have meant originally only 'an object that gives light' thus used for a 'light-tower' or 'light-house'. It is believed that the word *manarat* is given to the tower of a

mosque due to the light held by the *muezzin* as he recites the call to prayer at night which gives the onlooker below the idea of a light house. Since the beginning of history, mankind associated elevation and height with the concept of superiority, divinity, and supreme power, and thus *Minaret* represents the holy, pure and resolute soul. As Abderrahman (2007) states that: "But as the *Minaret* unified the various social, political, and religious elements common to the unifying force of Islam, it never lost its primary function as the main lookout from which to gather the members of the community"

Edwin (2008) reads Aboulela's *Minaret* as a book written by a Muslim African writer showing two elements that are at the heart of the novel, namely, Najwa's nationality as an upper-class Sudanese woman whose mother tongue is Arabic and Najwa's experience of exile. Failing to locate emphasis of these two themes in the novel, I argue, contributes to a partial understanding of the appealing power of Islam to Muslims in diaspora. For instance, that Najwa's best friend at the end of the novel is a South Asian British Muslim woman who does not speak Arabic illustrates the transnational nature of Islam that bypasses ethnic and racial barriers, a point that Edwin does not sufficiently engage with. Ultimately, Edwin's reading of the novel concentrates mainly on internal reasons that have prompted Najwa to put on the *hijab* "as the culmination of her newfound sobriety and modesty' and as 'internalizing. . . its deeper religious significance" (153). With its emphasis on Najwa's Africanness, Edwin's reading runs the risk of using the politics of location for, as Kaplan (1996:187) rightly warns us that "the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and reaffirmed"

Indeed, Najwa's multi-layered identity is highlighted in several places in the narrative. Her identity is formed and re-formed through the intersectionality of gender, social class, religion, nationality, diaspora, ideological affiliations, and politics. Arabic language, as a main component of Najwa's identity, becomes a site of contestation. In this context, Najwa does

not look at Arabic-speaking Um Waleed as a friend, but only as a teacher: "Strange that she is not my friend, I can't confide in her and when we are alone the conversation hardly flows" (185). Language is relegated and faith is upheld. Cariello (2009:340) views religion "as the place for identity formation". Religion, as she (p. 342) states, is both, "dispersed, transnational, interconnected, and global, and yet constitutes a local, always rooted and specifically-if not individually-constructed and experienced place". For Najwa, as Chambers (p. 183) states, Islam is "a central marker of identity in the fragmentary world of migration, asylum and family disintegration".

Najwa used to think that higher education means the same thing for all Sudanese girls: "I was in university to kill time until I got married and had children. I thought that was why all the girls were there, but they surprised me by caring about their education, forging ahead with their jobs and careers" (102). Najwa and these girls belong to the same generation, but they are markedly different in their socioeconomic conditions. Through Najwa's re-assessment of her past opinions and thoughts about other women now that she herself has become an "other" in exile, the novel shows how significant it is to take onboard the *different* experiences of women within the *same* nation. That Najwa is Sudanese does not mean that her aspirations and concerns represent those of all Sudanese girls of her generation. Social differences, especially social class, crucially inform each character's stances and beliefs.

This idea is further developed by introducing Lamya, a London-based rich PhD Arab student, and her mother, Doctora Zeinab. Although Najwa shares with them the same language, i.e., Arabic, their relationship is that of employer and employee. When Najwa gets a job as their maid and babysitter, she expresses her hope to become close to Lamya, but she acknowledges that Lamya 'will always see my *hijab,* my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin color, which is a shade darker than hers' (116). Najwa realizes that barriers of social class, ideological beliefs, nationality, ethnicity, race, and level of education cannot be easily erased. For Lamya, the *hijab* stands as a

marker of inferiority and a working-class status. Also, due to broken links with their heritage, lifestyle and tradition of origins as well as their homelands, the only way for Najwa and Tamer to recognize who they are is by relaying on Islam at the first place. Their conversation indicates also that their national identity has decreased, the characters do not have a problem of belonging as long as their faith is providing them with the missing part of their identities, and that is to say being Muslim has become more important than being Sudanese.

The friendship between Najwa and the wife of the Senegalese Ambassador bypasses language barriers: "We hardly talked and she instructed her chauffeur to drop her first" (188). Compared to other identity markers, Islam surpasses differences such as language, ethnicity, race, nationality, and social class and provides a basis for solidarity and sisterhood.

In fact, Islam provides "a term of reference or consolation" for Aboulela's characters in diaspora (Nash p. 136). It also supplies individual Muslims with a point of contact with the outer world. By foregrounding Najwa's ability to identify with other Muslim women with whom she does not share a common language, *Minaret* highlights the fact that Islam can act as a bridge that breaks through isolation and loneliness in diaspora. In this case, Islam not only shapes "an emerging awareness of difference", (Nash p. 136) as Nash argues, but it also offers a basis of commonality. In other words, the novel is more concerned with exploring the interstices of the experience of a contemporary Muslim woman in the West. Nash (p. 141) argues that "Aboulela does not structure her women's experience into explicit form of feminist resistance such as might be found in al-Sa'dawi or Faqir". He (p. 141) maintains that "Aboulela's discourse is never stridently feminist, nor does it set out to condemn male Muslim practice per se". What Nash is trying to draw our attention to, I believe, is that Aboulela's fiction endows women with the power to resist and transform certain lived experiences through their Islamic

faith. In other words, Aboulela's fiction can be read as a site where Islamic feminism plays a central part.

4.8 Cross-cultural Encounters

Hall (1990) calls for thinking of identity as a '"production" within, not outside representation'. He proposes that there are two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first position, He (p. 223) argues, defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, "a sort of collective one true self". This means that our cultural identity reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people" with fixed and unchanging frames of reference "beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (ibid.). The second position of cultural identity recognizes that as well as the many points of similarity, there are also "critical points of deep difference which constitute 'what we really are"' (ibid.). Cultural identity, Hall (p. 235) states, belongs to the future as much as to the past. For him (p. 235), then, diasporic identities are not defined by essence or purity, on the contrary, they are defined by:

> *the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities. . . produce and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference.*

Critics sometimes think identity crisis confirms the absurdity of the cultural clash's binaries. For instance, Stotesbury (2004:80) talks about the ways that novels like *The Translator* mix "Western popular romantic fiction" with an Islam that demands love go through "a complex three-way accommodation that involves woman, man, and God". On the other hand, Hassan (2011:197) argues that *The Translator* finds itself caught in a "reverse-Eurocentrism held hostage by… its rejection of existential freedom…and embrace of an idealized past". Nevertheless, *The Translator* is

not meant to accomplish a common ground or an in-betweenness platform from which Aboulela's narrative project launches.

