

Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

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ABSTRACT

Leila Aboulela's novel, *Minaret* (2005), provides authentic and rich content to explore the Muslim Arab woman's struggle over creating a modern yet religiously traditional identity. The conceptual framework of Victor Turner's liminality and Homi Bhabha's hybridity and the third space are applied in order to frame the analysis of this struggle and to show that the veil is a metaphor for the Arab woman's positive and negative experiences. In *Minaret*, the protagonist, Najwa, experiences a sense of in-betweenness or liminality through crises, transitions, and resolutions of secular and religious lives. The different hybrid identities and efforts Najwa makes to come to terms with her developing Muslim identity is discussed, particularly through her and the women around her who choose to wear the veil and modest, rather than revealing, clothing. Together, these form our analysis of the Muslim Arab woman's struggle to be Muslim through wearing the veil while living in Britain. The veil in this novel is furthermore symbolic of traditional Islamic culture and represents the struggle to be religiously faithful despite being surrounded by non-Muslims or non-practising Muslims. This then provides the means of understanding individual mobility, empowerment, and agency through which liminality is successfully negotiated in order to achieve a hybrid identity of Eastern and Western cultures.

Keywords: hybridity; Islam; liminality; third space; veil

INTRODUCTION

The novel, *Minaret* (2005), by Leila Aboulela provides a contrast to dominant Western discourses on Islam regarding Arab women's experiences and identities. The novel depicts a sympathetic view of immigrant Muslim communities and Islamic lifestyles through illustrations of the veil and Islam and how the female protagonist, Najwa, goes through stages and transitions characteristic of liminality in order to achieve a hybrid identity that is modern in Western terms, but firmly Muslim through the wearing of the veil. As such, we argue that the veil is a trope for the contrasts of struggle and comfort, ambivalence and surety of self experienced by Muslim women whether they wear the veil or not. The veil speaks to the positive, negative, and in-between experiences that Muslim women confront in their continuous effort to shape their identities as modern and respectable women of faith. Whether she wears the veil or not, its presence or absence suggests a dense web of meanings that often change over time. Therefore, the veil is a metaphor of daily life, a trope in fiction and the arts, loaded with contested meanings. In order to understand the veil and appreciate the diversity of Muslim women, exploring their liminal journeys and hybrid identities is necessary. To speak of the veil is to speak of security/insecurity, ambivalence/security, and struggle/comfort. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* provides the reader with an opportunity to explore how the veil is a metaphor or trope whose diversity can only be understood by unpacking the lived experiences of the Arab Muslim woman in the West.

In this study, the veil, also known as the *hijab*, occupies a central space symbolically for Islam. Conversations about Islam almost invariably seem to address the debate about the veil because it stands visually and symbolically as a reminder of conservative religion and identity (El Guindi, p. 3). The word “veil” typically means “a covering” and includes the concept of concealment. A veil may be a piece of cloth worn over the head, shoulders, and often (though not necessarily) the face. The veil may also mean a kind of netting found on a woman’s hat or a wedding headdress. Regardless of how much of a woman’s hair, face, neck, and bodice a veil may hide from public view, the current attention on the veil as a sign of Muslim cultural authenticity and the treatment of women seems to epitomize Islamic inferiority (Ahmed, p. 14). In this study, the word veil is used interchangeably with headscarf and *hijab* because that is the way it is used in Aboulela’s *Minaret* and does not refer to the covering of the whole face also known as the practice of *niqab*, the full facial veil in which only the eyes are visible, or the *burqa* where the eye area is covered in mesh.

The practice of veiling did not originate with Islam; neither is it a quintessentially Islamic practice. It existed in ancient Greece, the Balkans, Byzantium and pre-Islamic Arabia as an indication of high class status (Ahmed, p. 55; El Guindi, p. 149; Kahf, p. 29). The veil has also been adopted by some communities of Jewish and Christian religions as El Guindi notes (pp. 149-150). The heterogeneity of the practice of veiling and cultural differences that influence the shape and physical features of the veil may be self-evident to a keen observer. The *chador* of Iran had different colors and flowered patterns before 1979; since their revolution it has been predominantly black. Black *abayas* are mandatory by law in many parts of Saudi Arabia while white *haiks* are found in Algeria. There are colorful scarves in Turkey and Egypt; *tudung* are embroidered with colorful beads in Malaysia and Indonesia, and *dupattas* are found in Pakistan and India and reflect, like the other countries, local tastes and preferences. The multiplicity of positive and negative meanings associated with the veil also displays a complex and, at times, contradictory range of meanings. It is positively associated with modesty, protection from unwanted male attention and desire, and liberation from the demands of consumerist capitalist economies and their investment in women’s bodies. It signifies security and agency, and functions as a means of mobility in the public sphere.

