

Space of Freedom and Cross-cultural Encounter in Aboulela's *Minaret*

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Abstract

Leila Aboulela, as one of the Muslim Anglophone novelists, attempts in her narrative to convey diverse experiences of diasporic Muslim women and the challenges they face amidst transcultural spaces. This paper aims to negotiate the representation of the narrative in the cultural spaces in the diaspora and the protagonist's attempts to adhere to her religious affiliation in *Minaret* (2005), a novel which is written by Leila Aboulela. The paper attempts to give answers to questions related to cross-cultural encounters and to the significance of place and culture in sharpening the protagonist's adherence to identity. The researcher uses the analytical-descriptive approach to study the novel. To collect and analyse data, primary and secondary sources are used such as the novel *Minaret*, books and scientific journals and the Internet. The researcher finds that Islam is used in this narration as a shaping social factor in the lives of devout and non-devout Muslim women and that the cross-cultural encounter in the novel helps the protagonist to choose to adhere to her religious identity suggesting that neither place nor 'other' cultures can divert her from her own choice.

Key words: Anglophone novelists, diasporic Muslim, cross-cultural encounter, religious identity

المستخلص

ليلي أبو العلا واحدة من الروائيين المسلمين الذين يكتبون بالإنجليزية، فهي تحاول في روايتها نقل تجارب متنوعة للنساء المسلمات في الشتات والتحديات التي يواجهنها وسط فضاء متعدد الثقافات. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى مناقشة تمثيل السرد في الفضاءات الثقافية في الشتات ومحاولات بطله الرواية الالتزام بانتماها الديني في رواية (منارة) التي ألفتها ليلي أبو العلا في (2005). تحاول الورقة تقديم إجابات للأسئلة المتعلقة بالتداخل الثقافي وأهمية المكان والثقافة في شحذ تمسك البطل بالهوية. استخدم الباحث المنهج الوصفي التحليلي لدراسة الرواية. تستخدم في جمع وتحليل البيانات مراجع أولية وثانوية مثل رواية (منارة) والكتب والمجلات العلمية والشبكة العنكبوتية. ووجد الباحث أن الإسلام يستخدم في هذا السرد كعامل اجتماعي مؤثر في حياة المسلمات المتدينات وغير المتدينات وأن التواصل الثقافي في الرواية يساعد البطل على اختيار التمسك بهويتها الدينية مما يشير إلى أنه لا مكان ولا الثقافات "الأخرى" يمكن أن تصرفها عن اختيارها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتاب الرواية بالإنجليزية، المسلمون في الشتات، التداخل الثقافي، الهوية الدينية.

Introduction

Leila Aboulela's identity as an Arab, African, Muslim novelist, and later as a true diasporic, affects her narratives. Choosing self-imposed exile takes her far

away from home and compels her to seek solidarity in newer cultural spaces. Displacement and spiritual estrangement lead her to experience new cultures that challenge her nominal religiosity.



She tries to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern cultures by portraying, in her novels, Muslim women's struggles. She encourages dialogues and interactions among cultures to resist stereotyping and misconceptions about Islam, Arabs, and Africans. Her novel *Minaret* is written in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack which repetitively shows Islam and Muslims as 'the Other' in the Western secular setting. Nash (2012:27)¹ notes that critique of traditional beliefs in diaspora communities in favor of 'liberal Western values' is common among migrant fiction.

Minaret presents, the protagonist and narrator, Najwa, by portraying her present status in the world, and it continues to narrate her life in her homeland in Sudan and her early exodus into exile with her family. After being forced into exile and deprived of her social and financial status, Najwa describes her sense of anxiety and isolation in the place she lives. The description represents downward motion: Najwa's 'going down' and 'sliding' to a 'low' place. This movement is limited due to the space it occupies. Although Najwa was born in Khartoum to an affluent father, life in exile affects her financial resources. Najwa's cultural space is in London, and when she starts to know it for the first time, it symbolizes an invitation to explore its cultural setting. This space is intertwined with a set of cognitive challenges that disrupt narrative thinking to pursue an ontological search for the self, and thus Najwa's world would be disrupted by some sort of difference. So, 'the other' is represented here by London.

Najwa represents the aristocratic Sudanese adolescent who spends her life copying the Western female lifestyle, she did not wear a veil and had the total freedom to attend nightclubs 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... 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 the Islamic religion because Islamic rules constitute a set of prohibitions and permissions, these permissions do not include women attending nightclubs, imitating the West's clothing style, and unethical behaviors.