Sammar's name also symbolizes her uncomfortable in-betweenness. Her name's reception in Sudan and its reception in Britain reveal the collapse of Sammar's ability to be in-between and signal the coming cultural clash. Sammar likes to "reinvent the beginnings of her life" and "make believe that she was born at home in Sudan" (5). She imagines that having been born in Khartoum, her parents would have picked a name less conspicuous than Sammar. Instead, Sammar stands out among her peers as "the only Sammar at school and at college" in Sudan (5). Interestingly, having a name as Sammar actually prevents her from using other indicators of familial identity and affiliation, because "when people talked about her, they never needed to use her last name" (5). Sammar's name cheats her out of complete belonging in Sudan. To parallel, though Sammar's name also stands out in Britain, its pronunciation makes it more familiar than most Arab names in the West. Rae asks if "you pronounce it like the season, summer," which Sammar affirms, while qualifying that its meaning is different. It "means conversations with friends, late at night" (5). As Hassan (2004:188) observes, "the meaning of her name clashes with her isolated and alienated condition in Scotland". Sammar's name, rare in Sudan, a homonym in Britain-and a false friend-that seems English, and a semantic mismatch for her personality, positions her outside both her Sudanese and British locales. Her name serves as the first sign that Sammar might not be the ideal go-between- a translator- for Sudan and Britain.

Sammar is not helpless, and "it quickly becomes apparent that the novel does not conform to the stereotype privileged by the Western publishing industry of, as Hassan (p. 309) states, "the Arab/Muslim woman who escapes from the oppressive patriarchy of her native culture to freedom and independence in the West". Moreover, Smyth (2007:172) argues that *The Translator* troubles gender stereotypes. Smyth (p. 172) observes that Rae, an

Orientalist academic who "participates in constructing the West and the Orient in gendered terms", sees his masculinity undermined by his dependency on Sammar's translations and his physical illness, which "reveals these Orientalist notions as illusory". Smyth (p. 180) sees *The Translator* as a writing-back because it undercuts "Western imperial discourses which depict Islam as a backward, barbaric religion of extremists and terrorists".

Sammar shows her sense of culture shock in her fear of speaking out of turn: "In this country, when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard as if any minute now she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (*The Translator* p. 6). The romantic relationship that occurs between them in a background of immigration speaks to the author's perception of love as a bridge across cultures. Also, it signifies a no-nonsense repulse against a race-oriented misrepresentation of Islam as well as a strong move to cut across racial and cultural boundaries with an eye towards a removal of the image of cultural homogeneity (Hassan, p. 201).

Sammar acknowledges that differences in religious and social backgrounds stand as a huge stumbling block, and potentially portend failure, as Stotesbury (p.76) states, "Sammar felt separate from him, exiled while he was in his homeland, fasting while he was eating turkey and drinking wine. They lived in worlds divided by simple facts– religion, country of origin, race– data that fills forms". Although a big hurdle is removed, namely her awareness that he is on the wagon, the fact remains that their marriage is still a long way off. Notwithstanding, Sammar cannot emphasize enough how significant Rae's decision to forego alcohol is, for it might shorten the odds on their union: "he doesn't drink anymore … He had told her that and it had been another thing which made him less threatening. Another thing which made him not so different from her" (*The Translator* p.34). Sammar's sigh of relief upon discovering that Rae is not only faith-informed with regards to the prohibition of alcohol under Sharia law, but it also carries a hope that things might eventually end well.

Aboulela's depiction of Sammar's post-Tarig Sudan exposes the country's patriarchal culture while highlighting the culture's complexity and mobility, which undermines claims of Arabo-Islamic culture's a historicity and lack of change. Like other cultures, elements of Sammar's culture can function as forces moving in opposite directions, prompting change and agency. These meanings play out in Sammar's new desire to remarry and the position of Mahasen, her aunt and mother-in-law, towards it. Having experienced Tarig's death as a total loss, Sammar comes to believe that she needs another marriage to help her refocus her life and get financial support. However, Mahasen refutes Sammar's reasons for marriage by reminding her that in "the past, widows needed protection, life is different now" and that her son is her focus (13), adding, "An educated girl like you, you know English . . . you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for?" (13). Mahasen's reference to modern women's economic independence inscribes Arab women as subjects of history, a fact that, as Amireh (1997:187) states, is "seldom acknowledged in Western representations of them". Although Mahasen's point about women's increasing economic independence illustrates a cultural change to women's advantage, her dominant approach manifests the persistence of other forms of oppression, such as the universal expectations of motherhood and aspects of patriarchy, particularly the main power grandmothers can have.

This sense of linguistic and cultural incommunicability is dramatized throughout the novel: in the fixed ideas that Scots have of Muslims and that Sudanese have of Europeans; in the incompatibility of social customs and attitudes that continue to shock or surprise Sammar after so many and even in the choice of protagonists' names. "Rae" is a near homonym to the Arabic noun "Rai" ("*ra'y*" means "opinion"), rendering Rae "opinionated" to Sammar as she tries to come to terms with what to her is his incomprehensible mix of secularism and sympathy to Islam (141). "Sammar" (literally, "conversations with friends, late at night," as she explains to Rae) is pronounced like

"summer," the homonymy working to disguise both orthographic and semantic difference (*The Translator* p.5), a difference that escapes translation. Moreover, the meaning of her name, with its associations with Bedouin lifestyle, clashes with her isolated and alienated condition in Scotland. As such, the name functions to demarcate Sammar's public persona in Scotland as a veiled, dark-skinned Muslim woman with a conflicted private life.

Sammar does not feel alienated from Rae because of his looks and his knowledge of her culture and her world. Rae is familiar with Sammar`s language and she recognizes that his manners, his old-fashioned civility, make him seem out of tune with modern Scotland and more like someone belonging to her remembered homeland, which leads to the close communication between them which progresses gradually into love, as the narrative reveals. In addition, because Sammar feels that Rae is different from the other people she meets in Scotland, she becomes open to speaking to him and he gives time to listen to her, "from the beginning she had thought that he was not one of them, not modern like them, not impatient like them. He talked to her as if she had not lost anything, as if she were the same Sammar of the past." (p.33).

