

**Defying stereotypical representation of Muslim women : An Analysis
of Liala Aboulela's Minaret**

Assistant Professor: Azhar Hameed Mankhi
Wasit University –College of Education
Assistant instructor : Afrah Abdul Jabbar
University of Missan –College of English

Abstract:

This paper sheds light on the fact that Muslim women are experiencing a series of labels and stereotypes for a good period of time . They are humiliated , looked down at , and prejudiced against and insulted merely because their religion is Islam .Their humiliation is further developed after Sept 11 when the image of Islam is caricatured and misrepresented in western media. Aboulaila is one of the literary writers who even though living in islamophobic western society , holds religious beliefs and values that are entirely different and contrasting those of the western writers and some western Muslim writers who participate in distorting their religion and culture. Aboulala refuses to look at Islam with a western eye . Her novel minaret Shakes the stereotypical representation of Muslim women as oppressed and slaves .

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* offers a very different portrayal of Muslim women in London. The writer is challenging the western's representations of Muslim women as oppressed and backwards . Rather than craving to welcome Western culture, Aboulela's protagonists seek solace in their rising religious identity. *Minaret* is an attractive novel with a extremely attractive protagonist who searches for a place for herself in London and for meaning in a life brutally crushed by events beyond her control.¹

Aboulela's story is parallel to other novels by other women writers . it is about migration to a secular society and the hardships the Muslim woman encounters in that setting . the protagonist is brought to London by political exile. She is confused , lost and alienated and her identity is cracked down . She seeks a new sense of self through London's secular space.

The novel begins with Najwas's life in Sudan in 1984-85. Najwa is the daughter of a high- ranking and rich government officer . Her family in Khartoum maintains a western way of life. She usually listens to pop music and American films and dresses western fashions, and she is accustomed to large parties in which she dances and amuses herself the way western people do. Najwa, like others in her generation, follows western trends. Her family resembles the new bureaucrats who are above the masses and are detached from the socio-cultural atmosphere of the natives. Najwa's family takes over the prestige and power of the ex-colonizers and inherits their privileges.

Najwa says:"We ate from china and silver. We wiped our mouths with napkins that were washed and ironed everyday." (Aboulela, *Minaret* ,p.16.)

Dr. Al-Malki argues that, "the colonized elites were alienated from their communities' needs and instead of attempting to de-colonize they strengthened the British ideology." (Al-Malki ,p.13)

Similarly, Altbach points out that, "elites have often sent their children to private schools conducted in European language in an effort to maintain their privileged position."(Chinweizu,p.12)

Najwa knows she is a product of English education and belongs to aristocracy which widened the gap between her and her native culture. After the coup in Sudan in 1984 ,she escapes to London which regards as her second home because she was in the habit of going to London on vacations when she was in Sudan . Now that she is forced to live in London as immigrant she does not look at London at her second home as she used to see it . She cannot belong to London . She had a problem of belonging in Sudan because of her secular life . And she is still having these problems of belonging in London. She does not have the individuality her friend and peers have . However, Najwa attempts to hold on to some aspects that she feels is native as a compromise of her lost cultural identity, for example although she doesn't pray, she insists on fasting Ramadan. She also loves hearing the *azan (Call for Prayer)*; she secretly admires girls who are covered. At the same time, her western orientation and life style make her stand out and be identified as a westerner in her own culture. Najwa is a hybrid who belongs to two different cultures but can't identify with any. When she is in Sudan, she does not belong to the cultural setting of the natives, because of her father's political position and her privileged upbringing. Even when in London– she can't identify herself with the western culture– a culture that can not go beyond her dark skin. Najwa feels that she lost her identity, in Sudan she is an outsider and in London she is an outsider too. She can't form her own view of what she wants or who she wants to become.

When she loses her family one after another she still finds herself in a more problematic situation :

Who would care if I become pregnant , who would be scandalized ? 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.

(Aboulela 's Minaret, P.174-5)

In London she holds to what seems familiar in an unfamiliar setting. Najwa always looks for someone or a place to rescue her. For example, when Anwar comes to London ,she holds on to him because he reminds her of Sudan, although he accuses her father of corruption. After being orphaned, Najwa finds solace and companionship within the Muslim community. She searches for a place where she can find comfort and sense of belonging. The mosque represents that place for her, as she states, "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room."(Aboulela's Minaret, p.74-75)

When she finally steps into the mosque, "the words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it." (Minaret, p. 240)

Reflecting on sexual freedom, she remarks that 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 , 175).

Najwa is making clear that the freedom the west are proud of is empty . It reduces women to a mere sexual object .This proves that the western woman is objectified and treated as a plaything for the a amusement of men. Najwa does not glorify this kind of freedom . For her its is a punishment , particularly after she loses her whole family , country and religion . Freedom for her is related to lose and isolation . It's a burden she has to endure rather than a thing she has to enjoy .She is unable to regain her family or her country but at least she can regain her religion.