In a different setting, Najwa realizes that she becomes interested when Anwar's friends exchange views about Sudanese politics. However, she becomes upset when Islam and religion are discussed, not only because she considers it to be part of her culture and tradition, but rather separate from that, but also because she feels it is a missing part in her identity. When she expresses her opinion that Ramadan is a typical Islamic practice and that, in Khartoum, she always fasts during the month, her friends comment that she has become 'Westernized' and separated from her 'Sudanese traditions'. Najwa's fasting in Khartoum is a symbolic Islamic practice like an inherited tradition that has no meaning or spiritual value. Najwa, at this point, knows that she is 'alone' despite their company. This moment and long after that, Najwa experiences emptiness inside her, and this gathering fails to solace her, give her stability or bring her a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, Regents Park Mosque is a place where the *hijab* unites Muslim women. Najwa feels that the uniform-like *hijab* has the function of, as Gole (1996:142)² 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”. However, through this effect, the *hijab* gains significance and helps the formation of group solidarity. The importance of the *hijab* also helps to ignite feelings of hostility, where “irritation is too narrow a word” (Gole p.123)³ to describe the protagonist’s feelings about this headcover. Wearing the *hijab* in the mosque unites Muslim women and gives them a sense of belonging. Without this headscarf, ethnic differences seem to distance Najwa from the Muslim women she knows. In *Minaret* Aboulela tackles the themes of dislocation, border crossings, and cultural boundaries from an Islamic perspective thus *Minaret* is regarded as a representative of “Halal fiction” (Ghazoul 2001)⁴.

Spivak asserts that an immigrant woman suffers from double colonization; she is both a woman and an immigrant. Therefore, religion enables her to avoid her identity crisis in the West and to be assured of her place in immigration for integration. Unfortunately, the immigrant Muslims always need to prove their innocence, because their Eastern culture is perceived as hostile (Mamdani 2004:15)⁵. In a word, Islam ends Najwa’s dilemma of being isolated and alienated by providing her with a new network of friends whose companionship is constructed on faith.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze one of Aboulela’s novels, *Minaret*. The study addresses cultural encounters in a diasporic space and their effects on the protagonist’s endeavor to assert and practice her religious identity.

Questions of the Study

1. How are the culture of the ex-colonizer and the culture of the ex-colonized expressed in *Minaret*?
2. To what extent is the identity of the characters affected by the place and culture of the ex-colonizer in *Minaret*?

Literature Review

Minaret: Plot and Analysis

The plot of the story told in *Minaret* begins with Najwa’s life in Sudan’s capital, Khartoum. The first part of *Minaret* starts with a prologue titled “*Bism Allahi, Ar- Rahman, Ar- Raheem*”, a praise to God, which might be translated as with the name of Allah, the Almighty. *Minaret* is set in Khartoum between 1984 and 1985 and describes Najwa’s life before the coup in 1985. This event will radically change everything in Najwa’s and her family’s life. Najwa’s wealthy family, in Khartoum, maintains a Western lifestyle. For instance, their regular schedule was traveling abroad on holidays and her house is majestically attended by several servants. Her father is a government official of a very high rank, who is very close to the President of Sudan. Najwa, being the upper-class daughter of a Western Sudanese family, her focus falls on music, Western clothing, and parties. She also studies at the University of Khartoum, a privilege unattained to a great number of Sudanese students.

Najwa and her family do charity work, fast in Ramadan, and enjoy their affluent status, but none of them prays regularly nor do females wear the *hijab*. Nevertheless, the flashbacks used in the story enable the reader to witness Najwa's experience with her surroundings at the University of Khartoum and reveal her concerns about her status as a secular elite girl while most students were practicing Muslims, through their dresses and veils. prayer habits. When she wears short skirts because everyone around her does the same, referring to this 'wrong past', she says she feels uncomfortable wearing them. She often reports that she feels something bothering her when she sees the servants in the house getting up early to pray in the morning while her family and she did not pray even when they are already awake from a night out.

Najwa's father is arrested and later executed for charges related to embezzlement as the 1980s political turmoil emerges, while her brother and mother are sent to a chosen exile in London to avoid potential dangers. When Najwa comes to London, she faces a series of disasters: her brother is arrested and sentenced and imprisoned for a long time for drug offenses and a policeman's stabbing, the only link remaining to her past, her mother suffers from a prolonged illness, and she later passed away. Najwa's troubles aggravate when she meets Anwar, a former lover, in London. Anwar also comes to Britain due to another coup in Sudan. Although Anwar's accusations against Najwa's father continue all the time and break Najwa's heart, Najwa continues her relationship with him.

