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Displaced Identities: Migration, Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Leila Aboulela's Minaret

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Abstract

This paper discusses the portrayal and depiction of Western Muslims in Leila Aboulela's novel "Minaret." Using diaspora factors, the study examines how the novel's protagonists deal with their nostalgia and cultural memory as Muslims living in a Western society, while taking into account the constraints imposed on them by Western society due to the stereotypical image produced by political Islam. Through a focused and careful reading of the novel, the paper argues that Aboulela presents a comprehensive and very accurate portrait of Muslim immigrants. This portrayal emphasizes immersion in the community and the diversity of productive and interconnected experiences with the other society. The characters in the novel are portrayed as struggling and exerting effort with a set of issues related to identity, migration, and nostalgia for the homeland, forcing them to choose between preserving their identity or embracing tradition and modernity. The research discusses prejudice, discrimination, and negative portrayals of Islam in the media, as well as so-called Islamophobia in the West, regarding the reality of Muslims. Through a sense of cultural memory and nostalgia for moral considerations as Muslims, we forge an identity that challenges the reality of the dispossession of our old identities. Abu Al-Ala emphasizes the importance of belonging, the diversity of experiences, and Islamic identity in light of the global campaign against Islam and Muslims in the West. She also emphasizes the need to move forward in preserving their culture and identity, which must influence their social roles.

Keywords: Migration, nostalgia, Islamic identity, diaspora.

الهويات النازحة : الهجرة والحنين والذاكرة الثقافية في مئذنة ليلى أبو العلا

عبد الكريم سليم عبد الكريم اشكح المعموري
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المستخلص

يناقش هذا البحث تصوير المسلمين الغربيين في رواية "المئذنة" للكاتبة ليلى أبو العلا. باستخدام عوامل الشتات، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تعامل أبطال الرواية مع حنينهم وذاكرتهم الثقافية بوصفهم مسلمين يعيشون في مجتمع غربي، مع مراعاة القيود التي يفرضها عليهم المجتمع الغربي بسبب الصورة النمطية التي ينتجها الإسلام السياسي. ومن القراءة المتأنية والمتعمقة للرواية، تجادل الورقة بأن أبا العلا تقدم صورة شاملة ودقيقة للغاية للمهاجرين المسلمين. يؤكد هذا التصوير الانغماس في المجتمع وتنوع التجارب المثمرة والمترابطة مع المجتمع الآخر. تُصوِّر شخصيات الرواية على أنها تكافح وتبذل جهداً في مواجهة مجموعة من القضايا المتعلقة بالهوية والهجرة والحنين إلى الوطن، مما يدفعها للاختيار بين الحفاظ على هويتها أو اعتناق التقاليد والحداثة. ويناقش البحث التحيز والتمييز والتصوير السلبي للإسلام في وسائل الإعلام، بالإضافة إلى ما يُسمى برهاب الإسلام في الغرب، فيما يتعلق بواقع المسلمين. عبر ذاكرتنا الثقافية

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وحنيننا إلى الاعتبارات الأخلاقية، نبني بوصفنا مسلمين هويةً تتحدى واقع تجريدنا من هوياتنا القديمة. تُشدد أبو العلاء على أهمية الانتماء، وتنوع التجارب، والهوية الإسلامية في الحملة العالمية ضد الإسلام والمسلمين في الغرب. وتُشدد على ضرورة المضي قدمًا في الحفاظ على ثقافتهم وهويتهم، مما يؤثر على أدوارهم الاجتماعية.

الكلمات الدالة: الهجرة، الحنين إلى الماضي، الهوية الإسلامية، الشتات

1-Introduction

Migration and nostalgia occupy a significant position in postcolonial literature, particularly in narratives that address the struggles of identity, memory, and belonging. Leila Aboulela's Minaret(2005) provides a compelling exploration of these themes through the life of Najwa, a Sudanese woman whose journey from privilege in Khartoum to marginalization in London reflects the wider complexities of diasporic existence. Migration in the novel is not simply a matter of crossing national borders but an experience that reshapes Najwa's identity, forcing her to negotiate between cultural traditions, religious values, and the demands of a new environment. As Homi Bhabha's notion of in-betweenness suggests, migrants often find themselves suspended between two cultures, inhabiting a space that is neither entirely one nor the other. Najwa's life embodies this tension, as she navigates the challenges of exile while seeking to reconstruct a sense of purpose and belonging in an unfamiliar land.

