

Enhancing Women’s Mental Health through Islamic teachings in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Does my Head Look Big in This?*

تعزير الصحة العقلية للمرأة المسلمة من خلال التعليمات الاسلامية في مئذنة الليلى ابو العلا و في هل يبدو رأسي كبيراً في هذا؟ لرندة عبد الفتاح

Renforcer la santé mentale des femmes à travers les enseignements de l’Islam dans *Minaret* de Leila Aboulela et *Does my Head Look Big in This ?* de Randa Abdel-Fattah

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Introduction

Western media, controlled by corporate conglomerates, portray Islam as the main enemy of the West, and the Muslim world as a gist of terrorism that jeopardizes Western civilization and its democratic values. Muslim women, portrayed as casualties of Islamic traditions and subservient to patriarchal Muslim society, occupy a paradoxical position in the Western consciousness (Allen 35). Thus, for the West, Muslim men are polygamous and abusive, and Muslim women are “veiled, shackled, and secluded” (Hasan 67), forced into marriage and caged in the ‘hijab’. This was the principal reason for an extraordinary blossoming canon of narratives by and about Muslim women. Because writing can be a means of resistance, a mode of writing back against one’s oppression, these Muslim women writers were triggered by the Western curiosity about Islam and Muslims, especially after the events of 9/11. Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005) presents a very monolithic and closed understanding of religion; it emphasizes the role of spirituality and faith in women’s mental health. It is about a female, Najwa, the protagonist and narrator of the novel who succeeds in finding a place for herself in exile after facing many problems. Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Does my Head Look Big in This?* (2005) depicts the young Muslim Amal’s spiritual journey when she decides to wear ‘hijab’ as a representation of her Islamic identity.

1. Muslim Women's Defense of Islam

In response to Western discourse, Muslim women authors present a new picture of the Muslim female as a powerful, already enlightened Muslim with complete knowledge, a person who has a spiritual calling that others recognize as significant. In her article "Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*" (2012), Christina Phillips states that for these authors, religion is central. Being Muslim is more important than any other aspect of identity, seeking to deconstruct the stereotypes that prevail in Western television, film, and media, and elevating the values of Islam. The intention of Muslim women authors is to convince their readers of the 'correctness' of a particular way of interpreting the world (66). She quotes the example of Aboulela who explains: "I am interested in going deep, not just looking at 'Muslim' as a cultural or political identity but something close to the center, something that transcends but doesn't deny gender, nationality, class, and race" (67). Therefore, these Muslim women are seen as agents of change, not as passive victims; they reclaim their Islamic cultural and religious identity as a mode of discourse to counter the stereotypes imposed on them.

In her novel *Minaret*, Aboulela introduces Najwa's spiritual journey from a faithless to a devotee religious woman who reframes her identity according to her spirituality. The fact that she lives in a secular environment in London does not prevent Najwa from practicing her Islamic rituals. Moreover, Aboulela contradicts the Western discourse that blames Islam as being the religion of barbarism and intolerance. It claims that Muslim women are oppressed victims whereas Muslim men are violent terrorists. Presenting Muslim experiences and stressing the importance of religion in guiding them, Aboulela strongly opposes the Western view. Through her characters, she aims to show the role of Islam in Muslims lives; she presents it as the savior and source of strength from which Muslims get relief and power to survive. In the novel's vision, Islam brings to Najwa a vital and a new sense of identity. As she says to Tamer, "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, I just think of myself as a Muslim" (*Minaret* 110). Through this novel, Aboulela hence aims to present religion as a source of strength for her female narrator-protagonist.