Throughout the novel *Minaret*, Aboulela focuses on the varying aspects of the veil as a literary strategy to engage the hegemonic as well as patriarchal discourse regarding the veil, as well as the focus of Islamic treatise post-9/11. The analyses of this novel will provide examples of veiled women in the United Kingdom, namely in London, in order to stress the importance of religion as faith and its role in the experiences of transculturation and interfaith relations of Muslim women in the West. In this way, the narrative makes normal Islam-centered lifestyles and experiences where these representations of Muslim identity provide alternatives to contemporary Western discourse which suggest the veil is imposed on Muslim women. The narrative also reinforces the argument that veiled women are not muted personas nor are their identities simple products of patriarchal norms (Hassanpour & Ruzy, 2012, p. 925). Also, the veil is seen as a sign with multiple layers of meaning because voluntary veiling is believed to be an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture in addition to the fact that the incentive behind voluntary veiling re-establishes a link with authentic past culturally and its dissociation from the West (Jelodar et al., 2013, p. 74). Aboulela’s work, in showing the rootedness of religion in the lives of many Muslim women, thus fills a gap in Western representations of Muslim women.

In this study, our arguments are based on Victor Turner’s conceptual framework of liminality and Homi Bhabha’s concepts of hybridity and the third space. We attempt to discover how identities and struggles are developed and are carried out through the image of the veil. Bhabha’s concept of the third space is also used as an analytical tool in our

discussion of cultural hybridity. In this study, this cultural hybridity is described as a mixture of traditional Arab homeland culture and the new culture of the protagonist's adopted British homeland.

CONTEMPORARY ARAB IMMIGRANT MUSLIM WOMEN WRITERS

Arab Muslim women voices have achieved some significance recently. A few of these writers are mostly academics working in universities who decided to live in the United Kingdom, Australia, or the United States after completing their postgraduate education. Other Arab women writers are daughters of immigrants and therefore second generation citizens of the West rather than naturalized citizens. Notable Arab women writers are Suheir Hammad (b. 1937) (U.S.A), Fadia Faqir (b. 1956) (Britain), Mona Simpson (b. 1957) (U.S.A), Diana Abu-Jaber (b. 1960) (U.S.A), Leila Aboulela (b. 1964) (Britain), Zeina Ghandour (b. 1966) (Britain), Mohja Kahf (b. 1967) (U.S.A), Monica Ali (b. 1967) (Britain), Leila Halaby (b. 1978) (U.S.A), Randa Abdel-Fattah (b. 1979) (Australia), and Samia Serageldin (b. 1980) (Britain). Whether born in the East or the West, they deal with the issue of Arab-Anglo relations and the voice of Arab writers, either male or female, in the diaspora community. Their analyses place the work of Arab women writers within frameworks that examine the cultural contexts characterising the writings themselves. Their previous invisibility prevented them from speaking about their own concerns and made it impossible to effectively communicate and engage with mainstream society. As result, several Arab Muslim women writers, such as Aboulela, Abdel-Fattah, and Kahf, have created a literary space by which they could define who they are and speak of their experiences. This space however is an in-between space; it is on the borders of the Muslim Middle East and liberal West. It is argued here then that Arab immigrant women writers are trying to be heard on their own and not just as part of Western feminist movements.

Zalipour, Raihanah, Ruzy Suliza and Noraini (2011), in their article "The Veil and Veiled Identities in Iranian Diasporic Writings", examine the hybrid identities that Iranian Muslim women construct as a result of experiencing forms of prejudice and rejection in Western host communities. They also examine the connection between individual identity politics and unveiling in Iran following their revolution in 1979. Zalipour et al. (2011), in their conclusion, show that the veil (or its removal) is significant when the Iranian woman may be trying to hide her identity or politically assert her individuality.