At the same time, nostalgia functions as a powerful and recurring motif in Minaret. It is not limited to Najwa's longing for Sudan as a homeland, but extends to her yearning for her former social identity, her family ties, and the sense of stability she once enjoyed. Edward Said's reflections on exile as both a condition of loss and a stimulus for creativity shed light on Najwa's predicament: her memories of Khartoum are tinged with pain yet remain essential to her self-understanding. Aboulela presents nostalgia not as a mere sentimentality but as a lens through which Najwa interprets her present struggles and spiritual transformation. While migration exposes her to alienation and marginalization, nostalgia anchors her to a past that both comforts and haunts her.

By intertwining migration and nostalgia, Minaret captures the paradox of diasporic life: the impossibility of returning to the past and the necessity of forging a new identity within displacement. Aboulela's narrative situates Najwa's story within broader questions of postcolonial identity, religion, and belonging, offering insight into how female Muslim migrants navigate spaces of cultural hybridity, loss, and renewal. Thus, the novel serves not only as a personal tale of exile and longing but also as a representation of the wider dynamics of migration and nostalgia in contemporary diasporic literature.

While diasporic literature has been widely studied, Aboulela's Sudanese-British perspective is underexplored in mainstream postcolonial criticism. The focus could be on how Islamic identity reshapes the postcolonial migrant's sense of belonging.

Rewriting the Motherland: Feminist Resistance and Nationhood in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood. While widely read, Emecheta's work can be revisited through the lens of how motherhood becomes both a site of colonial exploitation

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and feminist resistance. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following research question:

How is the experience of the female diaspora shaped by the junction of migration, nostalgia, and Islamic identity in Leila Aboulela's Minaret?

2.1 Migration and Identity

Individual and group identities have always been reshaped by the experience of migration. Migration is not just a physical move for the Muslim protagonists in Leila Aboulela's Minaret; it is also a cultural and psychological experience that tests their sense of identity. This section examines how the protagonists' identities are redefined by displacement, especially when they balance their Islamic beliefs with the expectations of Western Society. The story of Najwa, a Sudanese girl from a wealthy family, is the primary focus of Leila Aboulela's Minaret. Up until a military takeover, her father, a high-ranking government official, provided his family a comfortable, safe, an opulent and westernized lifestyle. While the family flees to London and lives in exile, her father is detained and put to death on allegations of "corruption"[1,p.58] and "embezzlement " [1,p.95]. After her mother passes away, her brother Omar develops a heroin addiction and receives a "fifteen years" jail sentence for assaulting and almost killing a police officer [1, p.127]. Najwa is compelled to serve her aunt first as a servant and subsequently as a babysitter. She finds it difficult to provide for herself alone since the "new government" in Sudan "freezing" her "father's assets" [1.p.125].

Throughout the book, the need for erasure comes up frequently. For instance, the following comparison illustrates how Najwa's need for forgiveness for her evil history mirrors her need for erasure: "Our sins are a lump of clay clenched between a pigeon's beaks." The pigeon is perched on branch of a tree at the edge of the ocean. It only has to open its beak [1,p.4]. If a pigeon opens its beak and sins fall into the ocean, then that person's sins will be forgiven. Najwa feels soiled by sin as a result of her affair with Anwar [2,p.37] It is obvious that Najwa wants to abandon her Sudanese identity and adopt a western British one, which offers her security and the flexibility to do as she pleases without social criticism. Nobody would "care what [Najwa and Anwar] were doing" in a nation like Britain, where they would be "free" and ."a country we could leave at any time, return to at any time and it would be there for us, Solid", waiting"[1,p.165]. However, if someone recognizes her, Najwa feels threatened. She admits, "how many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?"[1,p.71]. According to Mercer, "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"[3, p.43].The emphases is mine because of her exile and the horrific event of her father's killing, Najwa's identity is "in crisis" and, as a result, a "problem."As an illustration of Derrida's "trace,"Najwa is essentially locked in recollections of Khartoum, which heightens her sense of isolation in London. "I regress, I circle back; the past doesn't let go," she claims [1,P.216].

Najwa's conflict to reconcile her Sudanese-Islamic background with her life in Britain reflects what Homi Bhabha theorizes as hybridity. This concept highlights and

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emphasizes the "third space" where cultural encounters generate new, fluid forms of identity beyond fixed binaries.