The process of Rae's conversion underlines the full import of the Islamic formulation of the love story. On a cultural level Rae need only say the *shahada* for the marriage to take place and, for a time, this is all that Sammar requires of him, even if his continued indifference privately causes her concern. However, within the novel's system of values a token conversion is not acceptable, for it would compromise the religious theme. Thus, Rae must reject this route, and he and Sammar are only united after he has embraced Islam in heart and mind. The proper circumstances of this event also require a change in Sammar. The notion that a formal statement will suffice is misplaced, and it is crucial to the story's development that Sammar realizes this, "he had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone" (p. 171)

In order to bridge the cultural gap between the characters and to make her narrative more credible, Aboulela creates in Rae a "modern Orientalist for whom Islam is not a threat" and who tries to reverse the imperial past by his academic contributions about the Gulf war (Nash 2002:30). The narrative culminates in Rae's move from postcolonial politics to the acceptance of faith. In other words, Rae must cease being a foreigner, necessitating a complete cultural shift. The move to appropriate cultural difference into a familiar frame of reference is inscribed in the narrative. This needs to set him apart from other Scots and liken him to someone from her own background makes it possible for Sammar to fall in love with him, to talk to him.

In *Minaret*, Najwa in Khartoum is solely characterized by her social class, which provides her with the privileges of a Western lifestyle and education. In Khartoum, where she was born and raised, her family luxuriates in a life of excessive spending and affluence. Najwa enjoys traveling to Europe, attending parties in the American Club in Khartoum, and wearing Western fashion; this type of life becomes the cause for her family`s destruction. Najwa's former life in Khartoum is defined by her socioeconomic class, how she deals with people and how she views the world around her. When she introduces her father in the narrative, she defines him in terms of his social background and describes her feeling toward it: "He had married above himself, to better himself. His life story was of how he moved from a humble background to become manager of the president`s office via marriage into an old wealthy family. I didn`t like him to tell it, it confused me. I was too much like my mother" (*Minaret* p.8). Najwa from her birth enjoys the life of splendour and is not sympathetic to her father`s conflict to climb the social ladder. Furthermore, it is inconvenient to listen to her father`s story and she is unwilling to know about his experience. Najwa only acknowledges the fact that she belonged to a wealthy family, and this is the only identification she wants to define herself with. During the conversation with her father, when Najwa expresses how she cannot identify herself with his early struggle, he

replies, "'spoilt,' … 'the three of you are spoilt.'" She realizes what her father was thinking when he articulated those words, as if he could predict that his family would not be able to deal with hardships because they were born into prosperity and did not work for it.

Despite living in a Muslim community, Najwa and her twin Omar have never adopted the typical Muslim lifestyle; they grow up copying western pop star hairstyles and clothing, dreaming of studying abroad. In Khartoum Najwa and Omar self-identification have developed in a state of acculturation; a process by which a human being acquires the culture of a particular society from infancy,

> *You drive,' he said and I didn't like that. I drove home and he didn't put Bob Marley in the tape recorder like he usually did. He just sat next to me, quiet and distant, but he wasn't asleep. I smelt him and guessed what the smell was. But I didn't want to believe it. Hashish? Marijuana. We heard the dawn azan as we turned into our house (31).*

Najwa suffers from feelings of unsettlement and anxiety, of having been uprooted from her home and her inability to plan her own future. Being deprived of a stable country reflects her sense of losing her identity. While she is working as a housemaid for her aunt and paid £20 during Christmas, Anwar laughs and remarks, "So you're now celebrating Christmas. You've become a true citizen of London" (p.150). Najwa then states, "I don't know what I'm becoming" (p.151). She knows that her displaced self in London has been transformed, yet she is unaware exactly who she is becoming in the absence of a stable sense of home and belonging.

Najwa's relationship with Lamya's brother Tamer is too based on Islamic faith. In contrast to the assumption that the conservative Muslims appear unable to compromise Islam with British culture, Tamer succeeds in doing so harmonising the relationship between Islam and the West, "is so devout and good. No cigarettes, no girlfriend, no clubbing, no drinking. He has a beard and goes to the mosque every day" (93).

Najwa's impulsive and inappropriate behaviors have intensified after the traumatic events of displacement, loss and disorientation; consequently, she commits one of the greatest sins prohibited in Islamic religion, and becomes more distanced from religious life, which exposes her identity to a greater western influence. However, the more she experiences degradation and deviation from her actual traditions and religious beliefs, the more aware she becomes of who she was and who she is, "He was teasing me now as he shuffled the cards, Kamal an appreciative audience. They often joked about how Westernized I was, detached from Sudanese traditions" (p. 230). Soon, she realizes that her relationship with Anwar was a mistake and notices her detachment from traditions of her homeland.

Najwa's newly acquired religious identity entails her to demonstrate her Islamic spiritual attachment materially. She chooses to adopt the veil in a secular setting and appears a visibly Muslim woman. Adhering to this Islamic visible marker as a physical need to prove her belonging to the Islamic religion in a Western context, Roy (2002:23-24) states that:

> *Re-Islamisation means that Muslim identity, self-evident so long as it belonged to an inherited cultural legacy, has to express itself explicitly in a non-Muslim or Western context. The construction of a 'deculturalised' Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture*.

Moreover, clothes can also be a means to face cultural challenges and differences in a sense that, not all countries have the same standards of dress code in the public space. Clothes will construct an important part of the physical appearance that will be visible when emerging in the external world. To wear the hijab entails that the protagonists affirm their identities as a Muslims in a context that is totally hostile to their Islamic identity, and as such face all the Western cultural biases against a great number of Islamic habits, traditions, and symbols. The cultural and religious markers such as the

hijab, prayer and fasting in Western contexts create a sacred space that marks the person practicing them not simply as a devout Muslim but as a person who practices a whole culture and civilization that is considered hostile or completely alien by the West and as such places himself under the scrutinizing eyes of Western racism. Najwas cross-cultural encounter, which intersects with her religious identity, is employed by Aboulela to present the growing of Islamic spirituality that provides the protagonist with agency, a sense of belonging and independence.