The continuous attack on Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 has generated the need to locate and create space through which Arab immigrant women can speak. Tariq Ramadan in "Western Muslims and the Future of Islam" relates this difference to the need for recognizing the importance of crafting a new kind of Muslim identity in the Western societies; one that seeks independence from the paternalistic influence of Muslim countries (p. 4). He notes that, unlike their parents, the children of Muslim immigrants to the West are not obsessed by the need to be overly self-protective of their religion and culture in an isolationist manner that, many times, leads to withdrawal from the mainstream society. Major priorities for this new generation are leading their lives according to the principles of their faith as well as being full participants in the societies in which they live and of which they are members (Ramadan, 2004, pp. 4-5). We hypothesize here that these cultural and identitarian sensibilities are explored in the literary field. A new generation of writers from diverse locations including, but not limited to, North America, Britain, and Australia has started crafting distinct features of their Muslim identities through literature. This fledgling body of literature has emerged, at least partly, as a response to the needs of the second generation of Muslims who are not only trying to remain faithful to the principles of their religion, but are also very much rooted in the Western societies to which they belong. In an interview, Leila Aboulela, an Egyptian-

Sudanese author, for example, describes herself:

... as a creative writer [attempting] to answer the need for self-representations on the part of the younger generation of Muslims. Islam is the epistemological force in these people's lives and the West is their home and yet they do not see an adequate representation of themselves in contemporary fiction and daily television programs and radio (Eissa, 2005, n.p.).

LEILA ABOULELA AND *MINARET*

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Egypt from a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother and raised in a very progressive environment. She learned English while going to an American primary school in Khartoum. Adding to her Western-oriented education, Aboulela also later attended a private Catholic school before pursuing an undergraduate degree in statistics at the University of Khartoum. She attended the London School of Economics after finishing her undergraduate education in Sudan. In 1990, she moved to Scotland with her husband and their three children, the setting of most of her writing. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2005, she discussed the years she spent abroad following her undergraduate education and how these years made it possible for her to reconcile Islam, modernity, education, and women's empowerment (Eissa, 2005, n.p.). She states: "My idea of religion wasn't about a woman not working or having to dress in a certain way. It was more to do with the faith" (Ibid). She became more involved with her religious faith while living in London as a graduate student and turned, at that time, to wearing the veil and went to mosque regularly. Despite negative reactions from Westerners toward Arab Muslim women who wear the veil, she was not prevented from becoming a published author and eventually became one of the most prominent Arab writers in English today. Aboulela now lives and travels between Abu Dhabi and Aberdeen, continuing to live a life blending East and West (Chambers, 2009, p. 78).

Aboulela's novel, *Minaret*, published in 2005 and written in English, is a story about migration, Islamic religious and spiritual struggles, and exile in Britain. In the novel, Aboulela presents a devout Muslim woman as the protagonist, Najwa, who shows an ever-present awareness of her religious identity. In other words, she knows herself deeply as a Muslim and both consciously and unconsciously live as a Muslim. Najwa, a Sudanese Muslim woman forced into exile in Britain, negotiates her past as an aristocratic, secular, Westernised woman living in Sudan, and her present, as a practising Muslim wearing the veil. We learn from the prologue that Najwa has undergone an Islamic and spiritual awakening that separates her from her previous life in Sudan, as well as from her previous self as the daughter of a corrupt politician-businessman. A successful novel, *Minaret* was long-listed for the Orange Prize in 2005 and the IMPAC Literary Award in 2006.

Aboulela provides her novel with the dichotomy of religious versus non-religious people. Almost all devout Muslim people in Aboulela's *Minaret* are represented as kind, sincere and selfless. It is the non-religious people who are represented as cruel, mean and shallow, generally providing a black-and-white picture. Anwar, Najwa's boyfriend and Omar, Najwa's brother, are examples of non-religious people in the novel whose characters are endowed with negative traits such as opportunism, hedonism, and irresponsibility. On the other hand, the characterization of religious people is such that many good qualities are invoked. Najwa, the protagonist-narrator, describes religious people or converts to Islam, such as Waffa and Ali, with words of admiration or positive adjectives such as "kind" and "protective to others" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 242). Due to the stark dichotomy that Aboulela constructs of good practising Muslim and bad non-practising Muslim, her characters lack depth. However, this narrative strategy enables a focus on the struggle that Najwa must

experience as she moves from non-practising to practising and located within both modern and traditional social mores once she becomes confident in her faith and veil.