According to Homi Bhabha concepts in Third Space "unreal space created when two cultures interact" in this space Identity is negotiated, and here the hybridization between the colonization and colonized., hybridity offers a different type of identity that is neither entirely controlled by the colonized nor entirely determined by the authority of the colonizer [4, p.174]. Bhabha developed his concept of hybridity, drawing on literary and cultural theory, to explain the cultural forms and identities inherent in colonialism. This antagonism and the lack of acceptance produce an identity that is at once familiar, novel and distinct. In essence, both the familiar and the novel result from interactions between the colonizer and the colonized, each of whom has limited control over the outcome.

Bhabha agrees that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" because he recognizes the perils of thinking in terms of Eastern and Western identities and the notion that each is somehow fixed [5,p.211]. Therefore, the idea of hybridity in this study offers an additional means of opposing Arab patriarchy and unfavorable Western stereotyping. This means that the claim that there is only one correct stance is rejected. This breaks down both the center margin dichotomy and the gap between the two. Hybridity challenges limited categories and binary distinctions and opposes the idea of pure, unique, authoritative identities.

Because he understands the dangers of thinking in terms of Eastern and Western identities and the idea that each is somehow set, Bhabha concurs that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity". Thus, the concept of hybridity in this research provides an extra way to counteract negative Western stereotypes and Arab patriarchy. This indicates that the idea that there is just one right position is disproved. This eliminates the gap between the center and margin as well as the center/margin dichotomy. The concept of pure, distinct, authoritative identities is opposed by hybridity, which favors constrained categories and binary distinctions.

2. 2 . Islamic Identity in the Diaspora

"One life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one"[6,p.340] .describes how Najwa transformed in the book after splitting from her partner Anwar. Her acceptance of, and commitment to her Muslim identity is a major factor in this transformation. For Najwa, the veil takes on symbolic significance. She reconnects with the mosque women she had previously turned down. These were the same women who had washed and preoared her mother's body for burial. They urge Najwa to visit the mosque and hear the women studying the Qur'an, and she observes that they are modestly dressed and wearing veils.

Similar to how she feels at home, Najwa sees the mosque as a place of rootedness and belonging: "In the mosque I feel like I'm in Khartoum again"[1,p.244]. The mosque offers a safe space where Najwa feels secure enough to negotiate her identity and sense of self once she puts on the veil and ends her inappropriate relationship with Anwar. She discovers that the mosque helps her cope with the hardships reality of being uprooted and losing her feeling of social and national belonging by giving her a sense of belonging. She discusses her visit to the mosque:

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This is a happy occasion and I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant. One more line to go. "My Lord, give us from your mercy and blessings so that we can love what you love and so that we can love all those actions and words that bring us closer to you.[1p.184]

The mosque, where "no one knew her past"[1,p.239]. provides Najwa with solace. In the mosque, it seems as though her individuality is lost. She is not Sudanese, black, impoverished, or even foreign; she is simply a Muslim girl According to Elbaz and Helly (1997). "Mass migration and market globalization... require citizens and to rewrite and rethink their identities,"[7]. Because of her experience in exile and her forced relocation to Britain, Najwa has had to "rewrite and rethink" who she is, and this process seems never-ending.

For Najwa, the Hajj, a spiritually significant pilgrimage to Mecca-becomes a dream that would satisfy her longing to have her sins, her innocence, and her liberal, westernized past in Khartoum erased. It would be the last cleansing of her transgressions. According to Najwa,

"If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh " [1,p.209].

If Najwa's Hajj, a death-and-rebirth experience, is accepted, she will return pure and innocent, eliminating her sense of contamination from her sin with Anwar [2,p.38].

The protagonist of the book, Najwa, is a Muslim immigrant who struggles with and eventually overcomes liminal situations at different points in her secular and religious lives. Najwa's identity is fundamentally shaped by Islam,which offers her solace and direction during trying times. Najwa's unique history as a former member of the Sudanese elite who was forced to flee to London after a military coup exacerbates her experiences as a Muslim immigrant. Her identification is further complicated by the fact that, as a Muslim immigrant, she must balance the difficulties of being a refugee in a foreign country with upholding her cultural and religious customs. In the end, the novel's portrayal of Western Muslims highlights the significance of tolerance, understanding, and acceptance in a worldwide society by highlighting the complexities and challenges experienced by individuals who straddle cultural and religious identities [8,p.22].

It is crucial that Minaret depicts the diverse identities of a Muslim lady living abroad. The book demonstrates how the protagonist's decision to prioritize her Muslim identity in a globalized society is aided by the realities of diaspora. In Minaret, Aboulela depicts "the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim (woman) who has faith"[1,p.78]. which contrasts with the stereotype of Muslim women as uneducated, obliging, illiterate, backward, disempowered, and oppressed.

