

## Challenges of Modern Muslim Womanhood as a Part of Spiritual Journey in Aboulela's Minaret

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to analyze Leila Aboulela's novel Minaret; and how she portrays in her novel the spiritual journey of Najwa the protagonist. Set primarily in postcolonial Britain and Sudan, Minaret narrates Najwa's spiritual journey from a privileged secular woman to a devoted Muslim who rediscovers spiritual purpose amidst cultural dislocation. This paper explores Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2005) as a literary portrayal of the modern Muslim woman's journey through alienation, faith, and self-discovery and argues that Aboulela's text constructs a feminist reimagining of Muslim womanhood—one that transcends Western stereotypes of oppression and instead frames agency through faith, modesty, and self-awareness. Aboulela here shows how the influence of strong faith helps a woman to deal with the challenges of modern society and how it is reflected on the decisions made by one. In Minaret, she delineates Najwa her protagonist's development in spiritual growth to overcome her challenges and build a strong connection with the Muslim community. It also hints that detachment from materialistic affiliation and seclusion from the external world is crucial in attaining connection with the transcendent. The study draws on postcolonial and Islamic feminist frameworks to illustrate how identity crises, societal expectations, and spiritual transcendence converge within Najwa's experience.*

**Keywords:** Muslim womanhood, identity crisis, spirituality, postcolonial feminism, Leila Aboulela

### Introduction

Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo, and got her basic education in Khartoum. Afterwards she went to Europe for higher studies, and during this time she got a chance to observe the situation of Africans especially Muslims in Western countries and during her job as a part time Research Assistant she started writing and her works involved characters blended between both the cultures that of East and West . Aboulela knew very well the criterion through which her writings would be judged and analyzed by postcolonial critics and culturalist politics (Morey, 2017). Nash writes that in his view, "instead of conforming to the Orientalist discourse of Western writing in Islam, Aboulela adopted an ingenious method of writing involving Orientalist and postcolonial critics [...] as representative of Islam" (2012, p. 45). Aboulela attempts to write about the condition of Muslim women in a non-Muslim majority place.

She is acclaimed to be a modestly renowned writer and her work has gained a quite some attention and commendation from critics, research students and literary prize boards. She writes often about the realities of her immediate environment, drawing inspiration from her social and religious identity; being herself an Arab, Muslim, African and vastly migrant woman. Abubekr This study is mainly focused on one of Aboulela's celebrated novels; Minaret and how she portrays the

mundane challenges of identity and societal expectations faced by modern women leading towards transcendence.

### **Background**

In contemporary postcolonial literature, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) holds a distinct place for its nuanced portrayal of Muslim female identity in the diaspora. *Minaret* effectively develops a plotline portraying a journey of spiritual progress of Najwa the protagonist. She is shown to be from an aristocratic Sudanese family and her father as a political diplomat. The family followed all norms that were bounded towards the western culture. Their condition started to go downhill when her father was arrested because of the coup and the family had to move to London in political exile. Latter in the years coming after their exile she lost her father in the coup and her mother was driven to deathbed moreover her twin brother Omar got arrested because of dealing in drugs and was sent prison for life. Initially the novel evolves around her spiritual journey from lack of faith portrayed through her distance from praying, fasting irregularly in Ramadan and her intimate relationship outside the sanctity of marriage, with Anwar, a Marxist activist, who doesn't have faith and is shown to be an atheist, to being firmly grounded in her faith in Islam. Najwa develops consistency regarding faith with the help of characters, though minor in role but conveying the complete turnover in Najwa's wholehearted acceptance of her religion consequently the novel shows her relationship with a young man of nineteen years old Tamer, when she was in her forties and they fall in love. The relationship could not last because the pressure of societal expectations and that the modern world doesn't accept such relationships, where the woman is older. Tamer is portrayed with religious persuasions. Najwa and he generally have to more to share on religious issues than anything sensual.

The novel presents the protagonist, Najwa, as a modern Muslim woman grappling with displacement, moral realignment, and spiritual awakening. Rather than subscribing to Western feminist prototypes, Najwa redefines empowerment through submission to faith, which challenges the secular assumption that religiosity and autonomy are mutually exclusive.

Aboulela's depiction of Najwa's transformation reflects the complex intersection of gender, migration, and spirituality in modern Muslim womanhood (Choudhury, 2025). Her narrative journey, from an affluent university student in Khartoum to a domestic worker in London, dramatizes how faith becomes both a refuge and a means of self-reclamation. This paper argues that Najwa's trajectory illustrates what can be called the "transcendence of the mundane"—a spiritual release from societal pressures and identity fragmentation through rediscovery of the sacred self.