Leila Ahmed, in her book *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992), discusses the Western vision on the veil and Islam. She demonstrates that 'veiling', in Western vision, visibly marks the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies and becomes "the symbol of both the oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam. It became the open

target of colonial attack and the spearhead of assault on Muslim societies” (Ahmed 152). In *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Randa Abdel-Fattah wraps the Western vision concerning ‘hijab’. Through the deliberate image of veiled Muslim girls as oppressed by their parents, she also attempts to help people get rid of prejudice and respect differences. Amal, the teenage protagonist, celebrates her faith by her own choice and willingness. She attempts to hold an incompatible culture which is highly difficult to achieve due to the increasing tensions after the Bali bombing¹ and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The task for both the writer Abdel-Fattah, and the protagonist Amal, is challenging as Homi K. Bhabha explains in his article, “Of Mimicry and Man” (2016), whereby assimilation between the Western culture and the colonized culture almost closes the gap of binary opposition of Self and Other. This phenomenon creates ambivalence, which is apparent in the strategy of mimicry (122). In the clash of cultures that Amal encounters during her journey of self-identification, Islam is her religion while the anti-Muslim community is her environment. She defends her choice as an expression of her faith like the cross for Christians. The narrative explains many aspects of the Islamic Culture: ‘hijab’, religious holidays, language, and beliefs.

Additionally, Western culture is explored within the story through the lifestyle adopted by the protagonist and her parents. Amal is in a critical position to seriously negotiate her cultural identity between the Palestinian-Muslim and Australian-Western ones. Another choice is introduced which is standing on a liminal position between both cultures. It is difficult for oneself to change where living in an opposed culture of his/her own “Life isn’t like the movies. People don’t change overnight. People don’t go from arrogant and self-righteous to ashamed and remorseful. They don’t suddenly give in when they’ve spent years taking out. No doesn’t magically become a Yes” (*Does my Head?* ch. 43).

In Amal’s case, acceptance is more flexible because she has similar characteristics as any Australian girl. She is blond and fair-haired, but she makes the decision to wear the ‘hijab’. The new ‘her’ receives various aggressive comments and attitudes from her schoolmates. She consciously realizes that she would face obstacles; she weighs them ‘unfailingly’ and decides to embrace them as she declares that the next day, she would write an official ‘To Wear or Not to Wear’ list. Therefore, in the left-hand column, she would write a list of all people who will not hassle her for wearing the ‘hijab’; in the right-hand

1. The 2002 Bali bombings occurred on 12 October 2002 in the tourist district of Kuta on the Indonesian island. The attack killed 202 people (including 88 Australians, 38 Indonesians, and others from more than 20 nationalities). A further 209 people were injured.

side, a list of all the persons who might convey her a sentiment that they “stare ozone holes into her or tut-tut behind her back”(ch. 3).

Amal realizes that embracing her Islamic faith comes from a profound self-consciousness rather than a mere symbolic performance; she reflects, “All this time I’ve been walking around thinking I’ve become pious because I’ve made the difficult decision to wear the hijab [...] but what’s the good of being true to your religion on the outside” (ch. 41). She acknowledges that change will not affect what is on the inside; she is convinced that putting on the ‘hijab’ is not the end of the journey; it is just the beginning of it. Therefore, Amal’s personal crisis is likely to be deeply rooted in her experience of displacement and of ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’, which is gendered as it is raced.

2. Misogyny as an Arab Cultural Heritage

In the discussion of Islam as being a misogynic religion, a distinction should be considered between Islam and Arabness in terms of traditions and culture. Misogyny is deep-rooted in the Arab culture and heritage, not in Islamic teachings. The pre-Islamic era witnessed the cruelty and hatred to females as fathers buried their baby daughters alive. Islam condemns these practices as the Koran denounces them in many verses, including the following:

And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief ! ... because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonor or bury her in the earth ? Certainly, evil is their judgment (Al Nahl 58-59).

In Islam, on the contrary, males and females are equal as in Surat *Al Hodjorate*, in which Allah says: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female...Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa” (13).