Aboulela presents a figure who "seeks redemption and fulfillment through Islam which is not confined to any geographical boundary," in contrast to the popular narrative about Muslim women being victimized.[9, pp.89–105]. Najwa is devoted to Islam and is not a runaway from it. She makes a number of choices in life that direct her in the direction she wants to go. Her decision to take Islamic studies, wear the veil, break up with Anwar, and choose the Hajj over Tamer's love was made voluntarily and without compulsion. She actually understands London's freedom to reach the source of her faith and to go around freely in the modern university [10,p.699].

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2. 3 . Nostalgia and Cultural Memory

As Najwa waits for the time of prayer, she daydreams about home because she feels a sense of nostalgic belonging inside the mosque: "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dram I am small back in Khartoum,ill and fretful ,wanting clean , crisp sheet and a quiet room to the rest. [1,pp.74-75]. Najwa is able to transcend the present and re-establish a connection with the quiet and tranquil moments of her life through the sacred space of her London nook. [11,p.265] .For so long, Najwa was able to cope with "a fractured country but not a broken home"[1,p.165] thus the closest she can get to reestablishing her connection to her past is to see her family's home in Khartoum.

The mosque is international and full of both English ladies who converted and women from other countries, much like London itself. By first cleaning and getting her mother's body ready for burial and then by being quietly modest, these women set an example for Najwa.Najwa adopts her faith, which she had only previously observed from the affluent periphery of Sudanese culture, as a result of this example.National background and race are irrelevant to the mosque's practicing Muslims because Islam unites them as a single community. Her new family eventually consists of the women in the mosque. The community she lost is replaced by the mosque, which becomes her new home.

Najwa's developing religious identity following her encounter with the women's group at the Regents Park Mosque brings back memories of her fascination with the active Muslim students at Khartoum University:

"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 heard the Qur'an recited, there wasn't bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert"[1,p.243].The final instance of identity negotiation and identification for Najwa occurs when she begins working for Lamya, an Egyptian PhD candidate who resides in London with her undergraduate brother Tamar. Najwa and Tamer develop a close bond while working at Lamya's house because of their common religious identity. But rather than being cordial, Najwa and Lamya have a hostile relationship because Lamya rejects Najwa because of her lower social status and class while Lamya leads a Western lifestyle and interacts with Arab ladies of the same class. Tamer, who is essentially the only religious follower in his family, is someone Najwa identifies with. They start a discussion about their identities and self-identification as Najwa is discussing Tamer's life and upbringing:

"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. What about you? I talk slowly. I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living

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here in London, I've changed. And now like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim"[1,p. 110].

Najwa's identity is complex; she negotiates social, class, political, and religious issues to create an identity that is unique to her. In addition to being older than Tamer, Najwa is also able to make concessions and accept the seemingly unavoidable result of their not getting married. Her faith in Allah's benevolence and mercy gives her the courage to accept her fate. In the end, Najwa appears strong rather than weak because she is unable to wed a young guy she loves and respects for his loyalty and is unemployed.Unlike her companion Randa, who is admitted in a university in England, Najwaenrolls into Khartoum University with much difficulty and does not have any clear goal for a profession or further studies even later in England. She would have most likely settled for the kind of life her mother had envisioned for Najwa, which included a suitably wealthy marriage, a large home with servants, and international travel, had political upheavals not upended her life [1,pp.52-198]

2.4 . Islamophobia and Prejudice

Due to Islamophobia and prejudice, Muslim immigrants encounter several challenges. Islamophobia against migrants has a strong social foundation and unique working mechanisms in European nations, as Perocco (2018) points out. This makes it extremely difficult for Muslim immigrants to assimilate into the cultures of their new countries. Despite these challenges, many Muslim immigrants have adjusted to their new environments and contributed positively to society. As a result of globalization, cultures and religions come into contact with one another.Trade, education, and art exchanges are just a few of the ways that this integration process benefits both immigrant populations and host societies. A study titled "Islamophobia through the Eyes of Muslims: Assessing Perceptions Experiences and Impacts," carried out in September 2021 by UC Berkeley's Othering & Belonging Institute, produced some intriguing results regarding how Muslim immigrants view themselves in Western societies[12].Participants described experiencing a range of discriminatory practices, such as racial profiling when travelling and trouble finding work because of false beliefs about being Muslim. Muslim immigrants continue to make significant contributions in a variety of fields, including healthcare, where research shows that foreign-trained physicians provide high-quality care that may lower health care costs, despite being excluded from mainstream society because of terrorist or religious extremist stereotypes that have been unfairly attributed to them by media outlets that present an inaccurate picture of all members under one umbrella group regardless of whether they share similar beliefs.Therefore, the important contributions made by Muslims who immigrate in spite of many challenges should not be overlooked.

