Tributaries JOURNAL
For studies and scientific research in social and human sciences
Vol 08 (01) june 2023 pp 504-521

Reconceptualising Western Freedom:Leila Aboulela's Representation of Displaced Muslim Womenin *Minaret*

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Submitted	Accepted	Published
23/12/2023	16/03/2024	01/06/2024

Abstract: Leila Aboulela's*Minaret* is a challenge to write back to the center and the margin in the sense that it seeks to correct Western Orientalist assumptions and to re-evaluate the reproduced stereotypes reinforced by first generation Muslim writers about Muslim women. Najwa, the protagonist of *Minaret*, is an illustration of a Muslim woman who chooses her Islamic faith. Through Najwa's experience, Aboulela corrects the stereotype that the East is patriarchal and misogynistic because of Islam. She also offers a different conception of freedom that Muslim women embrace, for they see that Western freedom is rather "oppressive". Western freedom does not answer their individual and particular religious needs. Najwa finds in Islam a reconciling power of her Eastern and Western fragmented self. To her and other Muslim women, among them the writer herself, Islam gives a broader identity that unites different peoples from different places, races, cultures, and genders.

Keywords: *Minaret ;West ; East ; Islam ; feminism; Freedom*

1. INTRODUCTION

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer who recently gained considerable attention and readership for her novels and short stories. Despite residing in Scotland and writing in English, Aboulela's narratives feature diverse female protagonists embarking on journeys from the East to the West, experiencing various forms of diasporic exile. While such themes are prevalent in postcolonial literature, Aboulela's approach diverges notably from earlier first-generation Muslim writers. This paper explores Aboulela's portrayal of devout Muslim women and their spiritual dilemmas within the context of Diaspora. As a second-generation Muslim writer, Aboulela offers a unique perspective on the challenges faced by adherents of Islam as they navigate the complexities of diasporic life. The purpose of this paper is analyzing the religious journey of Najwa from

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Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret* (2005), and the contradiction of Islam as a refuge to her life in the West. That is through Najwa's journey, we would have to understand more about the alternative to the view that Islam plays a major role in the oppression of women in the East; although this view mainly reflects the ideology of the western conception of feminism that is embraced by first generation Muslim writers, it has not changed until recently. Through our reading of the novel and the projection of this alternative definition of female freedom, which might seem contradictory since faith is usually thought of as restrictive and didactic rather than liberating, religion would possibly add a stronger motif in the artistic and ideological representation of the hybrid Eastern community.

Former criticisms that shed light on Aboulela's*Minaret*, its representation of the West, and its relation to religion include two types of readings. The first criticizes the writer's use of religion in a context that rids it of its politics. Sadia Abbas, in "Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel," condemns Aboulela's use of religion in her first two novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Her reading of the novel reduces its purpose to didacticism. She also interprets Aboulela's use of unpoliticized religion as apologetic since it makes it more marketable to the West. In Abbas's work, the role of religious women portrayed by Aboulelais also denounced, for these women are represented as desiring their own "subordination". The second reading focuses on a different approach than that of Abbas's. The feminist reading of Abbas denies the diversity of female freedoms that exist within the Diaspora. Claire Chambers and Rida Inam present a non-biased analysis of *Minaret* and other works by Aboulela. However, their analysis, since they both deal with several novels of Eastern Muslim writers, is less detailed and illustrative than what this paper aims to achieve.

Our contribution lies in a detailed feminist analysis of *Minaret* and its conception of a type of freedom embraced by marginalized Muslim women. The paper adds Lila Abu-Lughod's, who is a prominent anthropologist, understanding of the concept of freedom in the East and the Arab world. This type of freedom, which is embraced by Najwa, is a sort of a channel that links the East to the West, for the novel works on "the possibilities of building bridges between former colonizer and colonized" (Hassan, 2008, p. 298). Our reading of *Minaret*, hence, will focus on this new conception of freedom, which entails a focus on a postcolonial and feminist approach. The research, however, is less theoretical since all former criticisms have already dedicated a greater part to theory.