The mosque is not only a place where faith is strongly grounded; it is portrayed by Aboulela also as a site for the negotiation of social and ethnic identity. Where Najwa used to identify herself with friends and relatives belonging to the Westernized elitist upper class in Khartoum, class and ethnicity are not the grounds on which she builds her relationship with the Muslim community at the mosque. Racial and social hierarchies are insignificant identifications when Najwa socializes with other women. Her new friends, Wafaa, who is originally Arab and married to an English Muslim, and Shahinaz, who is from South Asia, support Najwa and offer her a sense of inclusion among women from multiethnic backgrounds. Nash (2007: 145-6) confirms that Najwa's negotiation of her Islamic identity goes beyond cultural and political differences:

> *It is indicative of a modern globalized environment in that she makes an individual choice in becoming a born-again Muslim. In the process not only does she reject the secular values of a westernized world that stretches from London to Khartoum, she adopts a position that is a conscious riposte to these … But she uses this experience in London to embrace a religiosity that emphasizes personal behavior over culture and politics*.

In the new settings, the protagonists of both novels are involved in a struggle to adjust to the western cultural norms. However, they have only succeeded when they made recourse to Islamic practices and Sharia. In that space between home and the new country, Sammar has managed to reach

stability when her beloved has converted to Islam, meanwhile Najwa turn to a practicing Muslim as a sign of self-redefinition.

4.9 Space of Freedom

Najwa's response to Western modernity and secularism in London triggers her to search for spiritual fulfilment. She has felt emptiness and bleakness since she was in Sudan where her Islamic affiliation was devoid of spirituality, yet she has not felt the urgent need until she experiences the secular West, as a migrant, where her feeling of emptiness is stimulated. Najwa's developing religious identity upon attaching herself to the Muslim community at the mosque reminds her of how she envied the group of Muslim students at Khartoum University: "I envied them something I didn't have but I didn`t know what it was. I didn`t have a name for it. Whenever I heard the *azan* in Khartoum, whenever I heard the Qur'an recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and a space would open up, hollow and numb" (*Minaret* p.143). Then she realizes that it is spiritual pleasure she was looking for:

> *I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This was what I had envied in our gardener reciting the Qur'an, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I hear the Qur'an recited, there wasn't bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert* (P. 243).

In fact, the need for a sense of spiritual pleasure to get rid of the emptiness and bleakness-when she sees Muslim students praying at the university in Khartoum, or the gardener reciting the Qur'an at home- inspires Najwa to search for spiritual rootedness. So, her decision to ground herself in a faith-based identity and connect to the Islamic faith stems from a personal desire in London where there are no established Muslim authorities.

Hassan (2008) that Aboulela's Islamic novels maintain the traditional patriarchal hegemony and reject women's personal freedom. For Hassan, Islam and feminism are unsuited in Aboulela's fiction. In the same regard, Nash (p. 147) maintains that "Aboulela's discourse is never stridently feminist, nor does it set out to condemn male Muslim practice per se.". He (p. 149) finds in Aboulela's fiction traces of "traditionalism that still adhere to … her representation of Muslim women." Hassan criticizes Aboulela's Islamic perspective which rejects feminism and Nash condemns her for complying with patriarchal tradition. Najwa expresses her consent for Tamer to have a second wife, which is an explicit acknowledgment of polygamy: "You must promise me you'll take a second wife… Because I might not be able to have children". The researcher believes that Hassan's and Nash's assessment of Aboulela's Islamic feminism is partially true. Aboulela minimizes Najwa's options within Islamic discourse which, the researcher argues, is inspired by the male-interpreted Holy texts, yet at the same time they ignore the Islamic centrality and perspective she asks to be respected while reading her novels.

Likewise, Najwa's brother, Omar, plunges into the Westernized lifestyle: he drinks alcohol, goes to Western nightclubs to dance, listens to pop music and decides to move to London permanently once he finishes school in Sudan. He goes further to admire modern life and Western trends, so Najwa narrates how he perceives the West as an advanced civilization and advocates colonialism: "He believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left." Even though Najwa plunges into the same life as her brother, she is surprized when Omar defends colonialism. Unlike her brother, Najwa never thinks of moving away from Sudan to settle in London, while she still clings to the Westernization that is associated with her class in Khartoum. Najwa refuses her father's suggestion to send her to study abroad and her brother sarcastically describes her attitude as being "very patriotic." Hence, Omar represents the Orientalist discourse which reflects a persistent

prejudice against Arab–Islamic people and their culture as inferior, uncivilized and needing to be rescued.

Moreover, Najwa's consciousness of her upper class and privilege is mirrored in her views and life, especially when she is driving a car to the university, as she thinks: "Was I not an emancipated young woman driving her car to university? In Khartoum, only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of students were girls– that should make me feel good about myself" (p.10). In her view, emancipation is confined to her upper class, who enjoy social freedom and economic privilege in Khartoum. Due to the socioeconomic class she belongs to, Najwa keeps herself away from the underprivileged girls who do not enjoy social freedom like her or cannot afford a car. Her awareness of her privileged class and the freedom she enjoys in society reveals the shallowness and arrogance in her character which will play a role later in her struggle to survive in exile. However, upon exposing how privileged she is, Najwa prefers to rely on her brother Omar to drive. She lacks the confidence to drive on her own and being always dependent is a theme that constantly appears during her experience in Khartoum.

Najwa contemplates her position reflecting her inability to be independent, "I wished I could feel like an emancipated young student driving her own car with confidence…. In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of students were girls- that should make me feel good about myself. But I preferred it when Omar was with me," (p. 10).

Reflecting on the fact that there are no differences between men and women in the grave, Najwa is stressing not only a religious belief but holds an emancipatory philosophical note, "All through life there were distinctions– toilets for men, toilets for women; clothes for men, clothes for women– then, at the end, the graves were identical. Similarly, Nazneen, as Ali (pp. 22-3) states, is "an unspoilt girl from the village… Not tall. Not short. Around five

foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied".

Minaret describes the trials and tribulations of its protagonist Najwa who experiences a sharp and dramatic decline from her privileged lifestyle and obvious material wealth in Sudan and becomes a maid servant in the UK. Coming to terms with diasporic displacement, she has to make choices on her own, as no family members or genuine friends are around to dictate her, to guide her or to reprimand her for making any iconoclastic decision concerning lifestyle or behaviour preferences. All the decisions and choices she makes in London are well studied and preceded by long thoughts and contemplations. She chooses to embrace Islamic identity with all its ramifications and manifestations in individual and social relationships and moral and social values. More significantly, she decides to wear the *hijab* and discontinue her illicit affair with Anwar the atheist, socialize with masjid-going Islamic women and finally prioritize the observance of *hajj* over her romantic attachment with Tamer. No external, familial, domestic, social and cultural-pressures or inhibitions influence these informed and studied choices Najwa makes. She uses her freedom in London to come back to Islam and not to go away from it. She disapproves of the liberty that is generally attributed and imputed to indulging in moral laxity and licentiousness common in big, Western cities like London:

> *Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? Aunty Eva, Anwar's flatmates. Omar [her only brother] would never know unless I wrote to him. Uncle Saleh was across the world. A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack, dealt a blow to my mother's marriage, and mild, modern Omar, instead of beating me, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called* ***freedom*** (175).