VICTOR TURNER'S LIMINALITY AND HOMI BHABHA'S HYBRIDITY AND THE THIRD SPACE

Victor Turner's liminality, as it is found in his theory on rites of passage, provides a conceptual framework for understanding how a protagonist must negotiate her fate. The phase of a rite of passage which most interested Turner was the middle, transitional phase. Turner (1967) argues that "liminality includes few or none of the attributes of the previous or future states, and that the features of liminality are ambiguous; that is, they are outside of all society's standard classification (p. 94). During the liminal movement between social identities, the individual finds themselves "betwixt and between" positions normally assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremony, where they experience a suspension or reversal of the normal rules of living (Turner, 1969, pp. 94-95).

Often the liminal separation from former and future ways of life is reflected in a physical removal from the familiar places and people of their former life, and in a sense of being outside of the ordinary flow of time (Turner, 1979, p. 399). In this experience of temporary separation, Turner argues that the liminal characters are ambiguous. This ambiguity can be conveyed through the use of symbols; thus, it is important to study "symbols and social action" with their multi-vocal references which can "feed back into the central economic and political-legal domains and arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raison d'etre*" (Turner, 1974, p. 64). We argue that the veil is a trope that captures the crises and struggles characteristic of liminality and its potential for change and resolution.

Building off Turner's own analyses of literature, liminality is found in literary criticism because liminality and its phases can be used to explore "indeterminate states in a wide range of literatures and literary periods" (Harden, 1983, p. 846). Kathleen M. Ashly in her book, *Victor Turner and the construction of cultural criticism between literature and anthropology* (1990), depicts the usefulness of Turner's key concepts as applied to a wide range of literary texts which in turn show the pertinence of cultural theory to many forms of critical practice such as feminism, narratology, and literary history. Literary applications of liminality first emerged in the later 1980s following Turner's death and many doctoral dissertations using the concept of liminality attest to the usefulness of his concepts and the ideas in analyzing literature. Notable studies include "Victor Turner's social drama and T. S. Eliot's ritual drama" (1985) by Ronald L. Grimes, Kate Stockton Kelley's "Social drama, liminality, and change: A new interpretation of the Redcliffean Gothic" (2006), Raymond Cary Stone's "'He that is not with us is against us': Apocalypticism and millennialism: 1630-1860" (2006), Myra Remigio's *Adolescent empires: Identity, liminality, and advocacy in contemporary American Literature* (2008), and Joan Wry's *The art of the threshold: A poetics of liminality in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman* (2010). All these different studies benefited from analyses using Turner's concept of liminality, the in-between phase of rites of passage.

Moving on from this, we believe that a similar application may be made to Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* in order to examine the identity conflict, confusion and struggles over traditional Arab culture and Western modernity the protagonist experiences. This conflict with liminality may or may not help the characters with hybrid identity to live successfully in life. In fact, it may threaten their identity. In order to understand how the characters overcome this conflict, we use Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the third space in our discussion of cultural hybridity (1994). Cultural hybridity is explained in this study as a

mixture of traditional Arab homeland culture and the new culture of the adopted Western homeland.

Hybridity, according to Bhabha, provides an alternative kind of identity that is neither completely defined by the authority of the colonizer nor fully under the control of the colonized (Bhabha, p. 174). Taken from cultural and literary theory, Bhabha formed his idea of hybridity to account for the identity and cultural forms found within colonialism. The hostility and lack of acceptance of the colonized creates a kind of identity that is familiar yet new and unique. The familiarity and the new are essentially the product of the colonizer and colonized interacting, each having incomplete power to determine the outcome. Aware of the dangers of binary thinking when it comes to Eastern and Western identities, the ideas that each is somehow fixed, Bhabha accepts that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211). As such, the concept of hybridity in this study presents another way to resist Western negative stereotyping and Arab patriarchy. This entails a rejection of the argument that there is only one right position. This takes apart the center/margin dichotomy as well as the space between the center and margin. Hybridity rejects the notion of pure, original, authoritative identities, and gives value to the importance of limited categories and binaries.