2. Rewriting Versus "Writing Back"

The concept of "writing back", which has been first coined by the British-

Indian writer, Salman Rushdie, and adopted later as an important postcolonial theory by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their work *The Empire Writes Back* (1998), has been taken as a mission by rising postcolonial writers from colonized or former colonized communities to re-identify and represent the reality of their worlds and cultures. The main reason in this re-evaluation is to disclaim the inferior position of their culture, religion, and skin color that has been imposed on them by the West for decades. These writes dedicate their works of fiction to writing back to the center. The aim is to give voice to those on the margin to retell their stories free from western stereotypical assumptions. However, many critics think that Eastern writers coming from the same religious and cultural backgrounds differ in their way of writing back. Some critics go so far as to accuse one category of rewriting and reinforcing the orientalist discourse rather than writing back. These Eastern writers fall into two groups. One group prefers a more secular representation while the other sees that religion (Isalm in particular) is an important ingredient to their identity. Claire Chambers (2019) in *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* speaks about how the first group of writers, which she calls writers from Muslim heritage, “hinge on a protagonist’s journey away from their ‘repressive’ families and communities towards assimilation in the apparently libratory, secular West” (p. 126). The second group of writers, which Aboulela belongs to, “writes back to two epistemological forces: the recycled ancient and modern Orientalist scholarship, and the testimony and expressed voices and ideas of native informants with Muslim backgrounds” (M. M. Hasan, 2015, p. 96). Thus, the latter group writes back to the center and to the margin that misrepresents Islam as repressive and sees the West as a force of freedom and solace.

According to Chambers, The result of overcoming, or rather rebelling against, Islamism is assimilation. Writers from Muslim heritage portray journeys of repressed protagonists who have been oppressed by their homeland’s Islamic culture in Diasporic spaces that promise freedom. Hence, they reinforce stereotypical assumptions about Islam as a political approach to life that is forced upon the individual and that there is no freedom in choosing it as a way of life. The focus lies especially on women here, for they are the easiest element to justify oppression in Islam. Female Muslim characters are “portrayed as disempowered, oppressed and belittled by Muslim men, subservient to their husbands with no equal rights, utterly neglected by parents and mistreated as daughters-in-laws, and most notably always kept under the veil of ignorance and at home” (p. 90). Orientalist writers and Diasporic writers of Muslim heritage share the view that women in Islamic societies are desperate for freedom from their victimized roles

in the patriarchal orient. Examples of such writings are Sean Boyne's*Sold into Marriage: One Girl's Living Nightmare* and Jean Sasson's*Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*. These stories narrate miserably tragic events that women who suffered under the power of Muslim men go through. Boyne tells the story of an adolescent Irish Muslim girl of sixteen who has been physically abused by her father. The later sells her off for marriage to an old farmer whose relation with her is another form of abuse. In spite of the pre-nuptial agreement of abstaining from any sexual interaction, her husband rapes her repeatedly. The narrative stresses the relation of Islam to patriarchy.

Similarly, writers of Muslim heritage who live in the Diaspora and whose writing prevails during the 1990s and the 2000s, such as Hanif Kureishi, Nawal Saadawi, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, strongly contribute in presenting Islam as a misogynistic ideology. Their portrayal goes beyond misogyny as they present it as extreme and its adherents as fundamentalists, adding to the struggles of Muslims living in the west after the 9/11 and the 7/7 London Bombing events. Their representation is in itself more extreme than that of the Orientalist writers'. Ali's *Infidel* (2007), although lacking the subjectivity of the postmodern elements that disguise Rushdi's*The Satinic Verses*'s (1988) extremist views, professes a clear accusation on Islam in regards to women oppression and even to the terrorist events that happened in the world. Her charge includes every Muslim adherent in the world.

Every story told by these writers depicts Muslim women as victims and that the West presents a space for freedom that saves them from the oppressive imposed principles of Islam. The West again is still superior, offering a setting of paradise, while the East is evil, and thus is still described as "other." The narrator of *Infidel*, who is Ali herself, in these lines romanticizes the West in the same way the West romanticizes itself in Hollywood:

> As much as I wanted to be a devout Muslim, I always found it uncomfortable to be opposed to the West. For me, Britain, and America were the countries in my books where there was decency and individual choice […]. In my own personal experience of the West—which was, admittedly, minimal—it really didn't seem to be terribly evil. But I stared long and hard at the photos of dead Muslims that were passed around: we had to give meaning to these deaths, and we were told that the West had caused them. We were taught that, as Muslims, we should oppose the West. (2008, p. 109)

The writer takes her western education inspired from her "books" comfortably, while she finds Islam backward just because her experience with extremists taught

her so. Taking that western education for granted and criticizing a sad reality in the East, instead of scrutinizing the politics under which this reality works, is perpetuating, rather than writing back, orientalist assumptions about the East. Aboulela's female character, in spite of "decency and individual choice," finds the West's freedom oppressive. However, Ali's experience stems from a personal experience of Islam and the West. While in the East, she was oppressed and denied of her freedom of choice, in the West she found a space to unleash her long repressed feelings. The account stems from deep personal wounds which makes it rather subjective and biased for she puts in contrast the non-evil West to the religiously evil East. Although the word "evil" in the quote above is not used to refer to the East, yet its use to deny the evilness of the West and the use of "but" immediately after such a label to refer to the East suggests the opposite label to the latter.