As Najwa turns religious in London, left-wing activist Anwar remains a highly

irreligious person to the extent that he considers veiled women 'disgusting' and 'frustrating'. Despite having an intimate relationship with Anwar, she realizes that Anwar is not sincere and does not intend to marry her. Having understood this, she has the courage to break up with him. For the first time, she feels alone and helpless amid the crowds of the City of London when she learns that their father has been executed, and his possessions confiscated. When Najwa meets a group of women at Regent's Park Mosque, she, then, re-discovers the beauty of her faith and her dedication to Islam. As time passes, her love and devotion to Islam increased. In her faith in Allah, she finds peace and solace. In the meantime, she became a housemaid for a wealthy family. Her employer, Lamia, is a Ph.D. student with mixed Sudanese and Egyptian heritage and a young mother with a daughter; Lamya lives the life Najwa once enjoyed in Khartoum. However, things take a different turn as Najwa and Lamya's younger brother Tamer develop attraction and love grows between them.

The second part of the story shows the change that Najwa has undergone after her relief in embracing Islam. She becomes a devout Muslim and begins to wear the *hijab*. Thus, the feminist world she was introduced to in Regent's Park Mosque, activities such as daily readings of the Quran, and daily prayers, primarily help Najwa to restore lost ties with Khartoum and at the same time provide her with the sense of belonging she yearns for as a lonely immigrant woman in London. The religious space she finds herself in helps her to breathe peacefully and comfortably.

Expressing this disposition, 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” (*Minaret* pp.74-5)⁶.

At the end of the story, Najwa agrees to separate from Tamer and accepts the money offered to her by Tamer’s mother, in exchange for Najwa Tamer’s separation. As the novel ends, Najwa is seen in a fever, sick with love, but hopefully, all is well because Allah is looking after her, and she will go on Hajj with the money she has earned.

Cross-cultural Encounters

In *Minaret*, when in Khartoum, Najwa is distinguished by her social class, which adds to the privileges of a Western lifestyle and education. In Khartoum, where she was born and raised, her family is blessed with a life full of spending and wealth; she is used to luxurious and leisurely life. This kind of life becomes the cause of the destruction of her family. Najwa’s past life in Khartoum is determined by her economic and social class, her attitude towards the people around her, and her views about the world. When her father is introduced in the story, she describes him in terms of his social background. She expresses her feelings towards him and seems to give him an excuse for the forced marriage he has undergone to support himself. She says, “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.”

(*Minaret* p.8). Since her birth, Najwa has been blessed with a splendid life and has no sympathy for her father’s struggle to climb the social ladder. Najwa only confesses that she belongs to a wealthy family, and this is the only definition she wants to introduce herself to. While talking to her father, Najwa expressed her inability to recognize his early struggles. In reply, he uses the word ‘Spoiled’ as if anticipating that his family would not be able to handle the hardships of life 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* (*Minaret* p.31).

Najwa suffers from mixed feelings of instability and anxiety after being uprooted from her home and being unable to plan for her own future. Being deprived of a stable homeland reflects her sense of loss of identity. Anwar expresses a cunning remark when she works as a housemaid for her aunt and paid £20 during one Christmas.

He laughs and says, “So you’re now celebrating Christmas. You’ve become a true citizen of London” (*Minaret* p.150). Najwa then replies, “I don’t know what I’m becoming” (p.151). She knows that her displacement in London has changed, but she does not know exactly who she will be in the absence of a stable home and sustained belonging. Najwa’s relationship with Tamer is based also on the Islamic faith. Contrary to the assumption that the conservative Muslim is unable to compromise Islam with British culture, Tamer succeeds in doing so, harmonizing the relationship between Islam and the West. He represents the perfect image of a devout Muslim for he abstains from the forbidden such as cigarettes, girlfriends, clubbing, and drinking. Above all that, he “has a beard and goes to the mosque every day” (*Minaret* p.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 the Islamic religion (adultery) 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” (*Minaret* p.230). Soon, she realizes that her relationship with Anwar was a mistake and notices her detachment from the traditions of her homeland.

Culture Practices

Najwa’s newly acquired religious identity necessitates that she has to demonstrate her Islamic spiritual attachment practically. She decides to wear the veil in a secular setting and, intentionally, 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)⁷ 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 ‘decentralized’ 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 the 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 these women affirm their identities as 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.