### **Significance**

The study will help to explore, how the novelist managed to develop an insight into religion and faith by featuring the drawbacks of conventional dogmatic norms prevailing in societies of modern world and how her protagonist through her transcendence of the mundane is able to deal with challenges of identity and societal expectations. This particular study attempts to deal with the estrangement of an individual from modern society 'secularism' towards faith and spiritual development.

### **Literature Review**

Aboulela's novels deal with the circumstances surrounding an ordinary woman's life and the spiritual development that helps one deal with worldly affairs (Mosleh & Ahmed, 2008) she has not set up an ideal character in *The Minaret* but a woman coping with the normal circumstances of life and still having faith, in 2005 she said in an interview: "

“My characters do not behave necessarily as a ‘good Muslim’ should. They are not ideals or role models. They are, as I see them to be, ordinary Muslims trying to practice their faith in difficult circumstances” (Hassan, 2008, p. 310 as cited by Mosleh&Ahmed,2008).

Najwa in *Minaret* develops faith after an ordeal through unusual phases and though during her young age she leads a westernized lifestyle, at times, she felt guilty about not following Islam properly through praying five times a day, fasting and so on. *Minaret* [...] conciliate what might be called "anthropological" readings of Muslim writing, which sees texts by an avowedly religious subject as offering insights into the mind of the "other"(Morey, 2017). According to Morey, *Minaret* reveals the difficulty of attempting to move the secular individualist form of the novel back to its spiritual roots: to fill an art form etched by 300 years of secular individualism with a sense of God as a real presence. The task is not an easy one and it is reflected in the novel's interpretative crises and challenges, and in the collision between its spiritual agenda and the banality of its chosen form. The desire to love and be loved is a central theme of the book drawing a line between sexual love and spiritual love, or love for the Prophet. Najwa's sexual relation with Anwar leaves her feeling vulnerable and unclean. By contrast, Tamer shares her religious priorities (Morey,2017). Hunter writes in her essay, "The Muslim Who Has Faith" in Leila Aboulela's Novels *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2010) that, Aboulela's novels delineates what Poole marks as a constant characteristic of the British Press, painting a negative picture of Muslims(Poole, 2005). She attempts to 'bridge the gap' between the East and the West through her characters. Aboulela counters the conventional dogmas and draws the arena of Western emptiness implanted in Islamic-African core (Nash, 2002).

The stereotypical concept of Islam being a narrow-minded religion is challenged by Aboulela as she highlights the spiritual teaching of the religion as the crux of it which equips a person internally to deal with external frustrations and challenges of modern womanhood. *Minaret* teaches that the frustration of being an immigrant must be endured without complain because of one's faith and practices (Hunter, 2013). Her decision to wear the hijab, far from symbolizing submission, functions as a metaphor for reclaiming agency through self-definition within a dominant culture that misrepresents Muslim women (Zidan, 2017). Other female writers who discussed diasporic life and its challenges of identity and modern womanhood in western society are like Monica Ali and Hanan Al Shaykh whose characters whether driven by the desire for better opportunities or in exile due to political reasons in their novels go through similar circumstances but owing to their particularly secularist convictions, they try to find their sense of identity in the liberal climate of London's masses in spaces such as work establishments or places offering fun and entertainment and its unhallowed streets. These narratives depict a major part to the female protagonists' full assimilation into a western civilization and reclaim their sexuality, uninfluenced by any religious obligation. Whereas through Najwa, Aboulela critiques the assumption that liberation lies solely in Western secular values. Her identity crisis hence becomes a path to authenticity rather than defeat—the condition from which transcendence becomes possible. Through the portrayal of her characters as ordinary people dealing with their day to day activities and yet holding onto faith, she tries to develop amongst her readers the feasibility of religion, especially the smoothness of Islam. Choudhury (2025) interprets Najwa's return to faith as a “re-inscription of dignity and identity” against the dual subjugations of patriarchal Sudanese culture and secular Western alienation. In other words, Aboulela redefines the Muslim woman's subjectivity as spiritually rather than socially grounded.

### **Theoretical framework**

The study has used a triangulation of theories including Islamic feminism, postcolonial feminism, and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity. As these theories suit in order to explain how gender, religion, identity, and power play a role in postcolonial Muslim contexts. The main focus of Islamic feminism is to achieve gender equality through reinterpreting Islamic texts such as the Qur'an. The theory argues that inequality is not caused by Islam itself but by patriarchal interpretations that are developed over time (Badran, 2009; Wadud, 1999). Scholars like Amina Wadud highlighted the concept of *ijtihad* which means independent reasoning as a way to restore justice and support women's rights within Islam (Wadud, 1999).

