

## Reframing of the Self: Space, Religion and Identity in Aboulela's Minaret

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### Abstract:

Temporal and spatial rupture and discontinuity are recurring themes in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2015), as experienced by the main character Najwa. From the beginning of the novel we note how Najwa is conscious of space, Marooned between her past and present, her identity is fractured. Though she switches from finding relief in London's unsacred places to the embracement of Islam. Najwa finds solace in religion that locates her in time and space. She finds a sense of identity and belonging through her newly found faith. The rupture involved in her transition from Khartoum to London is represented in her inability to fully reconcile the contours of her ethnic, national and religious identities. This paper explores the relationship between space and religion in reframing the *Minaret* identity of traumatized protagonist. It expends on knowledge on how trauma can be overcome in different cultures, than that of the west. More importantly, it shows that space is as essential as time in the representation, acting out and working through of trauma.

**Keywords:** Identity, Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, Religion, Space, Trauma literature.

### Introduction:

Across the surging numbers of literary endeavors that largely contribute to the prominence of trauma fiction, Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) stands out as a notable undertaking of the genre that sufficiently addresses personal and individual trauma. Aboulela's writing focuses highly on Muslim character's experiences, their ethics and the daunting impact of the world around them. This theme is fully demonstrated in a trio of her published fictions; *Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrical Ally* (2011). She employs the composite breed of three languages in the portrayal of her fictional narrative - brilliantly weaving together Arabic integrated words with English, Scottish vernacular and a distinct colonial discourse, this writing technique paints her monologue with a profoundly rich linguistic texture. However, Aboulela's prowess is not limited to the merging of lexicons, it is also seen in her seamless interplay of varied texts with a range of references from the Qur'an, Tayib Saleb (Sudanese writer), western romance fiction and Arab poets; she perfectly mixes this hybrid of rhetoric to form a compelling narrative and in the process, also define herself as a masterful contextual writer. The author speaks about three distinct places in her writing: gracefully sketching picturesque scenes of the snowy, remote cities of Scotland (Particularly Aberdeen), before vicariously laying bare the teeming multiculturalism of London in contrast with Khartoum's humid and vivacious climate.

Acclaimed to be a modestly renowned writer, Aboulela's literature has gained a reserved scale of critical attention and commendation within select circles of critics, literary prize boards and research students. 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. This paper's main focus is one of Aboulela's celebrated novels; *Minaret*. The book shifts through the intriguing sequence of events building toward the fall of Najwa, the daughter of a wealthy Sudanese minister and her frantic attempts at survival. Our author's narrative differs from other fictional prints about the ripple effects of cultural and social norms being the major factors of

cultural trauma. Most importantly, this paper aims to establish more emphasis on the specific roles played by space and time in the reformation of a traumatized individual and their identity.

### **Literature Review:**

In order to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the book's interpretation, there has to be a simplification of its abstract theme. *Minaret* revolves mainly around psychic and domestic trauma as a consequence of tragedy, it also projects a political and cultural undertone but for the sake of concise emphasis on our subject matter, the influence of both factors will only be mildly regarded. There are myriad examples in literature that focuses on psychic trauma; a few of those examples would include; Beigbeder's *Windows on the Wall* (2004), Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Schwartz's *the Writing on the Wall* (2004), Messud's *the Emperor's Children* (2006), Glass's *the Whole World Over* (2006), McInerney's *the Good Life* (2006), Schulman's *A Day on the Beach* (2007) and others.

Psychic or personal psychological trauma is anti-narrative, since victims are unable to aptly describe the internal suffering they experience. This precise phenomenon is mirrored in Aboulela's *Minaret*, as it accurately portrays a narrative of personal trauma stemming from two separate causes; migration and family tragedy. Although, migration might seem an unpopular cause for trauma, it bears a potent component of the subject, and that can be explained through the overwhelming circumstances of traumatic encounters suffered by migrants and their struggles to contend with the truth of their realities. Basically, migration in context is an optic that touches the fundamental sense of loss, alienation and displaced origin - these factors are scopes inherent with the concerns of living in a local space (Robertson, 40). The fact that "glocality suggests that our lives are irrevocably enmeshed in a Cosmo-political web of cause and effect" guarantees nothing about opportunities in alien or foreign places, as this new space in itself has its own responsibilities (Schoene, 61). Thus, to certain perspective migration might represent a certain sense of loss and disparity. All of the discourse above can be found in the unfolding ordeals of Najwa; our protagonist in *Minaret*, that which perfectly justifies it as the ideal book for this analysis, because it painstakingly makes note of the unavoidable painful constants in the sojourn of an immigrant in repeating her past "compulsion to repeat" (*Freud* 75) throughout her narrative.