The study's conclusions suggest that immigrant populations ought to be given further chances to integrate into society. By doing this, we may lessen the structural basis of anti-immigrant Islamophobia and promote a more comprehensive appreciation of the many contributions Muslim immigrants have contributed to their communities. In identifying and comprehending Muslim civilizations, political Islam took the stage long before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In addition to the political elites of the Muslim world, political groups using Islamic references as a means of political competition have garnered attention from academics and the media in both Europe and

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the US throughout the last 20 years. Their political power and the use of violence by some of their members are undoubtedly the reasons for this level of interest. However, the result is a single, simplified vision that, throughout the Muslim world, exhibits a single semantic dimension that, by taking use of the ambiguity of images and words, renews the range of representations already created by fanaticism and violence. A citizen who only watches television news finds it difficult to comprehend the current situation in the Middle East or Africa, and the Islamic phenomenon can only cause concern because all of the markers for identification and mobilization in the name of Islam are never separated. This view leaves no room for other facets of the Muslim world. Roy (1998).There are several components to the fear of Islam, or Islamophobia as it is sometimes called. Among other aspects, foreign critics of Islam and its ideology claim that Islam is homogeneous and dominated by a single viewpoint. According to what Green says about this interpretation, which is prevalent in the Western anti-Islamic viewpoint;

If Islam is monolithic and unchanging, and if media coverage focuses on violence or terrorism carried out in the name of Islam by a small minority of Muslims, then it is easy to draw the conclusion that what one sees on the news is somehow endemic to Islam and all Muslims [13,p.27]

If Islam is a monophonic religion that forbids differences, as Green claimed, then Muslims cannot be expected to have distinctions. Extremist or anti-Western views are not unique to Muslims; rather, they are a common occurrence. This conclusion is obviously problematic. It is stupid and superficial to assume that all Muslims hold the same, unalterable ideas, especially in the Global South, where Islam is practiced in a number of distinct and geographically remote cultures. Furthermore, Islam's doctrines, worship rituals, and customs vary greatly throughout these diverse cultures and independent nations, and each has its own unique understanding of the religion [8,p.219].

Therefore, this scenario will have a profound impact, particularly on immigrant Muslims. A state of class discrimination will emerge, bringing with it problems between opponents and Muslims, and conveying an idea that runs counter to the true essence of Islam [14,pp.3-19].

3. Conclusion

The struggle of a Muslim immigrant woman who returns to her roots (the faith) in order to reassess her current situation (living in the Western diaspora) and create an enlightened future is illuminated in Aboulela's Minaret. Najwa's Muslim/non-Western identity is strengthened by her trip to and existence in the West. As a result, a new Muslim lady who is a part of the global ummah and who strongly adheres to her faith arises.The complexities of transnational realities that modify a Muslim woman's true yet distinct identity in the diaspora are elaborated by Minaret. With its diverse cultural traditions and identities, Islam emerges as a worldwide faith in the book. Because of her religious maturity,Najwa is able to adjust both locally and globally, as well as universally, and she eventually learns how to live in a diaspora. Aboulela's protagonist encounters a variety of settings on her path from ignorance to enlightenment, but she perceives religion as a trans-national, agential space. She feels like she has found a new

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home at Regent's Park Mosque in London, where she encounters Muslim sisterhood. Najwa's multicultural and multifaceted identity is partly a result of this affiliation with the diasporic female group.The most significant factor in Minaret's reconstruction of diasporic Muslim women's identities, particularly in the West, is religion.The protagonist's descent from the noble Sudanese life to the hard, impoverished life in London is portrayed in the story. Her personality changes and she develops a new identity as a result of the blending of her origins and diaspora. Najwa's conversion from liberalism to Islam gives her life a sense of spiritual peace. Najwa gains a new sense of stability, self-assurance, awareness, and hope after going through the religious awakening. In her book, Aboulela offers a stolen example of a Muslim woman who simultaneously bears the burden of routing and rooting. As time goes on, Najwa embraces the realities of diaspora in addition to the significance of the origin. For her, religion dissolves the lines between geography and creates a multifaceted, transnational identity as a Muslim woman and a global citizen under Islamic global leadership.

CONFLICT OF IN TERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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