Abdelouahab Bouhdiba, in *Sexuality in Islam* (2012), argues that the Koran itself does not bear any sign of misogyny. Huseyin Hatemi equally attempts to prove, with the assistance of Koranic verses, that Islam “does not regard women as second-class human beings” (qtd in Gole 105). Fatima Mernissi, after studying the Koran and its commentaries for ten years, attributes in *Women and Islam* (1991) many of the more onerous aspects of women’s lives as due not to the Koran itself, but to political factors, such as court intrigues that have shaped subsequent interpretations of correct gender relations.

3. The Genuineness of Islamic Feminism

The compatibility of Islam and feminism has provoked heated debates. Some secular feminists living in the West have used the term ‘Islamic feminism’ to refer to Islamic alternatives to Western feminisms. They treat Islam as a natural and genuine way to gender equality and justice. In her article, “Paradigms of Knowledge in Islamic Feminism” (2013), Amani Saleh defines Islamic feminism as the intellectual, academic, and movement-based effort that aims at empowering women by drawing on Islamic frames of reference from which intellectual and movement-based norms, concepts, methodologies, as well other related matters can be mutually employed (11).

Fatima Seedat explains how this “critical faith-centered feminism” amplifies the potential areas of critique beyond gender into a wide array of inequalities, race, environment, and economics among them (420). Therefore, Islamic feminism not only enhances Muslim women’s spiritual empowerment, but the movement also challenges inequities within Muslim societies in accordance with the Koran which states: “And why should you not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are, ill-treated and oppressed among men, women” (*An-Nisa* 75), hence granting human dignity and justice for all.

Afsaneh Najmabadi discusses the extent to which Islamic feminists have come to clarify that gender discrimination has a social rather than a natural or a divine origin, providing possibilities for gender equality:

Thinking of Islam as the antithesis of modernity and secularism forecloses the possibilities of recognizing these emergences and working for these reconfigurations ; it blocks off formation of alliances ; it continues to reproduce Islam as exclusive of secularism, democracy, and feminism, as a pollutant of these projects ; and it continues the work of constituting each as the edge at which meaning would collapse for the other. (41)

Hence, Islam suffers from Muslim patriarchal societies’ misinterpretations of its scripts and teachings more than the Western vision and discourse.

Maysam Al Faruqi claims that Muslim female identity springs from the status of being a Muslim, which involves a choice that relies on a set of theological, spiritual and religious beliefs, dimensions of identity rather than gender or race. Moreover, the author asserts, “to discover the spirit of equality in Islam is not a *feminist* project, but the correct *Islamic* one. The status of women in Muslim communities is not given by Islam itself, but by the Islamic interpretations and the application of Islamic laws” (36).

For Kecia Ali (2006), the phrase “the status of women in Islam” is so controversial and the generalization becomes nonsensical (10). She points that the status of Muslim women is so diverse depending on class, ethnicity, age, geographical area, marital status, and education. Nevertheless, if this status takes into account the actual experiences of women or the suppositions with regard to the uniform conventions, it largely contradicts the complexity and heterogeneity of real textual inherited interpretations. The fact that this phrase is often used to suggest the idea of an existing necessary correlation between Islam and certain specific injustices that determine the life of all Muslim women should not be neglected.

Amani Saleh (2013) draws a global definition for Islamic feminism based on effects, empowerment of women, rather than characteristics or dimensions. In this context, Aboulela's *Minaret* highlights the role of spirituality and faith as a site of female solidarity and empowerment. Najwa's metamorphosis from a non-practicing to a devout Muslim has brought many changes to her life, mainly to her relationships. At first, besides being upper-class girls, Najwa and Randa seem to share common hobbies like music, dancing, and swimming. Yet, when they look to Iranian girls moving in black 'chadors'², Randa describes them as “totally retarded” (*Minaret* 29), unlike Najwa who seems confused. Their reactions are different. Randa declares that women in 'chadors' are “crazy” and asks “how can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything? Najwa, on the opposite, asks “[w]hat do we know about Islam? We don't even pray” (27). Although she does not wear the veil, she is not at ease with herself; she is aware that she is neglecting her religious life, unlike Randa who seems quite satisfied with the Westernized style she is following.