Described in this way, the third space is a place where difference interacts and therefore sites of cultural production, not reflection or mimicry, from which new identity possibilities are enabled. Hybridity found in the third space is a “lubricant” (Papastergiadis, 1997, p. 56) that fosters the interaction between cultures. In our study, the concept of the third space is useful for going beyond binary thinking and oppositional positioning common in colonial thinking. Despite contradictions and ambiguities, the third space provides a “spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (Bhabha, 1994, p.1). When the colonizer tries to normalize and define the colonized, the act of hybridity by the colonized creates this third space through which identity and meaning may be negotiated.

While we have chosen to apply Bhabha’s hybridity and the third space together with Turner’s concept of liminality, there have been, so far, almost no pre-existing studies on Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*. However, there are notable studies that have used Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and the third space to analyse Aboulela’s *Minaret*, namely, a dissertation, *dislodging (new) orientalist frames of reference: Muslim women in diasporic and immigrant Muslim Anglophone narratives* (2012) by Katayoun Toossi. The objective of her dissertation, Toossi says, is “without claiming to be the only study of its kind, is designed to counter stereotypes of Muslim women” (p. 20). Toossi borrows from several theories to frame her analysis: postcolonial theory, particularly critiques of Orientalist discourse, Muslim feminist scholarship, cultural studies and studies on diaspora. She considers Arab immigrant Muslim women novels to be part of a genre of Muslim immigrant and diasporic fiction that engages dominant, Western representations of Islam (p. 34). This representation, she says, is best viewed as characterizing “Muslim women as oppressed and victimized by the patriarchal authority of Islam or liberated from such control when Muslim women move to the West and adopt its values and lifestyles” (p. 25).

Toossi’s study problematizes this binary way of looking at Muslim women in the West and explores, through various post-colonial and feminist lenses, the Western perception of religiosity as always being a result of the imposition of external forces that are invariably oppressive or politically charged. Her study is more of a focus on the politics of identity and assumptions about Islam being an imposed religion rather than a chosen way of life. In contrast, our study is about how identity forms narratively over time and how the character becomes liminal, a time of being betwixt and between marked by challenging experiences. These challenges and identity transitions, linked through the image of the veil, enable the

hybrid identity to form. Our study, unlike Toosi's, is decidedly not political and does not deliberately address Western hegemonic discourses. Our analysis of Aboulela's novel uses a fresh theoretical frame based on Turner's concept of liminality and Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space.

LIMINALITY: BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

In *Minaret*, the dilemma symbolized by wearing or not wearing the veil represents an important facet of the protagonist, Najwa. Geoffrey Nash in his essay entitled, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and globalisation" (2007), offers a nuanced description of Aboulela's writing as one that is situated "within the feminized space which may be said to operate between the continuing pressures of Western cultural imperialism and conservative, anti-modernist cultural Islamism" (p. 138). Whether the protagonist, Najwa identifies with the Western culture or refuses it, Aboulela's narratives remain:

(i)ndividualistic representations of the Arab Muslim woman's experience without being ideological, squeezed between the secular and Islamic worldview. What characterizes her writings is that they are concerned with the individual experience of the diasporic Arab woman subject and the way she negotiates this identity with the Western settings she encounters. What her fictional project accomplishes is the articulation in English fiction of an immigrant Muslim woman's worldview (Hassan, 2008, 3).

Najwa goes through individual, emotional and spiritual journeys while attempting to find a stable sense of identity in England or Sudan. Aboulela's *Minaret* has two distinguishing parts: Najwa's life before she wears the veil and after she chooses to wear the veil. In each part, Najwa is depicted struggling with feeling liminal, struggling to know and be who she really is. As a result, the inner dialogues depicted in the novel are strong and may be considered negotiations of the self with the self. These negotiations and effort to overcome the sense of isolation, rejection, and uncertainty by forging a clear personal sense of identity occurs in both her homeland of Sudan and in London after becoming a political refugee. Najwa's rejection of the veil and her subsequent decision to wear it is fraught with struggle and ambivalence. Nevertheless, the veil is a literary trope for her experiences which can only be appreciated by focusing not on the veil itself but on the struggles and resolutions it metaphorically communicates.