Muslim writers, who write in opposition to such an ideology, which Timothy Brennan (1997) refers to as "proof of overcoming that to join this" (p. 38), are often accused of being apologetic, didactic, and unsympathizing to the West. Our analysis of the novel will bring an understanding to the newly founded representation, by a new wave of Muslim writers, of power relation between the West and the East, for Aboulela's characters in *Minaret* journey from Sudan to London and take different paths (for Diasporic experience is not patterned and the same for every individual as many first generation Muslim writers make it seem) to find themselves.

3. "Apologetic" or "Unsympathizing" to the West

Aboulela belongs to a category of writers that has been labeled as "Halal" writers. This, although she claims that she takes the label as a compliment as she told Chambers in an interview, (2009, p. 91) has promoted disapproval in literary circles, even in her homeland. She argues that "writers and intellectuals are usually very liberal and left-wing and so on, and people want me to be like that, they want me to be the liberated woman, so they are appalled at this *halal* writer thing" (p. 91). The wave of critical disapproval goes so far as to accuse the writer of being apologetic with the exaggerated didactic discourse that has characterized her writing. Sadia Abbas, in "Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel," comments on Aboulela's first two novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, as ways for the writer to propose "reasonably deft visions of Muslim women who desire their own subordination, thus making resistance to imperial dreams of female rescue simpler, more clean" (2011, p. 445). Abbas obviously undermines the alternative choice made by Muslim women to follow the religious path.

Women in the novel of Aboulela do not desire subordination; they make strong feminist choices that are made by strong Muslim women every day. Sammar in *The Translator* chooses not to marry Rae unless he converts and she sticks to her principle even when he rationalizes his arguments to convince her otherwise. It is only when he converts that she accepts to marry him. Likewise, Najwa, in *Minaret*, chooses Hajj over marrying Tamer; a feminist leading a secular life would have chosen a career over a man. Najwa simply prioritizes her spiritual growth over material and liberal choices that are usually taken by western women. It can even be read as a form of "writing back".

Abbas also suggests that extracting the political from Islam renders Aboulela's novels more marketable to the West, making their discourse rather "apologetic." According to Abbas, presenting characters that are religious but at the same time have political apathy is a strategic defensive method used by Aboulela to sell Islamism. Aboulela answers accusations of the sort in her interview with Chambers as follows:

> I just wanted to highlight the non-political part of the religion. I wasn't saying that extremism doesn't exist, but showing other aspects of Islam and demonstrating that many Muslims aren't interested in politics, and not interested in extremism. That was my concern. There *is* extremism, but I wanted to explore the lives of Muslims who aren't passionate about politics. I wanted to write about faith itself and how spiritual development is a need that is as valid and as urgent as love and career. I wanted to write about the average, devout Muslim and the dilemmas and challenges he or she faces. (2009, p. 100)

Aboulela's rejection of politicizing religion is not due to her lack of recognition that extremism exists nor is it a reason to constitute, as Abbas implements, an apologetic discourse. Her main aim is to portray ordinary Muslim adherents that have been marginalized in former literary representations. It might be a personal statement, as Abbas suggests, but hasn't literature been a product of personal statements at all? Abbas seems to suggest that Aboulela is building up on misogyny that is the result of the Islamic beliefs held by the characters in the novel, a misunderstanding that has been seen as "verg[ing] on a deliberate misreading of the novel and a simplification of the plights of several characters. In searching for the political polemic, it obfuscates the nuances of everyday struggle with faith and community that are presented in the novel" (S. Ilott, 2015). Abbas seems to want Aboulela and Muslim writers to focus on the negative effect of religion on the world and that requires the implementation of politics. She states that the writer's novels are religiouswhich affects the novel as an aesthetic literary

genre; however, their build on the privacy of religion make them secular rather than religious. They have nothing to say on "troubling effects of religion on the world [and so] in their chaste and narrow romantic focus, they make religion private. Secularism, it turns out, is constitutive of their *halal* goodness" (p. 455). That is exactly what Aboulela is trying to write: religion as a private affair. Abbas finds it disappointing since she insists on expecting a negative version of religion that should be represented in literature which would preserve the aestheticism of the novel. She comments:

> Narrowly focused and truncated in their realism, the novels reduce Islam to just another discourse, a set of beliefs held by some people, showcased by a sympathetic novelistic portrayal. Such a reduction may well be an inevitable feature of novels themselves; the leveling reduction of all systematic belief to one discourse among many—that might, in fact, be the Bakhtinian reading. Without some prior belief, how can one be sure that providential design is anything but simply another authorial illusion, unless one believes that God is the author of the novel? (p. 455)

A more important question that should come in mind here is: how is the author, by representing the lives of some marginalized characters who exist in the real world and who truly have this political apathy, reducing any system of beliefs? The novels are neither religious nor political; they do not impose ethical regulations. They simply prioritize freedom of choice, even when the choice is seen as inferior or even misogynistic (we will come back to negate this label), by a different category of people who do not identify with the Western liberal ethics. These novels are just realistic representations of some Muslim lives in the West. Apparently, Abbas's critique is based on her lack of knowledge for this existing world of believers in the West. Her orientalist and post-orientalist knowledge, along with her familiarity with the assimilationist Muslim society, is what make her critique biased and limited.

RidaInam shares our same perspective and she believes that there are mainly two reasons behind this biased reading of *Minaret*. First, Abbas believes "that Aboulela's views are identical to Najwa's, and secondly, that Aboulela intended the readers to view Najwa as an ideal" (2018, p. 193) while Najwa's choices are simpler because she is a simple citizen of a religious community with mediocre intelligence, no university degree, and a tainted history that adds to her anxiety issues and which paves the way to her choice of faith over any other material choices. This point will be further analyzed later when we deal with feminism in the novel as it has also been tagged as "not feminist enough" (p. 192).

Because of this supposedly "idealized" version of Islam, according to Abbas

and Eva Hunter, the novel is "not kind enough to the West" (p. 192). This point is strongly endorsed by Hunter in her "The Muslim 'Who Has Faith' in Leila Aboulela's Novels *Minaret* (2005) And *Lyrics Alley* (2009)." Hunter argues that "the form of her religion that she advocates is not modulated by her life in Britain" (2013, p. 88). The problem that Hunter avoids to resolve here is: what form of religion should the writer advocate? Hunter rather focuses her critique on the inadequacy of the form of the religion represented in the novel. That inadequacy mainly affects the image of Britain as dehumanized. According to her, in *Minaret*, London is portrayed as unspiritual and cold. The only symbol of spiritual existence lies in the Regent's Park mosque. Thus, it is only Najwa's faith that adds some warmth to the rather harsh background the city offers; Hunter further explains:

> In *Minaret*, too, Islam's depth is contrasted with 'Western emptiness'. The life Aboulela assigns Najwa in London is characterised by its narrowness. Encounters with the city's English inhabitants are minimal, sketchily done; her employers are Muslims, even if secular. Depicted as passive and naive, Najwa has no contact with British culture beyond daytime television, which she watches with the small children in her charge. She remains ignorant of the culture's variety of manifestations, including those of a spiritual and mystical nature. (p. 92)

According to Hunter, Najwa's misunderstanding of the West reflects the author's. (p. 92) However, the writer's aim is not to reconcile religion to London through annihilating Islam. Since the character's spiritual journey is the focus here, adopting faith is the character's way to erase the boundaries of East and West. It is in London that Najwa finds solace in her faith, not in Sudan. Her comfort in Sudan does not cover up that "hollow place" (2005, Aboulela) while in London she finally finds inner peace, not because the space is not spiritually fulfilling, but because the circumstances of her life and her character oblige her into a search for a path that exceeds the mundane needs of the everyday life. She does not socialize with whites because she is by nature an introvert, not because she sees that they are insensitive to her individual. In Sudan, although she is intrigued to know the Hijabi college girls she sees at the university, she finds it difficult to go beyond the minimally linguistic social etiquettes. Hunter's logic relies on her orientalist knowledge and how "much of the fiction emerging from writers in Arabic has depicted religion, Islam in particular, as reinforcing the oppressive structures within which its characters struggle" (p. 89) confessing that she is already blinded with established prejudices towards the working of religion in the female Muslim community. These prejudices stem from the discourses promoted by first