As in all cases of trauma, verbal expression and proper analysis of traumatic memories, even internal suffering is paramount to the treatment of individual traumatic experiences. The victims must fight to translate these psychological disorders into a narrative for them to adequately deal and eventually rid the trauma, processing their ordeals in words. As our book, *Minaret* projects in its portrayal of Najwa; the main character who suffers trauma, the author records her efforts to interpret her traumatic experiences into narrative memory, although she remained conflicted between the impulse of knowledge or denial, as she also struggles with the crucial need for social acceptance and status. The book continued to show, however, that other characters labored to grasp the inconsistencies of our protagonist's traumatic memory, as it is fragmented between the past and her subsequent realities.

Aboulela's book is duly established as trauma fiction owing to several irrefutable factors, as it extends through the focal points of formal radicalism, consciousness, post-colonialism, internalized sensibilities, period and memory gap combined with the resistance of language and representation of traumatic experiences. In the late 1980's, trauma fiction emerged as a genre with the clinical appearance of PTSD. According to Roger Luckhurst, the literature category opened with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and continued to thrive with the works of renowned authors like Margaret Atwood, Pat Barker, Anne Michaels, Benjamin Wilkomirski and W.G Sebald, amongst others (87). Though it can be debated that earlier writing can be considered trauma narrative. However, it is with the emergence of PTSD that the light was put on literary trauma.

Anne Whitehead in her book "Trauma Fiction" explains more on the paradox that "traumatic experience resist language representation", this latter lead to the rejection of any linear representation of traumatic events within the scheme of trauma fiction, but it employs the use of unsettling temporal structures and different referential modes, figuration and indirection. Obviously, none of these aesthetic techniques are new since "trauma fiction arises out of and is inextricable from three interrelated backgrounds or contexts: postmodernism, post-colonialism and a postwar legacy or consciousness" (81).

The literary techniques that are represented within trauma writing mirror the effects of the suffering on a formal platform, including the interplay of texts, repetition and fragmentation. According to Laurie Vickroy, who researched trauma fiction extensively, these narratives showcase trauma by only hinting at "the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of such experiences within their underlying sensibilities and structures" (3). The confusion of trauma is represented through a timeless plot, shifts in memory, textual gaps, repetitions, visual images and shifting viewpoints. This context allows the reader grasp the disorienting states of characters suffering traumatic experiences.

The spotlight on Najwa's spatial awareness was clear in the very beginning of the book. "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move" (1). This introductory text indicates spatial disconnection and spacing from reality. These themes became apparent through the novel as the Najwa's narrates her story as immigrant. Here, we deduce that the protagonist is trapped between her past and present, abandoned at the threshold of space and time neutrality, her identity is crippled. With this defined theme, Najwa's character is constrained to describe her trauma under those circumstances; in a misleading timeless state, unclear where to locate herself between the past, present and future.

### **Religion, Space and Time in Minaret:**

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* is structured along a timeless storyline brought about by the protagonist's exile from her fatherland. She sought refuge in London; a place with absolute disparate attributes to her native Sudan. The book opens with a eulogy to Allah, and the next lines of the novel were again quick to highlight the protagonist's spatial awareness. "*I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move*" (1). The prescribed norms of Islam, however served as the ultimate refuge, aiding our narrator locate a sense of self in the dimensions of her reality and giving a subtle footnote on the remedying effects of religion as a precursor for self-identity. The beginning of the story locates Najwa in the present, set in London, 2004. Although, the first part of the book takes place in Sudan in the years following the political coup of 1985, one that will forever change the plot of her family's history. Najwa's lifestyle and family were highly influenced by Western culture. They lived in a luxurious demure, catered to by a number of servants, a life replete with extravagance and bliss and punctuated by regular holidays abroad. "*In the summer, we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have*" (15). She narrates. The plot continues on in its savory note as our narrator meets Anwar, a student activist at the university, who also belongs in the party that would later stage the coup. He never hid his hatred against the government nor his remonstrations of the role Najwa's father played within the system, yet her attraction to him was kindled. She was as well fond of the conservative female students that donned traditional robes, who would later represent that glance of spiritual eagerness that eventually emerges as Najwa's plot takes a twist.