Najwa is liminal in Sudan as a university student because, although she is Sudanese, she does not particularly participate in regular Sudanese society. Instead, she is engaged with her inner worlds, her faith and its enrichment. By virtue of her father's position and wealth, she is more a member of the transnational elite that surrounds her father. She regularly speaks on the telephone with the Sudanese president when he calls for her father. She goes to elaborate parties hosted by the capital city's wealthiest families. She regularly embarks on shopping holidays in Paris and summers at her family's flat in London. As such, in Sudan, she has no real societal connections of her own rooted in cultural traditions or a social network of meaningful relationships that she can call her own. She has no personal experience of the Muslim veil and religious traditions that characterise her country's society. Najwa wears modern, fashionable clothing from the West, such as short skirts, and she keeps her hair in Western fashion.

Najwa's first thoughts on the veil can be illustrated through her discussion about it with her good friend, Randa, when they see Iranian women in the black *chador* in Khomeini's Iran in 1979 on the front page of the "Time" magazine (Aboulela, 2005, p. 29). As Najwa reads through the pages, "I turned the pages of an old Time magazine. Khomeini,

the Iran – Iraq war, girls marching in black chadors, university girls . . . a woman held a gun. She was covered head to toe, hidden” (p. 29). Randa glances at the magazine and finds it hard to contain her disgust for the veil:

Totally retarded . . . we’re supposed to go forward, not go back to the middle ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything? . . . They’re crazy . . . Islam doesn’t say you should do that. (p. 29)

To this Najwa replies, “what do we know? We don’t even pray.” Sometimes, I was struck with guilt’ and is immediately reminded of the girls at the university who wear the veil (p. 29). In addition, Najwa sets herself apart from most of her Sudanese peers. She notices other Sudanese young women who wear the headscarf or *hijab* and long flowing robes called *thobe* that cover all of their skin except for their faces and hands. She admires these young women in a way and sees them as perhaps more Sudanese than she is. Speaking about other women at the University, Najwa states the following:

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 too tight blouses If these provincial girls made me feel awkward, I was conscious of their modest grace, of the *thobes* that covered their slimness-pure white cotton covering their arms and hair. (p. 14)

This depiction reinforces the fact that, even though Najwa has always felt a calling inside her in Khartoum-the sound of the *azan* filling her and the recitation of the *Qur’an* tugging at her inner sluggishness-she lacks the requisite disposition to embrace Islam (pp. 29, 31). Najwa is not mindful of her religion and she feels her life insecure. She comes home from nightclubs at the time that the house staff is preparing to perform the early morning prayer, *fajr*. Najwa says:

We heard the dawn *azan* as we turned into our house. The sound of the *azan*, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me, it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn’t know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me. I parked the car and the guard closed the gate behind us. He didn’t go back to sleep. . . . The servants stirred and, from the back of the house, I heard the sound of gushing water, someone spitting, and a sneeze, the shuffle of slippers on the cement floor of their quarters. The light bulb came on. They were getting ready to pray. They had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake and I didn’t. (pp. 31-32)

Although privileged and from a very wealthy family, Najwa is not completely at ease in her modern and provocative Western clothing. There is something missing, despite having everything. She constantly feels that her privileged existence does not seem to fully complete her sense of happiness and security and, at a certain point, she contemplates her life:

I have a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn’t have, couldn’t have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, soundless sadness like a forgotten dream (p. 15)

The second part in Najwa's life starts with a serious crisis that forces her to live as a political refugee in London: her father is found guilty of corruption and executed. Najwa's mother becomes ill from leukemia and dies in London five years after fleeing Sudan with her son and daughter. In addition to this, Najwa's fraternal twin brother, Omar, is sentenced to sixteen years of imprisonment for drug trafficking and assaulting a police officer. Upon learning of her father's execution, Najwa enters a period of crisis that is sudden and filled with desperation regarding what would happen to her life. She states:

There are all kinds of pain, degrees of falling. In the first weeks in London we felt the ground tremble beneath this. When father was found guilty we broke down, the flat filling with people, Mom crying, Omar banging the door, staying out all night. When I was saying, there we were standing on split open and we tumbled down and that something had no end, it seemed to have no end, as if we would fall and fall eternally without ever landing. As if this was our mission, a bottomless pit, the roar of each other's screams. We became unfamiliar to each other simply because we had not seen each other fall before
(p. 61)