In the neo-Orientalist representation of Muslim women, freedom suggests embracing permissive, Western way of life or abandoning religious

identity and practices to adopt secular lifestyle or rejecting Islamic teachings in favour of Western modernity and its associated values. Aboulela offers an alternative definition of freedom, that is, the right to choose one's way of life based on the Islamic worldview, to adopt Islamic identity and to embrace Islamic principles.

The supportive ties that Najwa discovers in the mosque are starkly contrasted with the supposed '*freedoms'* of the non-religious world, which Aboulela portrays as being constrictive rather than liberatory. The notion of liberty in Western thought, since the time of Hobbes's (1615) *Leviathan*, has meant a *freedom* from external constraints and the right of individual self-determination. In Muslim thought, on the other hand, *freedom*, or *hurriyya*, has typically been regarded as an inner state of liberty from the tyranny of the senses, or as something that is experienced only as part of the collective group of the faithful. It would be wrong to suggest that Muslims have not seriously debated the concept of freedom over the centuries. However, *freedom* has been compared to 'perfect slavery', which indicates not only that slavery, but also that the institution was often used as a metaphor for understanding 'the relationship between Allah the "master" and his human "slaves" (Bostom 2006:3). Aboulela challenges Western perceptions of what freedom entails when her protagonist desires a position as her employer's family slave, or concubine:

> *My involvement in his wedding to a young suitable girl who knows him less than I do. She will mother children who spend more time with me … I would like to be his family's concubine, like something out of The Arabian Nights, with life-long security and a sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom in this modern time* (215).

The veil is also liberating and hence helps to remove it from its consistent association with Muslim patriarchal oppression, the novel here demystifies the *hijab* and renders it a source of comfort. Through highlighting this aspect of the *hijab,* the novel is writing back to some unexamined

assumptions in some feminist circles about the nature of the *hijab*. In this sense, the novel is entering into a dialogue with other feminist movements. Aboulela seems to suggest that there is no point in trying to ignore and transcend differences among women of different cultural backgrounds because they do exist. Instead, feminist movements need to engage in conversations and listen to different voices. The novel seems to urge feminists to find ways of hearing 'multiple, divergent and even discordant voices with clarity and resonance' (Kinser, 2003:110). According to Kinser this can be achieved if feminists retrain themselves 'to hear the cacophony in new ways, sometimes to allow for a little discord, other times to focus on underlying rhythms' (Kinser, p. 110). Kinser explains that these 'concordant' or 'discordant' voices are 'interdependent … and heuristic' and hence feminists should not think of differences as something either fixed or blended together nor as something that can always be transcended, but as something that needs to be engaged with seriously and profoundly (Kinser, p. 111).

Najwa represents the aristocratic Sudanese adolescent who spends her life copying western women lifestyle, she did not wear a veil, and had the total freedom to attend night clubs and wear revealing clothes, in her description, the protagonist states: "The party at the American club was in full swing when Omar and I arrived .We walked into the tease of red and blue discount lights and the Gap Bandages "Say Oops Upside Your Head..." My trousers are too tight. "An awkward twisting around to see my hips in the mirror" (*Minaret* p. 23). It is worth noting that, behaviors of this type are forbidden in Islamic religion, because Islamic rules constitutes of a set of prohibitions and permission, these permissions do not include women's attending night clubs, imitation of the west clothing style, and unethical behaviors.

Najwa comments "this empty space was called freedom" (175). Aboulela explains this (Chambers 2009:100) by saying that "Najwa's frustration with herself. Instead of making her do something, she's not doing anything with this freedom, and it just feels like an emptiness. I have this

feeling that, especially for young people in the West, freedom of choice just becomes a kind of confusion. They have a lot of choices, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are making the right choices. Freedom then can be a negative thing, rather than a galvanizing force."

Since freedom has different meanings in different cultural environment (meanings that may be incompatible with one another depending, for example, on whether a certain society places a priority on individuality or collectivity), no cultural or religious tradition has ever claimed that it is against freedom. Yet Aboulela rejects freedom wholesale, even though what she appears to be reacting against is a narrowly defined notion of personal freedom that she construes as Western and anti-religious (Hassan 2008:314).

Aboulela states that (according to Chambers 2009:92), "I used to look with a kind of admiration at the girls in university who wore the *hijab*, but it was only when I came to Britain that I felt free, that I wasn't surrounded by my friends or my family, and I could do what I wanted. And ironically, when I first came, and when I started to wear the *hijab* in 1987, nobody even understood what it meant. I mean, in London it just had no connotations whatsoever, so it was really a very good time to begin covering my head, without it having any kind of repercussions."

4.10 Summary of the Chapter

The chapter stars with an introduction. Then, an analysis is given of the plots of the two novels. Homesickness and longing for a geographic or spiritual space (imagined or real) in a diasporic environment is discussed from the protagonists' viewpoint. Islamic symbols such as mosques (as religious sites of worship) and veil (*hijab*) (as a marker of visibility and invisibility of Muslim women) are also discussed to add up to the general atmosphere of the sense of belonging and to the representation of Muslim affiliation and devotedness. The assertion of Islamic identity of the major characters is also presented alongside with the religious activities and rituals such as the recitation of Qur'an, prayer, fasting, and *hajj*. These rituals and actions deepen

the characters coherence to religion and inject in them the stability and belonging. Religious language, i.e., the Arabic, is discussed, too. A language that carries emotive and spiritual charges to empower devout Muslims to face the atrocities of life in exile and draws them close to the kingdoms of Allah. Nevertheless, language by itself is not a guarantee of an identity that protagonists strive hard to assume. Culture is also discussed in relation to diasporic secular space. Secular Westernized lifestyle fails to tempt protagonists to cherish the chance of the freedom available to indulge in sensual pleasures since sharia laws teach Muslims to observe their behaviour in every aspect of their daily activity. It is a freedom that constitute a cultural clash which makes the protagonists reject the in-betweenness that would deprive them from their Islamic faith and piety. Against the backdrop of alienation and trauma that defines both Najwa's and Sammar's experiences of migration, Aboulela's novels offer religion as a source of comfort and solace. The heroines of both novels hold to religion in Multicultural settings. A clear message is also delivered to the Western reader showing that Islam enlightens the life of Muslims and that freedom in the secular environment does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choice automatically mean that individuals make the right decision.