Najwa's cultural encounter, which contradicts her religious identity, is used by Aboulela to present the growth of Islamic spirituality that provides Najwa with strength, a sense of belonging, and independence.

On the other hand, the mosque is not only a place where faith is strongly grounded, rather it is represented by Aboulela as a site for the negotiation of social and ethnic identity. As Najwa is used to identifying herself with friends and relatives who belonged to the elite Western class in Khartoum. class and ethnicity are, apparently, not the foundations upon which she needs to build her relationship with the Muslim community in the mosque. Ethnic and social hierarchies are unimportant definitions when Najwa communicates with other women. Her new friends are Wafa and Shahinaz. Wafa is an Arab and she is married to an English Muslim, whereas Shahinaz is from South Asia. They support Najwa and provide her with a sense of inclusion and belonging among women from multi-ethnic backgrounds. Nash (2007:245-6)⁸ states that Najwa's Islamic identity quest exceeds her political and cultural differences and that, "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 stretch from London to Khartoum, but she also adopts a position that is a conscious reply to them. Therefore, she uses her experience in London to build a religiosity that focuses on personal behavior over culture and politics.

In the new environment, the protagonist is involved in a struggle to adjust to the

Western cultural norms. However, she has only succeeded when she made recourse to Islamic practices and Sharia. In that space between home and the new country, Najwa turns to a practicing Muslim as a sign of self-redefinition and self-satisfaction.

Space of Freedom

Najwa's reaction to Western and secular modernity in London leads her to seek spiritual satisfaction. She felt emptiness and melancholy since she was in Sudan where her dedication to Islam was lacking spirituality, but she did not feel the urgent need to live in the secular West as an immigrant, where her sense of emptiness starts.

Najwa begins to develop a religious identity when she attaches herself to the Muslim women community at the Regent's Park Mosque. This situation reminds her of a similar one when she envied a group of Muslim students at the university; she states "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 Quran recited, I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and a space would open up, hollow and numb" (*Minaret* p.143). After that, she understands that it is the spiritual pleasure she was looking for, "Now when I hear the Quran recited, there wasn't bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened, and I was alert" (*Minaret* p. 243). The fact that Najwa needs to feel spiritually fulfilled to get rid of emptiness and boredom when she sees Muslim students praying at the university in Khartoum, or a gardener reciting the Quran at home, ignites her desire to seek spiritual roots.

Therefore, her decision to establish herself as an entity based on religious identity and association with the Islamic faith stems from a personal longing in London where there are no established Islamic authorities and free from any hindering forces.

As argued by Hassan (2008)⁹, Aboulela's Islamic narration maintains the traditional patriarchal dominance and rejects female personal freedom. He believes that Islam and feminism do not fit in with Aboulela's novels. By the same token, Nash (2007:147)¹⁰ states that "Aboulela's discourse is never stridently feminist, nor does it set out to condemn male Muslim practice per se." He argues that, in Aboulela's fiction, the representation of Muslim women traces traditionalism. This argument is based on the incidents when Najwa expresses her approval for Tamer to have a second wife, explicitly acknowledging polygamy, on the other hand, she finds an excuse: she might not be able to give him children. The researcher thinks that Hassan and Nash's assessment of Islamic feminism found in Aboulela's novels is partially correct. Aboulela minimizes Najwa's choices in Islamic discourse which, the researcher argues, is inspired by sacred texts interpreted by males, but at the same time they ignore the centrality and Islamic perspective that she wants to be respected when reading her novels. The space of freedom and the opportunity to make decisions in an environment void of any patriarchal influence should also be considered in the situation of Najwa when she has proposed a second wife.

Omar, Najwa's brother, is also interested in the Western way of life. He drinks alcohol, goes to Western nightclubs,

listens to music, and decides to move to London permanently once he finishes his studies in Sudan. He goes so far as to admire Western trends and modern lifestyles. Najwa narrates how he views the West as an advanced civilization and advocates colonialism. Unlike her brother, Najwa has never thought of moving away from Sudan to live in London, while still clinging to the Westernization associated with her social class in Sudan. Najwa rejects her father's proposal to send her to study abroad; her brother responds sarcastically and describes her rejection as a sign of patriotism. Hence, Omar is represented to voice the Orientalist discourse which reflects a persistent bias against Islam and Muslims in addition to treating their culture as uncivilized, inferior, and requiring to be rescued.