Najwa decides to choose the freedom related to religion. For Aboulela and her protagonist Najwa ,religion is the solution for all their troubles . Aboulela argues: " You have to decide what you are going to do with all this freedom . You can do what you like , so being religious is one of the things I chose" .(Aboulela ,Interview,p.7)

Similarly, Najwa's anonymity allows her freedom. Alone in a London restaurant, Najwa is self-conscious of her freedom "It wouldn't be done in Khartoum for a woman to be alone in a restaurant. 'I' m in London', I told myself,' I can do what I like, no one can see me'"(Minaret, 128).

This defies the western view that Muslim women are stripped from their freedom . Aboulela proves that freedom is found in religion not outside religion . Alienated , Najwa searches for some one who might let her feel comfortable like before. When she finds Tamer, a Muslim man , he offers her the one thing that she has been longing. She

argues : "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."(Minaret, p. 197)When Tamer feels sorry for her she says "I need this from him. It feels right nourishing"(Minaret ,p. 117). This indicates that Najwa lacks human relationships, most of the time she is forlorn and estranged. It is important

for her that one shares her pain and solitude. She needs someone to take after her and to help her and to provide her with what she lacks .

Najwa tells Tamer "I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living in London , I have changed . And now , like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim "(Minaret, p. 110)

Tamer also views himself as a Muslim when he says :

My mother is Egyptian, I've lived everywhere except in Sudan: Oman, Cairo, here [London]. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity"(Minaret p.----)

Both of Tamer and Najwa stop thinking of their national identity . Najwa does not choose to be Sudanese nor a British but she chooses to be Muslim .She finds in Islam the freedom she desires and the sense of belonging she has been longing for . Islam is curing all her psychological and social problems .

Najwa finds relief in faith. She believes that Allah provides her protection she needs while living in London. " Rely on Allah , I tell myself, . He is looking after you in this job or in another job" (Minaret , p.114) This new religious identity offers Najwa the prospect to go beyond time and space and thus piece together the detached remains of her world: "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room ..."(Minaret pp. 74-75).

When Najwa starts to work as a house- maid in a house where another Muslim family live , she decides to put on hijab and chooses to become a self-

confident woman who has the freedom to choose the way she mostly wants .
Lamaya, Najwa's employer, treats Najwa badly because of hijab. Though Lamaya is Muslim but she refuses religion and welcomes the westernized secular world. In one of her parties she brings a belly dancer in full hijab then she begins to strip all her clothes hoping to amuse her western friends and to make fun of Muslim women who put on hijab . She presents herself as a western woman who shares the western view regarding hijab.

Najwa's connection to the women in the mosque and her adoption of the hijab can be read as a getting her strength back and being free from the various male forces that have destroyed her life and worn her down. Islam becomes the embrace that gives her a sense of place and belonging in an otherwise aggressive world.

Listening to the Quran and other religious activities , her life is now organized again by religious concerns. When she becomes an active Muslim, she meets Anwar only one more time as a prelude to her salvation. Significantly, she wears the hijab and meets him in public space, while most of their preceding meetings have been in private places .

.

Aboulela argues that freedom without limits does not bring happiness . She says in an interview :

Yes, Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness(Aboulela , Interview ,)

Najwa regrets the posh life she led in Khartoum. When her brother Omar was sentenced to life –time imprisonment , she visits him and shows her guilt and remorse for not choosing the way of Allah when they were in Sudan :

Our house was a house where only servants prayed, where a nighter watchman would open the gate for our car arriving late after a night out , then sits reciting the Quran until it was time for the dawn prayer . If Baba and Mama had prayed I say If you {her brother} and I had prayed all of this would not have happened to us . We could have stayed normal familyAllah would have protected us , if we had wanted him to . if we had asked him to but we did not , so we were punished (Minaret, p. 95)

Aboulala is arguing it is only western people who refuse hijab and Islam, but there are Muslims who prefer to accept secularization and freedom of the west .

For Najwa , the veil is an individual choice in which she finds a sense of order, security, protection, well-being, and locatedness. However, Aboulela relies on a binary logic in her representation of the veil and Muslim women.

The veil is seen as an obstacle to the western eye . It stands as a barrier between Muslim women and white men . It further represents the Europe's failure to explore the east.