In conclusion, the researcher argues that the struggle to adapt to a new environment, to balance the domestic with the public and to redefine the role of religion in one's life can be more difficult, and constitute a dilemma, for women living in a diasporic community, which can aggravate an unease and a discomfort with one's own culture, for being held hostage by two cultures and yet not belonging to either. The heroines are displaced in the land that they migrated to. They feel like strangers in an unfamiliar setting where both of them long for their native land, Sudan. As a result, they both try to take advantage of the Multicultural setting in Aberdeen and London. They go to the mosque and gather with minorities like them to create a sense of home. Thus, Aboulela points out the positive aspects about Multiculturalism such as

the existence of mosque and Halal meet stores and as well as the dark sides of Multiculturalism such as hinting at hidden racism and the struggle to belong to the majority culture. In both Novels, Aboulela describes the journey of female protagonists that gain their strength from their spiritual devotion. Aboulela says: “Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing... I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

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Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter is intended to give a summary of and general conclusion to the research, also a discussion of the findings, and recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

5.1 Summary and Conclusion

Aboulela in her two novels which are studied her, presents devout Muslim women as the main characters, who show an ever-present awareness of their religious identity. In other words, they know themselves deeply as Muslims and both consciously and unconsciously live as Muslims. Both novels depict the main characters' religious states of mind and the pervasiveness of religion in their daily lives. In this way, the narratives represent Muslim identity for Muslim women as far from imposed but central to their lives and well-being. The main characters' religious states of mind even align the narrative logic of Aboulela's fiction to a religious one.

The researcher argues that Aboulela writes about people who have faith and about the challenges of practicing one's faith in the modern secular world. *The Translator* and *Minaret* reflect the integration of Islam into the Western secular scene. Such an integration would encourage and enable the balancing of religious loyalties, specifically Islamic, with other loyalties, thus initiating new forms of conversation across cultural identities. For all the nuanced differences between the two novels, they share a preoccupation with the religious dimension, which is a reality in the lives of many characters, especially those who experience forms of displacement and spiritual isolation in diasporic settings. Both Sammar and Najwa find a spiritual home in their Islamic faith and challenge stereotypical assumptions of women's oppression in Islam. It is only through a return to or discovery of Islam that characters

start to come to terms with the new space as well as hold on to markers of space such as rituals, mosques, dress, and community feeling. Not only has religion provided the individual Muslim with a source of hope, but religion has also armed them with protection from committing sins, and from self-harm. For Aboulela, religion is the key to finding peace and obtaining strength to face obstacles of all kinds. I agree with Nash that the non-Muslim environment, where Sharia or Islamic rituals are not imposed by the state or society, help the protagonists to make individual decisions to be pious Muslims who split from traditional or political Islam.

In Britain, the Muslims' situation has radically changed; their relations with British people were hostile, the tensions increased considerably. British people believed that Islam is promoting violence and crimes; this stereotype has led to the spread of Islamophobia, a term referred to as the "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or people who practice Islam". The term has become a debatable ideology that has characterized the image of Islam in the last two centuries. With regard to this, the two novels attempt to reflect a tendency among some other Arab British writers to open corridors of dialogue with other communities in Britain. This tendency, which, the researcher argue, is a partial by-product of their immigration and settlement experiences.

It was her faith in Islam that provides strength to Sammar throughout the novel whether it was her husband's death or when Rae was not willing to convert. Najwa's commitment to Islamic principles and her solidarity with other Muslim women has rescued her from a state of loss and despair. Moreover, it is the universality of Islam and not ethnicity or nationality that becomes the major defining element of Najwa and Tamer's relationship. Aboulela promotes a personal matter of faith focused on and defined by the private sphere. By presenting Sammar and Najwa as transnational Islamic women, Aboulela is reversing the Orientalism which always perceive Arab woman as 'faceless woman' with no intellect but an oppressed subject. In her

representation of Sammar and Najwa, Aboulela creates a counter narrative of Orientalist masculinity and negotiates a way out of stagnant binaries of West and East and offers a model of 'progressive socially engaged femininity' rooted in Islamic tradition. She has reiterated the account of Islam as a backward and oppressive religion and Muslim women as powerless victims of Islam. Depicting Muslim women's deep spiritual bonds with Islam, Aboulela through these novels provides an alternative to the dominant paradigms of representations of Muslim women in the West since mostly they are depicted as victims of Islam awaiting rescue by the West or escapees of Islam who can only feel liberated in the West.

Aboulela's *Minaret* highlights the dilemma of an uprooted Muslim woman who has slipped down the social ladder in a capitalist society. It also emphasizes the role of faith as a power that can overcome all the difficulties and provide an alternative space for belonging for the individual in exile. A minaret with its architectural structure, according to together with the dome has become a symbol of Muslim identity and as minarets foreground the Muslim actors, the veil, reveals the Muslim devout as pious, in public life. Thus, among other Islamic signs, the veil deserves special emphasis because while in itself it is a mute symbol, it has an agency that functions both in personal and cultural domains while at the same time argues brings the personal under public attention. At the end, we see how Najwa's faith becomes a rescuer from all her disillusionments and torments of her diasporic life. She does not rely on Western feminist ideas to seek shelter amid the tribulations she faces, rather she discovers an alternative mode of empowerment and contentment in the female area at Regent's Park Mosque.

On the other hand, the religious theme in *The Translator* makes it an ideological novel, a work of fiction that seeks to persuade readers of the 'correctness' of a particular way of interpreting the world. Aboulela also succeeded in delivering a stronger message about the capability of shaping a profound identity for Eastern/ Muslim women to overcome the western

cultural control and its stereotypical labeling. The title of the novel itself is a reflection of Aboulela's attempts to translate Islamic faith and tradition, not only so as to be understood by non-Muslim readers, but also to be situated as an alternative insight into Western perceptions of romance. Sammar's relationship with Rae may drive the plot of the novel, but as I have suggested, it is secondary when her romantic desires for him are replaced with her recognition of God's position in her life. By portraying Sammar as a committed Muslim, Aboulela highlights the much more important relationship that Sammar tries to maintain and improve- the relationship with God.