Western feminist ideas are challenged by Postcolonial feminism that mostly present all non-Western women as the submissive timid subjugated and powerless. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), pointed out that this kind of thinking overlooks the reality of experiences, voices, and agency of women in formerly colonized societies. Therefore, postcolonial feminism emphasizes local cultures, histories, and power relations (Mohanty, 1988).

Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity adds another layer to this framework. As his point of view is that identity is not fixed but is created in a "Third Space" where different cultures interact (Bhabha, 1994). In this space, people form mixed or "hybrid" identities that combine elements of both tradition and modernity.

### **Methodology**

This study uses qualitative research methodology of narrative analysis and content analysis to scrutinize the novel.

### **Research Questions**

The questions to be answered are how the novelist portrays the transcendence of her protagonist and how this transcendence helps to combat the challenges of identity and societal expectations in the modern world.

### **Analysis**

Najwa's path toward faith is not linear; it involves loss, guilt, repentance, and gradual sanctification. Initially, religion offers solace in exile, but over time, it becomes a channel for self-actualization. Her "transcendence of the mundane" occurs when spiritual consciousness replaces the material markers of success that once defined her.

Najwa belonged to an elite Sudanese family, her father working for the government and her family had the modernized way of leading their lives following western culture for example her taste in dressing, food, music and etc. was inclined towards western things. Najwa's way of life and family were greatly impacted by Western culture. Their life was full of opulence and joy, interspersed with frequent vacations overseas, and they were pampered by a multitude of staff.

"In the summer, we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have" (p.15). She narrates. Everything took a drastic turn when the regime of the government was attacked by a coup in which her father served and he was arrested that led to the political exile of her family. Meeting of Najwa and Anwar, a university student activist who is also a member of the group that will ultimately stage the coup, leads the tale on its savory note. He never concealed his distaste for the regime or his rejection of Najwa's father but she became attracted to him. However, things drastically changed when her father's government was overthrown by a coup, and his detention resulted in her family's political banishment. After his imprisonment, the family leaves to their apartment in Lancaster. Najwa and her twin brother Omar states

'First weeks in London were OK. We didn't even notice that we were falling. Once we got over the shock of suddenly having to fly out the day after Baba was arrested, Omar and I could not help but enjoy London' (p.56).

Though this perception changed as the twins realized they had become refugees after their father execution and dismantle of his asset. This results as the turning point for Najwa's and her family. London 2003, becomes the setting for the second phase of the novel, here we find that Najwa has reconnected with her faith and the visible evidence of a completely overturned reality was sordidly apparent. Unable to finish her education, she sought for a job and shortly after begins work as a housekeeper for Lamya, a young mother and a PhD student she met at Regent's Park mosque, who embodies the old life of luxury Najwa once knew.

The years between 1989 to 1991 are narrated in the chapters ahead describing the unfolding realities of Najwa's present life and explaining the emphatic measure of Najwa's undignified fall to squalid conditions. The rush of these eventful periods throw a light on Najwa's contradictory liaison with Anwar, who had also escaped to London preceding another coup in Sudan, and newly formed interest in Islam. Najwa's interaction with Anwar is prompted by a longing of human contact and need for connection to her native home and a younger version of her in good old times. He became the only male figure after her father's death and brother's incarceration. Their reconnection from the very start hinted of a sinful relation beginning with their choice venue of tryst at the Hyde Park Corner McDonald's, which is an explicit depiction of Western way of life and symbolism and. It became even more clear when his dislike for religiously conservative women was highlighted when he frowned at the "Arab women dressed in black" (167), compared to the bright smile that lit his face in admiration when she tried on Western dresses in Selfridges' fitting rooms.

The novel is set in three different timelines: 1984-5, 1989-91 and 2003-4, with settings in Sudan and London; each of these periods weaves around Najwa's journey from a liberal, secular Muslim girl in her teenage to a conservative Muslim woman in her forties. Though Aboulela presents a conservative Najwa to her readers at first in the prologue, later we see a carefree, westernized teenage girl. During this phase of Najwa when she didn't pray five times a day, and at times prayed only in the month of Ramadan she used to feel guilty about it which shows she was never totally without faith like Anwar is shown to be. However even there she missed most of the days from fasting saying she is on her periods, "When I fast in Ramadan, I pray. A girl in school told me that fasting doesn't count unless you pray"(28) [...] "you spend half the month saying you've got your period and can't fast"(29). Still she always felt guilty and sad about not following these norms in Islam, when she sees the servants in her house waking up to pray for the morning prayer when they just returned from a party, and that she felt "hollow" despite all the luxuries she had in her life compared to the servants in her house who came from unprivileged places.