Leon Michel argues that the belief that Muslim woman needs to be rescued is false .he emphasizes :

The European man thinks that he will find in Africa beautiful palaces with a balcony over the door to the street , where a charming

prisoner will be waiting for a gallant French knight in shining armor to rescue her . they forget that the harems are well guarded and the moushrabais at the windows make it impossible to communicate , even to exchange glances (Michel , quoted in Mabro , 1996: 32)

The Orientlists are much annoyed when they see that Muslim women refuse to expose themselves

In popular western culture Muslim woman is the veiled woman . For them the veil refers to exoticism , oppression and backwardness of Islam .In many movies they are presented as slaves or they are seen only as asexual object . They are seen as belly dancers whose only job is to amuse men . They are not given important position in society .The western culture presents Muslim woman as a victim of Islam to demonstrate the west 's cultural superiority and maintain its hegemony over Islamic culture.

Malek Alloula stresses that the veil gives Muslim women a superior position:

These veiled women are not only an embracing
enigma to the photographer but they are an attack upon
him ...thrust in the presence of the veiled woman, the
photographer feels photographed having
himself being the object to be seen .He loses his
initiative .(Alloula quoted in Mabro ,1995:5)

Serveir has different opinion about the veil of Muslim women . He stresses :

Muslim woman remains in the barbarity of ancestral costumes . Compared to the conditions of other women of other religions , she is a slave. A luxurious animal, a beast of pleasure of the rich , a beast of burden to the poor . she is nothing more than a poor creature sacrificed to the pleasure of the maleShe cannot even hope in the future. Her ignorance and barbarity weigh heavily on the children whom she raises and on whom she passed her prejudices and antiquated ideas .(Serveir , quoted in Mabro, 1996: 173)

This description of Muslim woman as boring , ignorant and slave who could not even raise a family is unjust. Liala Ahmad in her book Women and Gender in Islam , argues that western women undergone discrimination and male domination in their culture , but they target Muslim women and show her as oppressed to control the Islamic world under the cover of civilization .

When the author was in high school, she wanted to wear hijab but she did not have the courage because she cared about what her friends would think. But when she did, she did it out of choice and not because her husband pressured her or something like that. Thus, *hijab* for her is a major part of her Islamic identity and is so to her heroines. Aboulela expects that : "In time the West will come to look at the veil in a different light. . It encourages me when a Western woman comments on my headscarf. I feel that she has reached out to me, she has seen beyond the symbol."(<http://www.arabnews.com/?page=7§ion=0&article=98991&d=27&m=7&y=200>)(

McLarney underlines the connection between the *veil* and liberation, indicating that the idea that the *veil* dehumanizes the woman is closely linked to emancipation of women in the West. McLarney states that "whereas women's bodies [are] placed in organic communication with the social body' the veil 'shuts

off from the penetration of Western values to Muslim women's bodies."(McLarney, 7.)

.

The veil does not necessarily assign a negative meaning of oppression or imprisonment as represented in the West, but it may also imply resistance against imperial domination and loyalty to native/national culture

Anwar blames Najwa for thinking of marriage when she tell him she is sorry for the sexual experience she had with him before and that she wished it had happened in " a room in the best hotel in Khartoum , with a wedding dress hanging in the cupboard , the sheets white and crisp". (Minaret , p. 173)

But Anwar tells her that her guilt is meaningless because : " like every other Arab girl, you have been brainwashed about the importance of virginity". (Minaret , p 175)

It is quite ironic that Anwar tells Najwa that by losing her virginity, she has become part of the majority. Najwa echoes Anwar's argument, "He was right. I was in the majority now, I was a true Londoner now.... 'I know you're Westernized, I know you're modern,' he said, 'that's what I like about you – your independence'" (Aboulela 176).

For Najwa , Anwar is an outsider to her Muslim culture. Even though Najwa had a western education but in the west she chooses to have conservative values .

Aboulela shows that sexual intercourse has further subordinated Najwa and that it is through faith that she gains her independence.. The emphasis is on how this freedom allows Najwa better understanding of their positions unlike the male characters who remain imprisoned within the migrant dilemma.

Gole states that " Aboulela thinks that Islam organizes principles that organize social life and at the same time , it guides the individual through the chaos "(Gole P 668)

Najwa defies the stereotypical presentation of Muslim women and she shows Muslim women are not oppressed as they were always seen by the western people , but they voluntarily choose the way of Islam with no one to press them to do what they don't like .

The persistence of negative language used to describe Muslim women, the homogenization of all Muslim women, and the heightened focus on the headscarf are all examples that reflect how Muslim women have been used as a discursive means to render those who do not share Western values as "others."

Moreover, these media representations have fostered the perception that Muslim women are not active citizens in their communities, and instead reduce them to victims, passive women, or only veiled women. Such stereotypical representations tend to reflect a narrow view of Muslim women, in which the actual problems or challenges faced by Muslim women are ignored. In this way, critical issues which affect Muslim women are often mistakenly perceived to be caused by religion, rather than specific socio-economic, nationalist, or political forces.

Aboulela like her protagonist , knew religion in Britain not in Sudan .She emphasizes :

I already had the inclination but the atmosphere wasn't conducive to it growing. In Britain, I had the accessibility of the mosque, and the trauma of seeing that one life had ended and another one was taking its place. This made me understand the process of rebirth.