5.2 Findings

Based on the discussion and analysis which are conducted beforehand to tackle these two novels, the researcher reaches the forthcoming findings:

1. Place where the two protagonists long and belong plays a significant role in the two novels. The novels create a diasporic space which seeks to define an Islamic discourse that enables the woman protagonist to find a highly unconventional home. Home, as we have seen, is a state of mind rather than a geographical location. Aboulela has emphasized in her works the importance of devotion in granting the person a spiritual refuge in the absence of the homeland. Aboulela presents nostalgia and faith in her fiction as important ingredients to provide the characters with a solid frame of reference. In exile, religion becomes a home from home, and an anchor for a troubled and tortured identity. Sammar works as a translator in Scotland to earn livelihood, and Najwa works as a maid in London after her family's disintegration and her financial decadence. Both women do not work in their homeland as Aboulela herself had a sheltered upbringing in Sudan. In both the novels, women protagonists are Sudanese as Aboulela is herself and Islam is the basis of their relationship to men in their respective lives.

This yearning to belong becomes the basis of Sammar's relationship with Rae which manifests place’s entanglement with emotions and social interaction. Once Sammar feels accepted, her sense of place changes from

alienation to belonging. As a matter of fact, right after this conversation at Rae's house, Sammar literally feels at home, as Sudan transposes to Aberdeen for the first time. At the beginning of their relationship, Anwar personifies home and belonging to Najwa. Yet he refuses to marry her, and she starts to experience further displacement and alienation. Unlike in The Translator, Najwa's emotional attachment to Anwar does not give her a sense of belonging. Once Najwa engages in a new beginning as a housemaid, she recalls her past that has led to this present. But, in contrast to the downward movement Najwa has suffered in London, she keeps her sight upwards, where she can see the minaret at the Regent's Park Mosque. The minaret signifies the site of survival to which Najwa resorts by connecting with the Muslim community of women at the mosque. Islam provides a sense of belonging as it allows these two characters to come together to create a place of their own, away from their old hostile environments.

2. The culture of the ex-coloniser and the culture of the ex-colonised are expressed in the two novels in a cross-cultural encounter.

What makes this novel (*The Translator*) different from most other Western romantic fiction is Aboulela's central deployment of Islam and its practices through her protagonist. She presents an alternative insight into the idea of romance, where desire for one's would-be partner is pushed aside in order to adhere to one's religious observances. It, then, is a story of spiritual growth, with its central conflict being not between colonizers and colonized or between traditional norms and the violent intrusion of modernity, or between oppressive patriarchy and a feminist, liberatory impulse-major themes of postcolonial fiction. Rather, the conflict is between worldly desires and spiritual internal struggle that is an important theme in religious literature of all traditions. Sammar's rootedness offers her a mode of resistance to acculturation and guides her through the cultural conflict that she experiences during her travels which entails Rae to seek spiritual acculturation as an attempt from Aboulela to counter and challenge the colonial discourse.

However, I believe this image of the Winter Gardens which house tropical plants portrays Sammar's dislocation in self-imposed exile.

Moving from the specific to the general, Aboulela describes finally the differences between Western and Arab societies at the cultural, economic, and political levels. She explains in several places the impact of Western cultural colonization and domination over Arab countries in picturing them as third world, while Western countries have been shown as first world countries. Furthermore, the west is portrayed as the land of freedom and equality, where everyone is free to choose his/her religion, political interest, and is treated fairly and justly, while third world countries are portrayed as backward, illiterate, and uncivilized. However, the falseness of the western system and their vague labels is exposed when we see that Arabs, Muslims and third world citizens, living in the west, are treated aggressively, labeling them as aliens and others.

Sammar is attracted to Rae because he is different and understands her culture and religion in contrast to other colleagues like Jennifer, the head of the department who is disappointed to discover that Sammar has not been victimized at the hands of the immigration authorities. Rae's reasonable and sensible attitudes toward the geopolitics of the Middle East set him apart from Orientalists and Eurocentric academics. She respects him for his objectivity, detachment, and knowledge, and is eager to know his opinions on Islam despite the fact he is not a Muslim, so far.

The failure of the romantic relationship that links Najwa and Tamer, and he asks her to marry him despite their differences in age and class, this failure is due is grounded on religious piety. Najwa decides to give up her love for Tamer for the sake of his spiritual growth. From Aboulela's Islamic perspective, which aligns with the *halal* identifications of her novels like *The Translator*, this romance should end with marriage despite any difference because men and women have equal status and value before God, and piety alone differentiates one individual from another. Although they share the

same religious identity- like Sammar and Rae by the novel's end-their romantic relation does not end happily.

Aboulela emphasizes how it is not only western audiences who stereotype Islam and Muslims, as claimed by some to be, but such people exist everywhere, and it is not uncommon that divisions exist inside Muslim communities, as exemplified through the image of secular, elite, educated Lamya, who in a house party she organized, invites a belly dancer who comes in full *hijab* and begins to strip her clothes one by one, hopes to entertain her western friends by making fun of *hijab* wearing women and separates herself from them through presenting a self-image as a liberated woman for whom oppressing connotations of *hijab* has no value. Western values, principles and power represent the stimulus to the Islamic nation and Muslim individual's identity figuration. Nevertheless, the relation between Muslim and the West is among the major factors which control the establishment of identity in Diaspora. Reading Aboulela's narrative as differing from "typical migrant novels," in which either the female character is liberated through sexuality or meets some westernized characters who help her see what is wrong with her culture, in accordance with the ideology Aboulela is conveying, her characters do not need to meet some English people who will teach them Western liberal values, and thus make them feel at home in the host country. Since Aboulela's characters do not feel the need to assimilate because of their given their solid spiritual identity which prevent them from being dragged further away from religion and commit sins and make big mistakes.

3. The identity of the characters in the two novels is mirrored in various ways. The novels portray Islam as a common interest that can function as a basis of coalition among women of different origins and classes in the age of globalization and capitalist expansion. In *The Translator* and *Minaret* hybridity and acculturation are the main features of the Islam that both protagonists adopt. The religious life is first understood by Najwa as a way out of a dysfunctional sexual relationship, or perhaps even a replacement for

it. She moves towards religious passion as a substitute for physical passion. This type of transference is consistent with Aboulela's earlier novel *The Translator*, in which religious longing constitutes another kind of corporal desire, related to but separate from the desire for sexual and emotional intimacy. This point is clearly shown in *Minaret* when Anwar confronts Najwa for the last time in front of her apartment after she adopts *hijab*. Najwa celebrates the *hijab*'s cloak of invisibility, which spares her the sexual harassment she experienced when she wore Western clothes, and she also recognizes the subtle allure of concealment. Thus, hijab marks the distinction between public and private while at the same time reinforcing the community feeling among women who wear it.