Moreover, Najwa's awareness of her upper class and privilege is reflected in her views and her life, especially when she drives the car to the University, as she thinks, "Wasn't I a young, liberal driver driving to university? In Khartoum, only a minority of women drive and at the university, less than thirty percent of the students are girls - and that would make me feel good about myself" (*Minaret* p.10). She considers emancipation as limited to the upper class that enjoys social freedom and economic privilege. Because of Najwa's socioeconomic class, she keeps herself away from underprivileged girls who do not have social freedom like herself or cannot afford to buy a car. Her consciousness of her privileged status and the freedom she enjoys in her community reveals the shallowness and arrogance of her character that will later affect her endeavor to survive in exile.

However, after revealing how privileged she is, she prefers to depend on her brother to drive. Najwa's lack of confidence to drive and being always dependent is a dominating theme that is constantly explicit during her existence in Khartoum. Najwa emphasizes religious belief as well as a liberating philosophical note upon reflecting on the fact that there are no differences between male and female in the tomb "Throughout life, there have been differences – toilets for men, toilets for women; Clothes for men, clothes for women – then, in the end, the graves were identical. Likewise, Nazneen is a 'pure girl from the village...not tall'. Not short. About five feet two. The hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to hold the kids. All things considered, I am satisfied" (*Minaret* pp. 22 - 23).

Minaret describes the attempts and troubles of Najwa who experiences a sharp and dramatic decline from her privileged lifestyle and obviously wealthy conditions in Sudan and becomes a maidservant in the UK. Coming to terms with diasporic displacement, she must make choices on her own, as no family members or honest friends are around to command her, to guide her, or to scold her for making any serious decision concerning lifestyle or behavior preferences. All the decisions and choices she makes in London are well studied and preceded by long thoughts and observations. She chooses to embrace Islamic identity with all its consequences and appearances in individual and social relationships and moral and social values. More significantly, she decides to wear the *hijab* and discontinue her illegitimate affair with Anwar the atheist, socialize with Muslim women who go to the

mosque, 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 carelessness and licentiousness common in big, Western cities like London. She says "Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? Auntie Eva, Anwar's flatmates. Omar 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**" (*Minaret* p.175).

The supporting connections that Najwa discovers in the mosque contrast starkly with the supposed '*freedom*' of the non-religious world, which Aboulela depicts as restrictive rather than liberating. The concept of liberty in Western thought means freedom from external constraints and the right of the individual to self-determination. On the other hand, in Islamic thought, freedom, or *hurriyya*, is viewed as an inner state of liberation from the tyranny of the senses, or as something that is only experienced as part of the collective body of believers. It would be wrong to suggest that Muslims have not rigorously discussed the concept of freedom over the centuries.

However, freedom has been compared to complete servitude, indicating not only that servitude but that the institution was often used as a metaphor for understanding the 'relationship between Allah "the Master" and his human "slaves" (Bostom 2006:3)¹¹. Aboulela challenges Western perceptions of what freedom entails when her protagonist desires a position as her employer's family slave or concubine, "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" (*Minaret* p.215).

The veil has also a liberating force and thus helps to remove it from its constant association with Islamic patriarchal oppression. The novel here demystifies the veil and makes it a source of comfort. By highlighting this aspect of the *hijab*, the narration re-writes some of the unexamined assumptions in some feminist circles about the nature of the veil. Aboulela seems to suggest that there is no point in trying to ignore and transcend the differences between women of different cultural backgrounds because they do exist. Instead, feminist movements need to engage in conversations and listen to different voices. The novel appears to encourage feminists to find ways to hear, as Kinser suggests, "many, divergent, and even conflicting voices clearly and resonate". This could be achieved, according to him (2003: 110)¹², if feminists retrained themselves "to hear the cacophony in new ways, sometimes to allow for a little discord, and at other times to focus on the basic rhythms".

Upon Najwa's comment by saying that, "this empty space was called freedom"

(175), Aboulela's explanation to Chambers (2009:100)¹³ is that Najwa's frustration with herself does not lead her to do anything within this space of freedom. In the West, freedom of choice just disrupts young female Muslims. For those juvenile Muslims, freedom can be negative instead of a positive stimulating force. Aboulela tells Chambers (p. 92)¹⁴ that in Khartoum she admires girls with *hijab*, but she does not wear it until she comes to London when she feels free from the criticizing eyes of her friends and acquaintances in 1987, wearing the *hijab* would not imply any connotational impact.