The novel is coloured by Najwa's sudden traumatic displacement from all the places and people familiar to her. "There is this sense of alienation, that there is only you and God. That's what religion teaches, that life is a temporary thing which is going to dissolve one day."(Minaret ,p. 114) For Aboulela, a personal, religious

identity provides more stability than national identity. "I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me."(Aboulela , Interview)

This process of rebirth empowers Najwa . For both Najwa and Aboulela Islam provides empowerment and a sense of relief to the individual .The writer she aims 'to make Islam more familiar to the reader and to defy the western view that Muslim women are only veiled women not able to raise a family or do anything profitable in society .

Aboulela delivers a clear message to the Western reader which is that Islam enlightens the life of Muslims. Aboulela says:

Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness."(Aboulela, interview)

When Najwa decides to cover herself and wears the veil, she is subverting the Western system of meaning which associates the veil with subjugation and domination and at the same time exposing the Islamic/oriental patriarchal manipulation of covering women bodies since they are the site of sexuality, temptation and disgrace. By insisting that leaving Anwar and wearing the veil is her own free willed choice,

Aboulela attempts to show veiled women, like herself and Najwa, enjoying a different kind of empowerment. This is part of her project to represent an alternative meaning to the western stereotyping of Muslim women.

Al Karawi and Bahar sums up the issue of the veil in this novel:

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* provides the reader with an opportunity to explore how the veil is a metaphor or trope whose diversity can only be understood by unpacking the lived experiences of the Arab Muslim woman in the West.... The narrative also reinforces the argument that veiled women are not muted personas nor are their identities simple products of patriarchal norms ...*voluntary veiling* is believed to be an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture Aboulela's work, in showing the rootedness of religion in the lives of many Muslim women, thus fills a gap in Western representations of Muslim women. (256, emphasis added)

Aboulela show that Muslim women are complex subjectivities that the west has represented as either "absent" or "distorted" (Sayyid 3).

One thing is concluded that migrant Muslim women are capable of ethical behavior and human understanding that connects human beings despite their differences and their otherness

Aboulela believes that having a religious identity is more stable than having a national identity because she can carry her religion with her anywhere she goes.

Conclusion

Aboulela's Minaret discusses the struggle of Muslim women in a foreign land, and end with their empowerment through embracing an Islamic identity. Hijab is one of the main symbols of this Islamic identity. Both heroines embrace hijab to become their representation and self protector in what could be sometimes unfriendly setting. Embracing this symbol means fighting against the westerner's perception of hijab. Thus, it is not a barrier to interact with others. Although she poses herself strongly in her work as an Islamic feminist, she hopes in future to do it through a male protagonist.

The people still alternate between love and hatred to the west, as some admire the west while others despise everything western. Some believe in the superiority of the "white" and still view themselves as inferior. Aboulela also points out, that colonialism convinced the natives that they are primitives and uncivilized by referring to them as 'Third World' in comparison to the west where it is modern and civilized. The modern generations who are exposed to the West are the best advocates of the superiority of the West as they compare between both settings, emphasizing the advancement and civilization of the West.

The Sudanese elite follow the western norms by inheriting their language, ideology and traits. This creates a sense of displacement, as they can't align themselves with the natives and instead look at the western culture with admiration and strive to imitate it. A sub culture is created among the western-educated youth and its products are natives with a western view, clashing with their native mentality and views about culture

Bibliography

Aboulela, Leila. *Minaret*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006.

.....-. "An Interview with Leila Aboulela by Clarie Chambers",
Contemporary Women's Writing 3 (1), 2009: 86-102. DOI: 10.1093/cww/vpp003.

..... "Muslim Women: Restraint? Sure; Oppression? Hardly." 27 July
2007. 12 Apr. 2009

<<http://www.arabnews.com/?page=7§ion=0&article=98991&d=27&m=7&y=2007>>

Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*.

London: Yale University Press.

Amy, E. Lory, "Contemporary Travel Narratives and old Style Politics: American Women

Reporting after the Gulf War". *Women Studies International Forum*, Vol.22, No.5, (1999): 525-541.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwa Madubuike, *Towards the decolonization of African Literature*, vol.1 .Enugu: Howard University Press.

Fischer , Susan Alice, 'Review: Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*'. *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, Volume 5 Number 2 (September 2007). Online at

<http://www.literarylondon.org/londonjournal/september2007/sfischer.html>.

McLarney, Ellen. "The burqa in Vogue: Fashioning Afghanistan". Journal of Middle East

Women's Studies (2009):

Mabro, Judy. 1996. *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travelers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern*

Women. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.

Said, W. Edward. 1981. *Covering Islam: How Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon Books.