generation Muslim writers whom Aboulela takes the challenge of "writing back" against their "colonial anti-Islamic discourse" (Al-Khayyat& Abu Amrieh, 2023, p. 3). Hunter obviously sees that Aboulela views the West as a harsh environment for her character and Islam as its solution. She finds the writer's lack of understanding of the West as a way to make Islam itself superior to it. Inam argues that Hunter's arguments are "based on the premise that Western culture is without question better than Aboulela'sunderstanding of it, and that if she failed to see its merit then she must be misinformed or mistaken" (p. 208). Islam, in the novel, holds no superior position, for both Najwa and the secular Omar are equally satisfied with their set of opposite beliefs. Even when Najwa tries to convince her brother to take her path, he stands for what he sees most suitable for him. The novel holds no "narratives of superiority" (p. 210).

Najwa is physically rejected by the East no matter how she longs for it. After the military coop and her father's imprisonment, she and her family flee the East to a rather unfamiliar West. Unfamiliar in the sense that their experience of it is different since before the coup, they see it as an exotic pleasant experience. Their lack of financial comfort renders the West harsh which signifies the projection of a certain personal emotion, rather than an established prejudice that belongs to the writer, that the characters experience. Najwa's exile starts in the East and the reason for it lies in a lack of an individual conception of life. It is through finding herself that she finds comfort in the West. When she asks Tamer how he would identify himself, she announces that she shares the same conception; her answer includes neither the East nor the West. She defines herself as "Muslim". Aboulela's aim is to convey an image of Islam that is not political. Her aim is not idealizing it in the face of the aloof West but it aspires to portray it as a spiritual alternative to embracing absolute freedom. Actually, the protagonist identifies with the autumn like London better than she does with Sudan. The opening lines in the novel are a strong evidence of relating London to personal maturity: "London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent". The disappointment is not what the city offers; it is what Najwa's years of youth do. At the end of the novel, Najwa refuses to go back to Sudan and decides to go to Hajj and come back to London where she might get a degree and start over, a decision that negates the protagonist's detached relation to the city.

4. Westernized Feminism versus Islamic Feminism

Hunter and Abbas share the concern of the text presenting women as happily "subordinate" to men. The reason, according to both, lies in the Islamic beliefs the main female protagonist holds. Hunter confesses that "a secular feminist like me may be wary of any appeal to 'tradition', whether in the name of 'religious beliefs' or 'culture', that would militate against women's wellbeing" even when she knows that "throughout the African continent most of its populations adhere to some form of spiritually-linked belief system" (p. 88). Their concern is based on the writer's conception of freedom and Najwa's choices in the novel.

Najwa, instead of embracing freedom in London, describes her state as "com[ing] down in the world". This expression is used four times in the novel to refer to Najwa's feelings about freedom. When she finds herself alone in London, after her father's execution, her mother's death, and Omar's imprisonment, she consciously senses "that empty space [which] was called freedom". It is quite obvious that Najwa's displeasure with absolute freedom has given rise to negative interpretations of the writer's conception of it, although many postcolonial feminist movements have taken place in the late 80's rejecting the western conception of freedom; that is two decades before the publication of the novel. The issue lies in the religious ingredient rather than the cultural one. In Chandra TalpadeMohanty's "Under Western Eyes" and Ethel Crowley's "Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism", both critics address weaknesses in Western feminism and suggest an alternative subjective and personal feminist discourse that promotes the idea that freedom does not mean the same thing to all women in the world. The aim is to give voice to marginalized women to tell their experiences and define their freedom accordingly. Postcolonial female writers have taken this mission; however, Muslim women's representation has displayed a shortcoming in the accuracy of the accounts. In these accounts, they always need to be saved by the West, like the example of Ali's Infidel. Professor of Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies at Columbia University Lila Abu-Lughod answers in an interview this very mission of "saving"; she states that "the problem, of course, with ideas of 'saving' other women is that they depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by westerners" while what it is more important is answering the questions of saving them from what or to what and "What violences are entailed in this transformation?And what presumptions are being made about the superiority of what you are saving them to? This is the arrogance that feminists need to question" (2002, Shaikh). Abu-Lughod gives an imagined situation of bringing such a mission of saving to

America where a middle class white woman suggests helping a “poor” African American woman from her oppressive man. The hypocrisy, in this case, would be more apparent and the political agendas more questionable.