At this point, the only option Najwa's thinks available to her is to work as a maid. The high-level Sudanese lifestyle fades into the past and is a haunting but distant memory. "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" (p. 1), she says. These words conclude Najwa's narrative and her account of a dream. In the dream she is ill, needs the comfort of her parents' room and their bed, she becomes "sure that [her parents] love [her]," but also sees that "Around us, beyond the bed, the room is dark and cluttered, all the possessions that distinguish us in ruins." (p. 276). She is in a particularly potent liminal configuration with a mysterious past and denied an imaginable future. She is unable to make something of herself. Najwa is daydreaming of the past and not working hard; she constantly dreams of when she is a child living in Sudan in her family's home, comfortable in her parent's care and affection. It seems that, because her higher-level identity in Khartoum is based on her father's success and importance, his failure is her failure that she does not seem able to overcome. Through Najwa's new phase of liminality in London, she has been separated from her upper class comfort, security, respectability, and family.

In London, not only is Najwa cut off from her family suddenly, she is also mistreated by her relatives. Her uncle's wife, Eva, who, instead of helping Najwa obtain a respectful job, turns her into her housemaid and even pays her less than what she would regularly earn for the same job elsewhere. Najwa's cousin, Sameer, cuts his relationship with her and her brother since he turns out to be more successful socially, economically, and academically. The way Najwa's relatives treat her on the basis of their socio-economic privilege while in exile mirrors her previous unsympathetic treatment of those who were from a lower social class than hers back in Khartoum. Najwa becomes the under privileged among other Sudanese relatives and friends from her past in London, and thus their treatment of her differs on the basis of social and economic status. Although she is at times around them, she is separated from them. In this condition, everything seems to be ambiguous. Her deep ambivalence creates emptiness in her, particularly when she is alone in London. She longs to be part of Khartoum Islamist life again back in the University: the life she only passively observed as if watching a television. She says:

I remembered the girls in Khartoum University wearing *hijab* and those who covered their hair with white *thobes*. They never irritated me, did they? I tried to think back and I saw the rows of students praying, the boys in front and the

girls at the back. At sunset I would sit and watch them praying. They held me still with their slow movements, the recitation of the *Qur'an*. I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it. Whenever I heard the *azan* in Khartoum, whenever I heard the *Qur'an* recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. I usually didn't notice it, wasn't aware that it existed. Then the *Qur'an* heard by chance on the radio of a taxi would tap at this inner sluggishness, nudge it like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them

(p. 134)

Along the way, Najwa keeps rejecting others. When Wafaa, the woman who washes her deceased mother's body, suggests Najwa join her and other women for *Qur'an* classes, Najwa says, "couldn't they see that I was not the religious type?" (p. 135), even though she admires other women wearing the veil. Thus, she cannot decide about the identity she can approach. When Doctor Zeinab, Najwa's employer, asks her about her origin, Najwa lies: "There is the threat that someone will know who I was, what I've become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?" (p. 71). Najwa cannot seem to be herself or find herself. Her upbringing has not prepared her for this life of exile: she has never been independent, nor does she have the qualifications that will help her survive in London. She feels unsettled, rootless, and suffers the anxiety of not being able to build a future of her own, having been deprived of home for good. The loss of country for Najwa is linked to her sense of having lost her identity.

Through her relationship with Anwar, her former communist love-interest and friend, Najwa thinks she could make decisions about her life and can choose to be a Westernised Muslim woman. Anwar, who supports the first 1984 military coup in Sudan, is later forced into exile after a political party opposed to the one he supports stages a successful coup. Anwar's presence in Najwa's life provides the only attachment she has to her past and home. Najwa's relationship with Anwar develops since he provides her with a sense of belonging, a nostalgia for the easy days of being a student with him at the University of Khartoum.