"The servants stirred and, from the back of the house, I heard the sound of gushing water, someone spitting, a sneeze, the shuffle of slippers on the cement floor of their quarters. A light bulb came on. They were getting ready to pray. They had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake and I didn't (31)."

She was attracted towards conservative female students that wore traditional robes, revealing the spark of spiritual eagerness that eventually emerges as Najwa's plot moves forward.

"Two girls from my class were leaving the library and we smiled at each other. I was not sure of their names. They both wore white robes and one of them was very cute with deep dimples and sparkling eyes. They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and my too tight blouses (14)."

She highlights here what would be keen to note as the first spark of self-scrutiny. Najwa's realization that she is detached from her faith and that it makes her feel incomplete shows that one cannot recognize her as a person wholly deprived of faith but that she had a grain of hidden faith already that pushed her towards spiritual growth. Further there are people like Um Waleed, Wafaa, her convert husband, Ali, who acted as the light for her to come closer to Islam. Wafaa and other women from mosque who came to wash her dead mother made an impact on Najwa, to come visit the Masjid and Wafaa's insistence on this issue is like a catalyst in the process of transcendence and here, Islam meant more firm faith for Najwa and the encounter with Ali made her ponder on the potentiality of Islam that draws people to it. Najwa felt more appropriate whenever she went to mosque and met all the women there and heard there Quran instructor namely Um Waleed call the name of the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] with so much love and affection, "Ya habibi ya Rasoul Allah"(72).

Consequently when the protagonist is shown to be in her forties and is transformed into a modestly dressed maid liable to being reserved she falls in love with young Tamer the brother of her employer who was just nineteen years old at the time and that he develops a firm religious dimension between them. Tamer has a religious mindset unlike the members in his family like his mother Doctora Zeinab and sister Lamya who hold the belief that peace of mind is the outcome of worldly gains.

Lamya's married life is already on rocks yet she still holds onto the western modernity responsible for the unrest in her life Tamer and Najwa mostly speak about Islam and that Tamer wants to pursue his degree in Islamic Studies but his family thinks it's not a wise decision career wise. Tamer's way of leading a Islamic mode of life with keeping beard, talking about halal food and his stay at the mosque during Ramadan, shows his deep intensity into faith that Najwa sees as something new and refreshing in him, "his eyes clear and shining, as if he could see other things"(172). The relationship of Tamer and Najwa contrasted from the relationship Najwa had during her university days and in times after her mother's demise in London with Anwar. Marxist activist Anwar, despised the government Najwa's father was working for and even while he was with her, he constantly spoke ill about her father and he was often hinting that he was just infatuated towards Najwa because of her beauty and attire.

In spite of all this and that Najwa felt dejected from his behavior, she could not let go of him. Even her sexual relation with Anwar out of wedlock makes her forlorn and guilty for it to point that she cannot take it anymore and seeks refuge in the protection of a modest lifestyle following Islam. She is finally able to set herself free from the exploitative relation with Anwar product of the modernized western society and its norms. Anwar let her go easily a further proof that he was just physically attracted towards her and that he didn't like the Islamic way of lifestyle and wanted to stay away from it. On the other hand Tamer liked Najwa for her modest attire and the fact that they both were on the same page regarding faith and religion. Tamer also turned out to be one of the people who helped Najwa build her faith more strongly and transcend out of worldly pleasures and despite that she took money from his mother to stay away from him, it was solely for his well-being because she didn't want Tamer to be a cause of hurt for his family and especially his mother resulting in his downfall like her twin brother Omar who misbehaved with his mother making Najwa feel that it is because of such behavior that he was punished by fate and got arrested in drug dealing case. Further they were forced to part ways because they were a mismatched couple (difference in age; Tamer too younger than Najwa) and that in this modern society such couples cannot be thought of, though religiously this is accepted where women could be older than men,

big age gap and so on, that our Prophet [PBUH] was just twenty-five years old when he married Khadija [RA], when she was forty years old and that in order to marry one mustn't see age but that the partner should be righteous and modest with a deep rooted faith.