The greatest evil lies in portraying such a great variety of women who lead different cultures , have different races, and live different economic situations in one label which is “Muslim” and turn that label into the causing apparatus behind their sufferings. First generation Muslim women add more prejudice to the label by making their accounts subjective, biased, and generalized. Subjectivity and generalization bring back the conception of freedom to its western tradition. Abu-Lughod further prioritizes a deeper analysis of the real needs of these women over the western conception of freedom:

> We might still argue for justice for women, but consider that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best. Among the most difficult things for American feminists to accept is that these futures might involve women in developing within a different religious tradition, or traditions that don't have as their primary ideal something called ‘freedom’. (2002, Shaikh)

To Najwa, freedom is “falling”. To her, “protective” men are not patriarchal. They are simply caring. Hunter comments on Najwa’s use of the word when referring to the British convert, Ali, as a way of not being conscious “of the obverse side of ‘protectiveness’, that it is linked to an assumption of male superiority and privilege regarding human and legal rights” (p. 93).She blames the writer for promoting patriarchal ideas in the novel and instead of “criticising patriarchy, Aboulela is criticising the fact that it does not work as it should” (p. 93). Najwa’s disappointment with the male figures who fail to protect her in her life creates in her an admiration of Ali’s way of “protectiveness” towards his kids and wife. The teaching is instilled by Islam and Hunter is criticizing Islam since she comes to the conclusion that religions, including Christianity and Judaism, have always acted as agencies for power to patriarchy through this very notion of “protection”. Historically speaking, the assumption is correct; however, the act of protecting women in religious contexts has not always been used to exert male power. The agenda Hunter is referring to is political while Aboulela is simply referring to the protagonist’s psychological need for parental security and for affection. This type of generalization falls into the category of feminist views Abu-Lughod warns against. Freedom does not simply mean the same for every woman, including intellectuals, however surprising this might be for western thinkers. Aboulela comments in her interview with Chambers that she was intending on Minaret to

be a Muslim feminist novel. Her logic relies on the protagonist's disappointment in the men in her life. Even Tamer who shares her religiousness represents a kind of disillusionment. Thus, she chooses God by deciding to cleanse herself from her sins and past guilt through Hajj. Aboulela is aware that if it "were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. In Minaret, on the other hand, I wanted it to be that at the end she's relying on her faith rather than a career" (p. 99).

Another point should be referred to here is how anti-Islamic feminism portrays Arab communities. While gender oppression is understood to be coming from religion, a closer analysis of every case in every Arab community would provide one with the clear answer that it is mostly political and cultural oppression, rather than religious, that is responsible for patriarchy. Najwa in the novel believes that her father worries about her brother's future rather than hers since she will inevitably marry someone and make a family. She comments: "I was in university to kill time until I got married and had children. I thought that was why all the girls were there too but they surprised me by caring about their education, forging ahead with jobs and careers. I surprised myself by never getting married". Another reference to Anwar's cousin who was promised to him as a bride since they were children shows how Muslim women's oppression comes from cultural beliefs rather than religious ones. A woman is free to refuse a marriage proposal in Islam and arranged marriages are rather cultural or, in rare cases, political.

Najwa's choice of freedom is not forced by any person or conception outside her own being. The writer's aim is not to idealize Najwa's choices or to make them superior. She simply portrays a different type of women who possess different inclinations towards life. Western promises for absolute freedom fill Najwa with hollow gaps in her soul. Her constant diets and sexual relation with Anwar add no fulfillment. She starts to feel that freedom is a burden and that she is "falling" as has everything in her life. Thus, Najwa uses that freedom to choose Islam. Her choices are well studied and instead of making the usual cliché choice of "embracing permissive, Western way of life", she "uses her freedom in London to come back to Islam and not to go away from it [and] disapproves of the liberty that is generally attributed and imputed to indulging in moral laxity and licentiousness common in big, Western cities like London" (Hasan, p. 98).Aboulela proposes an alternative to the western conception of freedom. However, in spite of Najwa's freedom to choose her religious path over the liberal and secular life, she is still thought of as "subordinate", as has been mentioned before. The misunderstanding comes from thinking that the writer's opinion of

Najwa is her conception of the ideal Muslim woman.