Minaret explores the crucial role a mosque can play for Muslim women regardless of their social class, ethnicities, education, language, and age. The mosque is not only a place to practice faith for Najwa but also a point where she makes social connections that overcome social class divisions, language barriers and ethnic borders. Islam ends Najwa's worries of being isolated by providing her with a new network of friends whose solidarity is based on faith. What Najwa manifests in her conversation with Tamer shows her identity only as Muslim, is a negation of national identity markers and their related connotations. Not only being British, but also being Sudanese does not have any significance for Najwa, as both have failed to provide her with the love, support, and sense of belonging she had been longing for. National identity markers remain insufficient in dealing with the identity problems Najwa is having, whereas religion is curing the psychical, psychological, and social problems Najwa is having in exile.

The examples of the religious language that Sammar naturally uses in her every day speech can also support the poststructuralist argument that language, the words and phrases that are handed down to us, can significantly affect the formation of our experiences. The mediation of language, ideologies

and discourses do not diminish the importance or reality of the experiences for the people who have them.

The representations of religious identity in the narratives of Najwa and Sammar's way of living, thinking, and feeling and of the way they are always aware of their identity as Muslims, then, strongly suggests how Islam for some Muslim women is a central feature of their lives and a system of belief they feel comfortable with, rather than an ideology imposed on them with which they cannot connect, the way many Western representations suggest. Through these representations Muslim identity is rooted in Muslims' lives because of its having basis in the spirituality and sacred texts of Islam. It is religious piety that empowers them to ignore their differences and give up their inclinations. Tamer realizes that piety provides a sense of empowerment and satisfaction with what Allah bestows. Islamic faith becomes the ground which Sammar invokes for a possibility of re-assessing and re-inventing her sense of identity and belonging against all odds. Eventually, her Islamic faith offers her a spiritual home in exile. Therefore, religious faith is crucial for the orientation of Muslims' way of live, because it prompts development of the self, and represent an anchoring motive for living in Diaspora

4. The identity of the characters is not affected by the place and culture of the ex-coloniser.

Aboulela, through these novels, provides an alternative to the dominant paradigms of representations of Muslim women in the West since mostly they are depicted as victims of Islam awaiting rescue by the West or escapees of Islam who can only feel liberated in the West. Although Arab women novelists write about Muslim woman's struggles against Islamic custom and male oppression, establishing the feminist theme as an inter-text, Aboulela swims against the tide and open up new views between Muslim female and Islam in a diasporic space. According to Aboulela Islam is not only a part of the cultural or social norms but also a part of the protagonists' faith that actually satisfy their spiritual needs. The Islamic views expressed by Sammar

and Najwa are very consistent with Aboulela's, for her, a personal religious identity provides more stability than national identity, since she can carry religion with her wherever she goes, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from her, as she contends. Not only has it provided the individual Muslim with a source of hope, but religion has also armed them with protection from committing sins, and from self-harm. For Aboulela, religion is the key to finding peace and obtaining strength to face obstacles of all kinds.

Sammar is, right from the beginning, portrayed as a religious person, but the events of her life test her dedication to Islam. These challenges come in the form of her husband's death and her eventual romance with Rae, but also promise an improved and peaceful self if she is able to overcome them. These events teach Sammar that her faith cannot be taken for granted and that her faith is not static but demands to be continuously and consciously developed. In this regard, Aboulela attempts to portray a Muslim woman whose faith needs not be seen as a political act, but as a very personal one-one that influences a very common human desire for self-betterment through prayer. On the other hand, Najwa and her brother were subject to western culture influence, they have been taught that a man has to be accorded total freedom and independence. However, adopting western values and principles has created fragile ties with their religion.

Sammar is attracted towards Rae because he views Islam from different perspective and Najwa too is attracted towards Tamer because he is a conservative Muslim despite having Western education and exposure. In fact, Rae is drawn towards Sammar because of her commitment towards Islam and Tamer too holds the same reason in case of Najwa. Sammar is a devout Muslim since the beginning of the novel and learns the true essence of Islamic teachings at the end, but Najwa is a "twice born" Muslim, from a Westernized girl she eventually becomes a devout Muslim.

5.3 Recommendations

The most important value of literature is that it nourishes our emotional lives because human emotions speak a universal language regardless of when or where the work was written. So, the researcher recommends that:

- Simplified and/or abridged versions of Aboulela's literary works should be taught to students at different scholastic levels since the language is authentic and the experience is close to home. It is also motivating to tell students that the author is Sudanese, and some names and places are also Sudanese.
- Students at tertiary level should be encouraged to conduct research related to Sudanese authors since, as far as the researcher can tell, some university libraries lack any references to Sudanese authors in particular and Leila Aboulela in special.
- Literature enriches experience and empowers readers with insights and the capacity to make decisions and solve problems therefor, bookshops and public libraries should contain literary works such as Aboulela’s.
- Literature based on culture and identity should be taught to students for it teaches them the kind of life other nations live and helps them understand and respect people around them.
- Sudanese intellectual and academic circles should acknowledge and appreciate the works of Leila Aboulela instead of waiting for this praise and recognition to come from overseas.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Studies

Post-colonialism is a domain still fertile for more investigation and discussion. Moreover, post-colonialist writers are still apt to surprise us with new insights and discoveries. It is no wonder that Aboulela is one of these writers whose literary achievement is open to criticism and analysis. Despite the number of studies and research conducted to analyze and discuss her two novels: *Minaret* and *The Translator*, there are still some corners need to be

shed light on. For instance, what are the reasons that impede the protagonists to acculturate -positively- in a secular environment other than their religious affiliation? Is it the hostility- or rather, the imagined hostility- they sense on the *Other* side? Failure to cope with situations they find themselves in contradicts with the assumption that Muslims- or at least most of them- are tolerant and able to overcome atrocities of life and trivialities due to their faith and strong cling to God. Critique is also launched on the way characters are portrayed, as well-structured, ideal, Muslim women. This logically unrealistic image is hard to find, even by devout Muslims, in everyday encounter. So, researchers need to dig deep to find the root-cause of this perfection. The Sufi spirit that lingers within the protagonists' incessant quest for spiritual purity should also be scrutinized. There are also other literary works written by Aboulela which are available and open to scrutiny, interpretation, and close investigation by applying tools such as colonialism, feminism, masculinism, secularism, religion, ethnicity, culture, and so on, in diasporic environment.

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