Through the portrayal of her characters as ordinary people dealing with their day-to-day activities and yet holding onto faith, she tries to develop amongst her readers the feasibility of religion, especially the smoothness of Islam. Najwa has always been under the protection of men throughout her life and that her wanting to be Tamer's "concubine" frames the Islamic evolution of the story but with the lens of feminism, this gesture depicts her subjugation towards men, wanting protection, which shows she is failing to be independent. Najwa's treatment as woman cannot be disregarded in the story even her will to be Tamer's mistress doesn't fall out of religion but that in older times a man could have one and that he was judged by his treatment with the her. Choudhury (2025) interprets Najwa's return to faith as a "re-inscription of dignity and identity" against the dual subjugations of patriarchal Sudanese culture and secular Western alienation. In other words, Aboulela redefines the Muslim woman's subjectivity as spiritually rather than socially grounded. Najwa's faith practice—her prayers, modesty, service, and silent endurance—reflect the Sufi-like pursuit of inner purification.

Her rejection of Karim's romantic advances is not moralistic but existential; it denotes the moment when worldly attachment gives way to spiritual awareness. In essence, Najwa becomes the embodiment of tawba (repentance) and ihsan (spiritual excellence). Aboulela's literary philosophy resonates with Islamic feminism, which calls for authentic readings of the Qur'an and Hadith outside patriarchal misinterpretations. Zidan's (2017) study observes that Islamic feminists seek to "reread history by revaluing the social conditions" that shaped earlier gender hierarchies. In this sense, Aboulela's fiction becomes a cultural corrective—exposing both Western misconceptions and internal patriarchal distortions. Najwa's basic identity becomes her religion: "I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you, just think of myself as a Muslim" (110). Religious spirituality gives Najwa's life a new dimension and relocates her sense of belonging and identity helping her to take control over her life. In *Minaret*, Najwa's faith is linked to the greater Muslim community, the ummah, more than to her homeland (Hunter, 2013).

*Minaret* in its constantly transforming scenes vastly portrays two faces of the world One of opulence immersed in secularism and the other of hardship and tragedy salvaged by religious spiritualism. It is apparent that the author's insinuation through her characters is profoundly woven around the pursuit of self-discovery and identity, particularly in the abrupt circumstance of a pressure of societal expectations and crippled identity, it also hints at the struggles of communal acceptance. Such unresolved issues gave rise to vulnerability being a response to the mundane experiences she suffered. It was only in her acceptance of these oddities of her life that the readiness to seek refuge arose and when she found it, she claimed a new identity in her dedication to Islam. Najwa's quiet spirituality presents a unique feminist stance: it reclaims the female voice through introspection, not confrontation. By foregrounding piety as empowerment, Aboulela breaks from the liberal-feminist tradition that defines freedom in opposition to faith. Instead, *Minaret* gestures toward synthesis—a reconciliation of devotion and individuality.

### **Conclusion**

In *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela crafts an intimate narrative that transcends common binaries of East and West, faith and feminism, tradition and modernity she situates Najwa's crisis in the aftermath of Sudan's political upheaval and London's cultural dislocation, creating a dual framework of postcolonial identity formation. Following Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Najwa occupies

a “third space” between Sudanese tradition and Western modernity (Al-Karawi & Bahar, 2014). Her identity becomes suspended between privilege and servitude, faith and secularism, belonging and exile. Bouregbi (2021) notes that *Minaret* illustrates how identity is not “fixed and stable” but constantly metamorphosing under the influence of new environments. Najwa’s reclusion and eventual turn to Islam are not regressions; rather, they are acts of resistance against an alienating modernity. Her decision to wear the hijab, far from symbolizing submission, functions as a metaphor for reclaiming agency through self-definition within a dominant culture that misrepresents Muslim women (Zidan, 2017). Aboulela’s literary philosophy resonates with Islamic feminism, which calls for authentic readings of the Qur’an and Hadith outside patriarchal misinterpretations. Zidan’s (2017) study observes that Islamic feminists seek to “reread history by revaluing the social conditions” that shaped earlier gender hierarchies. Through the spiritual and psychological evolution of Najwa, the novel illustrates how the modern Muslim woman can navigate identity crises, moral expectations, and the burdens of cultural displacement through the rediscovery of faith. Najwa’s journey from secular privilege to spiritual serenity reflects a transcendent understanding of womanhood—one that defines liberation through divine proximity rather than societal approval. In doing so, Aboulela proposes a post secular model of female agency: grounded in submission, strengthened by faith, and resilient amidst modern fragmentation. Aboulela in her novels anticipated the Muslim women and their struggle, as Wadud says, aiming “gender jihad”, the system should be formulated in a way to enhance a quality life for all of God’s creatures and this cannot be done just by having refugees in the Masjid (2006). In *Minaret* the separation portrayed that in order to attain transcendence, one must be physically, mentally and psychologically alone.

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