5. NajwaVersus Other Eastern Women

Najwa is highly flawed. Aboulela creates a simple citizen of the world with mediocre intelligence and no degree, or a willingness to have one, struggling to find her place in life through faith, pretty much like a great majority of ordinary non-ambitious people in religious communities, yet she does not have prejudiced traditional views about women who have ambitious; she tells Tamer about her youth wishes later in life: “When I was your age, I imagined I would get married, have children, the usual things. I didn't imagine anything different. I had friends who wanted to be doctors, diplomats but I never had these ambitions”. Najwa’sconfession shows her recognition of her own incapacities. These incapacities stem from her personal history. It is part of her father’s wishes that she becomes someone else’s wife. She does not want to take her failed brother’s place in the world by pursuing an independent and successful career. Her choice of God is a choice that also relies on a paternal figure to protect her, as she constantly dreams that she is in her old house in Sudan falling ill and pampered by her parents. She also wants to be pitied, even by Tamer later, as she confesses, which is another indicator of her inadequacy to stand on her feet without relying on another paternal figure. Thus, Najwa’s subordination is paternal rather than patriarchal. It is psychological. She is lethargic to the point of accepting her fate as a maid although she has several opportunities to change it. She gives the rest of her remaining money away to Anwar and never bothers to ask him to return it. Her “incapacities are not due to gender norms or regressive values” (Inam, p. 197). Her immaturity is the leading force behind her weaknesses. Najwa, nevertheless, shows that her power lies in showing that she knows less with some men. Her relation with Anwar forces her to pamper his ego to make him feel superior. Whenever she corrects his articles, she fears his over-sensitivity about pointing out his errors in English. She “would have to flatter and soothe him. He needed my constant assurance that he was clever and handsome, that his limp was becoming unnoticeable, that one day he would achieve his dreams. But I needed things from him too”. This does put Anwar in an inferior position in the reader’s mind. Najwa’s relation with Tamer is rather motherly. The age difference between them makes her superior to him. She guides him through and ultimately decides on his future with his mother, Doctora Zainab, to study what he wishes instead of what his parents want him to pursue.

The women Najwa admires and think of as stronger figures in the novel are what maybe Aboulela thinks of as ideal. Although they are mostly background

figures, they are successful and independent women who manage to have families and successful careers. Doctora Zainab is one of these women; Najwa describes her as follows:

> DoctoraZeinab smiles as she walks into the kitchen. I like her - her thick auburn hair, the way she beams at Mai, the way she stands waiting for the kettle to boil, her hands on her hips, not caring that her stomach is bulging. I have always been vain and careful. Even when I am completely alone, I watch my posture, check that my eyebrows are smooth, that no food is stuck between my teeth. Whenever I come into contact with women like DoctoraZeinab, large and unselfconscious, I admire them.

This quote implies another evidence of Najwa's knowledge and recognition of her own faults. She admires Doctora Zainab for possessing social, intellectual, and personal skills that give her an air of natural superiority among the men in her family. Inam believes that Doctora Zainab is matriarchal for taking most of the decisions in the family, even those that concern her daughter and her husband (p. 197), but while matriarchy is as negative as patriarchy for it excludes men as much as patriarchy excludes women, Doctora Zainab's decisions, including that of forbidding Tamer from marrying Najwa, show grace and wisdom rather than a claim for hegemony. Unlike the way her daughter acts, she settles the matter with respect to Najwa. She even takes her advice to allow him to study what he wants in spite of her wishes. Although she pays Najwa as a way to bribe her to keep away from her son, Najwa does take the money, which renders her actions as more sensible than what the reader expects. This shocks the romantic expectations of the reader and renders the novel more realistic.

Another important feminist character that the quote implies is a vital contrast between Najwa's body image and that of Doctora Zainab. Throughout the novel, Najwa, especially when she gains weight in London, is self-conscious about her rounded stomach and how it is "pushed against the waistband of my skirt" and "all the weight I had gained [that] had settled in my hips". It is only through wearing Hijab that she develops some security about her body. While Doctora Zainab is strong enough, in character, to put her hands on her hips while her "stomach is bulging",Najwa relies on her Hijab to give her the same confidence. Although this reliance has different functions, for Aboulela sees in veiling "an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture" (Al-Karawi&Bahar, 2014, p. 256), one of these functions, among them Najwa overcoming her body image, tend to give evidence for the writer's implication that strong women outside adherent groups exist. That means that the writer is not seeking to idealize Muslim

women in contrast to those who choose other paths in life. The argument that states that she seeks to idealize Muslim women through Najwa is wrong.