"*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 life changed in an abrupt way by a phone call in the middle of the night. She was an observer of her father arrest as he tries to flee. 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'* (56). Though this perception changes as the twins realized they became refugees after their father execution and dismantle of his asset. This became 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. However, there was a disparity in the beliefs of our minor characters, Lamya and Tamer, her younger brother who also lives with her. Lamya's upheld western precepts starkly contrasted her brother's religious doctrines. Najwa was attracted by Tamer's devotion to Islam. The preceding chapters would roam back to fill in the years between 1989 to 1991, describing the unfolding realities of Najwa's present life and laying bare the emphatic measure of Najwa's ungraceful fall to squalor. The spate of these above-mentioned periods illustrates Najwa's paradoxical liaison with Anwar, who also fled to London after another coup in Sudan, and thriving interest to Islam.

Monica Ali and Hanan Al Shaykh are other female writers who discussed the difficult of a diasporic life, whether prompted by the yearn for better opportunities or political exile in their fictional texts. The protagonist characters in their respective books are, in similar context as ours, often caught between alien spaces with disoriented identities. Yet, owing to their particularly secularist convictions, these sets of protagonist seek to find their sense of self in the liberal climate of London's laic space such as work establishments, leisure provisions and its unhallowed streets. In these narratives, a major part to the female protagonists' full assimilation into an occidental civilization hinges on them reclaiming their sexuality, uninfluenced.

In our story, however, Najwa's interaction with Anwar is pushed by a need of human contact and longing for connection to her native home and a younger version of her before the coup. He became the only male figure after her father's death and brother's incarceration. Their reconnection bore an all too ominous omen from the onset, beginning with their choice venue of tryst at the Hyde Park Corner McDonald's, which is a pure representation of Western symbolism and lifestyle, all of which gave us an inkling that this will be a sinful relationship. It became even more clear when his apathy for religiously conservative women came to the surface, frowning at the sight of *"Arab women dressed in black"* (167), compared to the glimmering smile that lit his face in keen admiration of her trying on Western outfits in Selfridges' fitting rooms.

After a certain period of time in what would be known as an exploitative relationship with Anwar, she suddenly jolts in horror to realize that she had not acknowledged or observed the months of Ramadan, completely as a result of her commitment to him. She opines to seek refuge, not in secular western feminism but through a different medium. She felt inclined to find solace within a sacred partition of Regent's Park Mosque, coined out for Ladies. Here she remained in solitude, within a pious space that allows her the chance to fill the gaps in her reality and thus, adding together the fragmented pieces of her world.

*'I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats.  
I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp  
sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room ...'* (74-75).

Najwa is no longer guided by London's space and time but rather Islam became her compass.

Religious matters eventually remodel her life. This transformation in self-identity birthed a chaste friendship between Najwa and her employer's sibling, Tamer. Her connection with Tamer, the only virtuous male in the book remains essentially innocent. The concluding pages of the book gives light to a pact struck by Najwa to Tamer, a pact that not only gives the latter what he wants but also enables our narrator start her life in London, anew.

### **Conclusion:**

Being a Muslim becomes Najwa's core identity: *"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"* (110). Islam reshapes Najwa's life and relocates her in time and space to overcome her trauma and take control over her life. The book in its constantly transforming scenes sufficiently illustrates two worlds – One of opulence immersed in secularism and another of hardship and tragedy salvaged by religion. It could be seen 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 tragic occurrence, it also hints at the struggles of communal acceptance. As a trauma fiction, the book meanders through the tormenting ordeals of family tragedy and the desolation Najwa encountered. These unresolved issues gave rise to vulnerability being a response to the traumatic experiences she bore. It was only in her readiness to admit these anomalies that the consciousness to seek refuge rose and finding it, she claimed a new identity in her dedication to Islam.

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