Since freedom has different meanings in the different cultural environments (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)¹⁵.

In the neo-Orientalist representation of Muslim women, freedom suggests embracing the Western way of life or abandoning religious identity and practices to adopt a secular lifestyle, or rejecting Islamic teachings in favor 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.

Aboulela believes that Islam has its own way of liberating women through spirituality that allows them to build identities across borders as Muslim women.

Methods

The researcher adopts the analytical-descriptive method to study Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* based on a diasporic standpoint. The study focuses on exile as an imposed geographic site within which cross-cultural encounters are experienced by the protagonist. Primary and secondary sources are used to collect data to support the discussion.

Conclusion

Aboulela's *Minaret* sheds light on the dilemma of an uprooted female Muslim who has slipped from the social ladder in a capitalist society. The novel also emphasizes the role of faith as a driving force that can help believers overcome all difficulties and provide them an alternative space for belonging in a diasporic setting. A minaret with its architectural structure, 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. Among other Islamic signs, therefore, the *hijab* deserves special emphasis because, while, in itself, it represents a mute symbol, it has a force that operates in both personal and cultural spheres while at the same time it brings personal attention to the individuals who wear it.

In the end, Najwa's faith becomes a savior and a shield against all the disappointments and torments of her life in the diaspora. She does not depend on Western feminism to provide her with refuge in the middle of the troubling situations she faces but rather

explores an alternative method of empowerment and satisfaction in the feminine realm in Regent's Park Mosque. The culture of the ex-colonizer and the culture of the ex-colonized are expressed in the novel on a cross-cultural ground. What makes this novel 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 the desire for one's would-be partner has been pushed aside 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 the religious literature of all traditions. Najwa's resistance to acculturation stems from her rootedness; it also guides her through the cultural conflict she and Anwar encounter., who muses and admires the Western secular way of life, to pursue spiritual acculturation, as the author attempts, to encounter and challenge colonial diasporic dilemmas. 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 the 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 its vague labels is exposed when we see that Arabs, Muslims, and third world citizens, living in the west, are treated aggressively, portraying them as aliens and others.

The disappointment after the failure of the love affair between Najwa and Tamer, and Tamer's proposing to marry her despite the differences in class and age, due is grounded rooted on their religious piety. Najwa chooses to sacrifice her love for Tamer for the sake of his spiritual fulfillment. From Aboulela's Islamic perspective, which aligns with the *halal* identifications of her novels, this love affair should culminate in marriage despite any difference, because males and females are equal in standing and value before Allah, and it is only piety that distinguishes one from the other. Although they share the same religious identity and cultural background, their romance does not end happily.

Aboulela asserts that it is not only the Western masses who stereotype Islam and Muslims, as some claim, but such people are everywhere, and it is not uncommon for divisions to exist within Islamic societies, as is evidenced by the image of secularism and the elite, educated Lamya, who organized a party at home. She invites a belly dancer who comes in full veils and begins stripping her clothes one by one, hoping to entertain her Western friends by mocking veiled women and

distancing herself from them by presenting a self-image as an emancipated woman to suppress the connotations of the *hijab*.

Western values, principles, and power represent the stimulus to the Islamic nation and Muslim individual's identity figuration. Nevertheless, the relation between Muslims and the West is among the major factors which control the establishment of identity in Diaspora. Reading Aboulela's novel differs from the typical immigrants' novels, in which the female character is liberated through sexuality or by meeting some Western characters who help her find out what is wrong with her culture. According to the ideology conveyed by Aboulela, her characters do not need to meet some Englishmen who will teach them Western liberal values and thus make them feel at home in the host country. That is because Aboulela's characters do not feel the need to assimilate because of their given solid spiritual identity which prevents them from being dragged further away from their religious affiliation and committing sins and making big mistakes.

The identity of the protagonist is not affected by the place and culture of the ex-colonizer. Right from the beginning, Najwa and her brother were subject to Western cultural 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. Najwa is attracted to Tamer because he is a conservative Muslim despite having Western education and exposure. In fact, Tamer is drawn towards Najwa because of her commitment to Islam.

In this narration, we can see Najwa as a “twice-born” Muslim: from a Westernized girl she eventually becomes a devout Muslim.

Aboulela, through this novel, 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 Najwa are very consistent with Aboulela’s because, for Aboulela, a person’s religious identity affords more stability than mere national identity, since Muslims can carry their faith with them wherever they go, whereas they can easily be deprived of other things. 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.

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