Najwa, as an exiled female, is alone, cut from any family ties and assistance; yet, she is able to integrate smoothly into the new environment. She succeeds in overpassing the chaotic experiences she had in London thanks to her faith and belief in Islam. In fact, *Minaret* is a good example of what Islam as a religion can offer to its believers of what Islamic feminism can offer its advocators. In *Minaret*, Islam bypasses social classes, ethnic, racial boundaries, and creates a sympathetic environment that enables Najwa to survive thanks to the sisterhood support where Islam serves as a ground for a feminist solidarity and support network. From Margot Badran's vision:

A concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the
_____ writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse

2.A 'chador' is an outer garment worn by women in some parts of the Middle East, particularly in Iran and Iraq. It is often black and is sometimes worn with a scarf underneath which covers the hair. Underneath the 'chador', women usually wear long skirts and blouses, or long dresses.

and practice... Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all 'insane' (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life.

This is an important distinction. Islamic feminism is not simply a feminism that is born from Muslim cultures, but one that engages Islamic theology through the text and canonical traditions.

This idea is further echoed in Najwa's experience; she suffers because of the male characters around her. In an interview with Claire Chambers, "British Muslim Fictions", Aboulela assumes:

The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life : her father disappoints her, then her brother lets her down, she becomes very disillusioned with her boyfriend Anwar, and even Tamer- who is presented sympathetically because he's religious like Najwa-even he disappoints her because of his immaturity. (113)

The above quotation clarifies Najwa's disillusionments with male characters. Yet, she seems to be brave, mainly after her commitment to religion. She takes care of her family when they arrive in London; she has never let her brother even when he was jailed. Besides, she gives money to Anwar when he is in London although he has never treated her well. More importantly, she is the refuge that sustains Tamer from the hostility of his sister when she refuses to accept his outlook as a devout Muslim. Obviously, Aboulela presents women as brave persons who survive without men's assistance. In this vein, the writer succeeds in countering Western discourse on Muslim women.

4. The Impact of Religion and Spirituality on Health and Well-being

The equation of religion, health, and well-being has been the center of interest of a number of empirical studies over the last two decades. Costa Nogueira et al. in their quantitative research entitled "The Lack of Teaching/ Study of Religiosity/Spirituality in Psychology Degree Courses in Brazil", argue that people who devote themselves to religion tend to be less depressed, to have greater self-esteem, more effective coping skills, greater happiness, greater life satisfaction, and improved physical health (325). Morgan Green and Marta Elliott, in their article entitled "Religion, Health, and Psychological Well-Being", note that religious engagement in various forms has generally been found to be

associated with greater physical health and psychological well-being with few exceptions. In general, it seems that the relationship between religion and well-being relies upon both personal and social components (152).

Muslim women are criticized in non-Muslim societies for practicing their religious ritual of wearing 'hijab'. Abdel-Fattah depicts, through the voice of her protagonist Amal, how she is proud of her religion and belonging to an ethnic minority in a dominant majority. She says, "I feel like my passion and conviction in Islam are bursting inside me and I want to prove to myself that I am strong enough to wear the badge of my faith" (*Does My Head?* ch. 2). Her beliefs strengthen her and make her feel better. She adds, "I believe it will make me feel so close to God... That's when this warm feeling buzzes through you and you smile to yourself, knowing that God's watching you, knowing that he knows you are trying to be strong to please him" (ch.2). Amal suffers from prejudice and racist remarks when she permanently sets her mind on wearing 'hijab'. Hostility and unacceptance that she deals with justify her hesitation as she states, "I can't sleep from stressing about whether I've got the guts to do it. To wear the hijab, the head scarf, full-time" (ch. 1). These lines reveal Amal's fight with her difficult decision, and the big challenge for her to wear a full-time 'hijab' that would threaten her comfort zone after being known as an Australian-born girl. It is the clear code of being a Muslim in a prejudicial group:

"I'm terrified" she said "I am ready for the next step ; I am sure of that but I am still nervous. Agh ! there are million different voices in my head scaring me off" and "I can't imagine what my class will say if I walk in with the hijab on ... I'm walking in fully covered and yet I'm still breaking out in sweat. (ch. 2)

Feeling nervous and depressed seems to dominate the psyche of Muslim women. Eloul Liyam et al. evoke the importance of remembering that no culture has totally overcome women's marginalization and lack of empowerment, and that even in developed countries, women still report a rate of depression twice as high as men. A lowered view of women, not inherent to religion, but sometimes practiced in the name of socio-cultural values, may reduce self-esteem in women and increase susceptibility to depression.

The perception of Muslim identity by the mainstream society is associated with increased hate crimes (Abu-Ras et al. 223) along with negative effects in the workplace (Ghumman & Jackson 10). According to a new study conducted by researchers at the University of Westminster and published by *The British Journal of Psychology*, British Muslim women who wear 'hijab' have a better

chance of having higher self-esteem³ and confidence in their body (Swami, Viren, et al). Moreover, in a quantitative study, David R. Hodge et al. assert that Muslim women who reported wearing the ‘hijab’ more frequently exhibited lower, rather than higher, levels of depressive symptoms. Wearing the ‘hijab’ appears to be a protective factor in the area of depression (7). Muslim women in Western countries, and native Muslim women in the countries where the ‘hijab’ is banned in the workplace feel frustrated in wearing the attire of their choice. A Muslim woman, by adopting ‘hijab’, is carving a public space for herself, and this dress serves as an instrument of autonomy and self-esteem (1).

Amal goes mad, but it does not in any way make her give a second thought of the decision she made:

I can't stop thinking about Hidaya and I feel sick with longing for my friends and teachers. Sick with longing for a school where you learnt what every other student in any other Melbourne school learnt but you could also pray and fast and wear a hijab and get on with being a teenager without having to answer questions or defend yourself against new headline. (Does my Head ? ch. 2)

Again, this quote reinforces the previous argument that Muslim women represent a fertile ground for sickness and depression. For instance, the decision to practice their religious convictions openly, which is a natural right, comes to be so difficult for them. According to et al, “it is believed that disease or ill-health is caused by a disregard for some aspect of one’s spiritual life (7).

The practice of ‘hijab’ has been tested to unfold its relation with increased psychological well-being. Results from a study of 499 Muslim Kuwaiti adolescents suggest that religiosity evokes lower anxiety, higher self-esteem and subjective well-being (Abdel-Khalek 136). Women practicing ‘hijab’ in a New Zealand sample reported having a greater life satisfaction and fewer symptoms of psychological distress (Jasperse et al 266).

Green and Elliott figure out that religious individuals tend to have better psychological well-being and health than non-religious individuals. Religion alleviates stress and tension, providing mental stability and positivity; this hence facilitates psychological well-being (159). Conversely, the self-determination theory assumes that satisfying feelings of autonomy, competence and accordance are crucial in promoting psychological well-being (McKnight and

3. In psychology, the term self-esteem is used to describe a person’s overall sense of self-worth or personal value. Self-esteem is often seen as a personality trait, which means that it tends to be stable and enduring. Self-esteem can involve a variety of beliefs about oneself, such as the appraisal of one’s appearance, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors (Cherry, Kendra. “What Is Self Esteem ? Accessed July 18, 2019 <http://www.psychology.about.com>).

Kashdan 245). According to Greenfield and Marks, religious activities such as praying, attending places of worship and constant remembrance of God fosters psychological well-being (255). In the same vein, Maltby et al. assert that frequent acts of worship such as prayer have a positive impact on psychological well-being (373).