Najwa's closest friend, Shahinaz, is another example of a powerful Muslim woman in the novel. Although she has four children, she manages to be a devout Muslim, do her home chores, and take care of her children. In addition to this, she decides to get a degree in social work and accomplish her dream. Shahinaz is also a very good friend of Najwa. She accepts her without having any curiousity about her past and find that "both want to be better Muslims" enough to form a strong friendship. She shares Doctora Zainab's opinion about Najwa's relation to Tamer and finds it rather irrational. However, she offers her advice without interfering in the matter, giving Najwa the full freedom to choose. She is a supportive wife, for she also chooses to make things easier for her husband by living with his mother. In addition to Shahinaz, Um Waleed, their Tajweed teacher, is another woman who manages multiple chores during her days. She is an excellent teacher who is both admired and revered by Najwa; she manages to take care of her family; and she possesses an exciting character that "seems to come from within her or from perhaps a turbulent domestic life" and that she resigns when she becomes their teacher.

6. Reconciling the West and the East

Actually, most of the women Najwa meets are steady callers at the Regent's Park Central Mosque. This place is Najwa's strongest link with the West. Through the mosque, she manages to live in a warm microcosmic Muslim community that unites Muslims from different cultural backgrounds, which include both the East and the West. The mosque provides Najwa with security and belongingness. The restlessness and all the side effects that her exile inflicts on her in London are replaced with a home. She is no longer ashamed of her past, which no one cares to ask her about. Their carelessness does not stem from insensitivity; it rather comes from prioritizing their mission of becoming better Muslims. The mosque erases all boundaries. To illustrate, Najwa prays once in Ramadan next to a wife of a Senegalese Ambassador whom she is tempted to tell that even she was the daughter of an important political figure but she decides that all she needs her to know is her name, for "there was no need - we had come together to worship and it was enough". They are all equal, whether they have promising careers, rich husbands, black skins, or tarnished pasts. This facilitates the journey taken by Najwa to identify herself in the West. She finds a place where she is equal to all other women coming from different social, racial, political, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. All the women are united by their pursuit of faith.

Outside the mosque, especially in Lamya's house, Najwa is the maid where she feels less of herself. In the mosque's gatherings, especially those of Eid, Najwa is happier and more relaxed.

Aboulela creates a feminine sanctuary in the mosque where men are excluded which makes it even more secure to Najwa whose character is timid. This allows her more freedom to express herself without being too self-conscious. Hasan sees this absence of men as symbolic of "a feminist utopia that facilitates for women to keep patriarchal domination at bay. The fact that Muslim women discuss various aspects of their religion in their regular sessions at the masjid is a rejection of the conventional monopoly of Muslim men on religious discourses" (p. 100). In addition to learning Tajweed, Najwa goes to the mosque to discuss the interpretations of Quran and involve herself (although she finds it rather difficult to disagree decidedly with most opinions) fruitful debates about them. The absence of men in the mosque does not stress the boundaries of gender; it just reinforces bonds between women and contradicts the conception of misogyny in Islam. While Muslim men and women have different spaces in the mosque, they strongly identify with each other more than with non-Muslims outside the mosque. Najwa identifies more with Tamer than with her equal in gender, Lamya. Tamer answers Najwa about how he identifies himself; instead of choosing a nationality (Sudanese, Egyptian, or Western), he finds himself trapped in those labels and thinks that being "Muslim" is closer as an identity to him. He believes that Lamya sees herself as "Arab", which explains the reason why Najwa finds it difficult to communicate with her. Thus, Aboulela goes beyond traditional clichés of binaries through creating a broader identity that crosses even boundaries of gender.

7. CONCLUSION

Aboulela's novel presents a unique approach to addressing the cultural conflicts experienced by Eastern women in the West, highlighting that assimilation alone is insufficient to resolve their sense of displacement.The writer's contribution to the concept of "writing back" diverges from previous portrayals by Muslim writers, emphasizing her characters' quests for identity outside of religiously repressive societies often depicted by assimilationist narratives. In *Minaret*, she particularly focuses on a female protagonist whose concern in the West is not to adapt herself to its promises of absolute freedom. Actually, Muslim feminists, like Aboulela, draw their own conception of freedom. Freedom is, accordingly, viewed subjectively outside its western universality. While Islam is portrayed by first generation Muslim writers as oppressive, it is

rather viewed as liberating by second generation Muslim writers and adherent Muslims in general. This new wave of writers conveys important communications that challenge universal notions implied by the center. One communication is that some women rather choose Islam, which has been presented in orientalist discourses as oppressive. Najwa, the protagonist of *Minaret*, finds in faith a secure identity in the West. Islam does not make of her journey torn between two geographical, cultural, and racial poles referred to in the title as East and West; it rather reconciles them into a broader identification unit that rather erases all boundaries, including those of gender.

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