In *Minaret*, Najwa's immersion with religion and her social connections with the Muslim women community have utterly changed her life and the nature of her relations. Islam is the basis of a support network that provides her with emotional and practical help when she is in serious difficulties, regardless of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and social differences among them. Aboulela naturalizes Najwa's life as a devout Muslim, and emphasizes the centrality of religion in the well-being of her soul by showing that living a religious life can be satisfying, nourishing and energizing to her personality. Najwa, through associating religion with love, security and peace of mind, suggests that living religiously is preferable for the Muslim protagonist. Through Amel, Abdel-Fattah breaks Western stereotypes and validates Muslim women's experiences, empowering them to embrace their religious choices.

Conclusion

Immediately after the tragic events of 9/11, Western media adopted a stereotype of oppressed, subservient, subaltern, and voiceless Muslim women. These depictions are seldom truthful and realistic; they are, oftentimes, crammed with stereotypes and generalizations. Muslim women scholars and intellectuals have altogether engaged in a mission to respond to the Western discourse by illustrating the reality of Muslim women conditions and the true Islam, far from the patriarchal misinterpretations of Islamic script. With an emphasis on Islamic feminist coalition among Muslim women and the roles that Islam plays in their lives, this article has discussed how Muslim women's commitment to Islamic principles and their spiritual powers have rescued them from the state of loss and mental depression.

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Abstract

The concept of "Muslim woman" connotes submissiveness or backwardness. Contemporary literary works portray Muslim women in a new light not commonly seen in the Western media. Muslim women writers have engaged in a mission to respond to the Western stereotype by illustrating the reality about Muslim women conditions and the true Islam. In *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005) and *Minaret* (2005), Randa Abdel-Fatteh and Leila Aboulila respectively defy not only the pressure that resulted from prejudice and discrimination, but also which negatively impacted their

psychological well-being. This article attempts to shed light on how Muslim women articulate their feminism and the positive impact of spirituality on their mental health.

Keywords

Islamic feminism, psychological well-being, Muslim woman, spirituality

الملخص

ارتبط مفهوم "المرأة المسلمة" بالتخلف والرجعية والخضوع. حيث كثرت في العقود الأخيرة، خاصة بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر، الاهتمام بالإسلام والمرأة المسلمة وانتشرت أعمال أدبية تحاول تقويم الصورة النمطية التي ترسخت في الدهنية الغربية التي ترى ان المرأة المسلمة مضطهدة، امعة ومتخلفة لا حقوق لها كأعمال ليلى ابو العلا ورندة عبد الفتاح. في هذا المجال جاءت دراستنا حول روايتين هما *Minaret* (2005) للروائية ليلى ابو العلا ورواية (2006) *Does My Head Look Big In This ?* لرندة عبد الفتاح من منظور نسوي، مبرزين دور العامل الروحاني الديني في توازن واستقرار الحالة النفسية والعقلية للمرأة المسلمة.

مفتاحية

الحركة الحقوقية النسوية الإسلامية، الصحة النفسية، المرأة المسلمة، الروحانية

Résumé

Le concept de « femme musulmane » évoque la soumission. Des oeuvres littéraires contemporaines décrivent les femmes musulmanes d'une manière différente de celle que les médias occidentaux les montrent généralement. Les écrivaines musulmanes se sont engagées dans une mission visant à répondre au stéréotype occidental en illustrant la réalité de la situation des femmes musulmanes et de l'Islam. Dans *Does my Head Look Big in This ?* (2005) et *Minaret* (2005), Randa Abdel-Fattah et Leila Aboulela défient non seulement les pressions résultant de préjugés et de discriminations, mais également l'incidence négative sur leur bien-être psychologique. Cet article tente de faire la lumière sur le féminisme islamique et sur la façon dont les femmes musulmanes articulent leur féminisme, ainsi que l'impact positif de la spiritualité sur la santé mentale.

Mots-clés

féminisme islamique, bien-être psychologique, femme musulmane, spiritualité