Najwa enters into a very normal relationship by Western cultural standards with Anwar. They date, kiss in public, and later are physically intimate. She continues to seek her identity based on her perception of others. She accepts Anwar's disgust for female Muslim Arabs who cover their hair and bodies with flowing clothes. He, in fact, wants Najwa to be modern and Western: in tight skirts and sexually available to him. She has a longing to identify with Anwar's encouragement of the Western lifestyle and professing that he likes her because of her modernity and independence. This prevents Najwa from seriously engaging her liminal status and striving to create a Muslim identity that tugs at her conscience. She does not feel like she belongs to London, since she still feels a sense of alienation, loss, and detachment from her surroundings. It is not her worldview or lifestyle in London that will give her a sense of belonging. Therefore, Najwa's relationship with Anwar fails; they have very different views of religion and politics. Najwa imagines living with him in Sudan, "I wanted to know how to live with that, how to be happy with that. Change, he would say, revolution. But I had been hurt by change, and the revolution, which killed my father, did not even do him the honour of lasting more than five years" (p. 164). He likely never intends to marry Najwa. This is made clear when a letter from his sister makes a point that he is traditionally betrothed to his cousin back in Sudan. Their relationship ends when Najwa decides to wear the veil and rejects Anwar's view of the modern Arab woman who is not religious and is sexually active outside of marriage.

HYBRIDITY AND THE THIRD SPACE: A RESOLUTION OF LIMINALITY

In the novel, Najwa changed since leaving her boyfriend Anwar, “one life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one” (Cariello, 2009, p. 340). This change is largely motivated through her adopting her Muslim identity and taking it to heart. The veil becomes symbolically important to Najwa. She gets back in touch with the women from the mosque that she has previously rejected, the same women who washed Najwa’s mother’s body before burial. They encourage Najwa to go to the mosque and listen to the women’s study session of the *Qur’an* and she takes notice of their wearing the veil and dressing modestly. Najwa finds the place as a space of belonging and rootedness that parallels her sense of belonging at home: “In the mosque I feel like I’m in Khartoum again” (p. 244). After wearing the veil and ending her improper relationship with Anwar, the mosque becomes a secure space in which Najwa becomes comfortable enough to negotiate her sense of self and identity. Finding the mosque and feeling a sense of belonging to it helps her cope with the painful reality of uprootedness and the sense of loss of social and national belonging. She says about being at the mosque:

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

Being at the mosque gives Najwa a sense of nostalgic belonging; as she is waiting for the time of prayer, she daydreams about home: “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 small back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, [and] a quiet room to rest in” (pp. 74-75). It is the religious space of the woman’s corner in London that allows Najwa to transcend her present and reconnect to the times when her life was quiet and peaceful. To conjure up images of her family home in Khartoum is the closest Najwa can get to reconnecting to her past, because for so long she could manage to deal with “a fractured country but not a broken home” (p.165).

The mosque is like London itself, cosmopolitan and full of women from around the world as well as English women who converted. These women guide Najwa through example, first by washing and preparing her deceased mother’s body for burial and then through their quiet modesty. From this example, Najwa embraces her religion, the religion she has previously merely observed from the elite margin of Sudanese society. For the practising Muslims at the mosque, national origin and ethnicity are not relevant; religion makes them one community. In time, the women at the mosque become her new family. The mosque becomes her new home, replacing the community she lost.

Najwa’s growing religious identity after connecting to the community of women at the Regents Park Mosque reminds her of how she had been intrigued by the practising Muslim students at Khartoum University:

I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This was what I had envied in our gardener reciting the *Qur’an*, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I heard the *Qur’an* recited, there wasn’t bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert. (p. 243)

The last site of identity negotiation and identification for Najwa is when she starts working for Lamya, an Egyptian PhD student, who lives in London with her brother, Tamer, an

undergraduate student. While working at Lamya's place, Najwa forges a strong relationship with Tamer due to the shared religious sense of identity the two uphold. However, Najwa's relationship with Lamya is more antagonistic than friendly: Lamya lives a Western lifestyle and mixes with Arab girls from her same class, while dismissing Najwa on the basis of her inferior class and social identification. Najwa identifies with Tamer, who is almost the only member in his family who practises Islam as a religion and faith. While Najwa is talking to Tamer about his life and upbringing, they enter into a conversation about their identities and how they identify themselves:

My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese, though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you? I talk slowly. I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim". (p. 110)

Just like Najwa, Tamer bases his identity on his faith. He finds that Islam provides him with a sense of location and belonging against the backdrop of his exposure to a Western lifestyle and education. When Najwa asks Tamer about Lamya and how she views her identity, he answers, "I guess she thinks of herself as Arab" (p. 110). Further, to have Najwa and Tamer experience a common identity through Islam while Lamya's identity takes a secular path reflects the fact that Aboulela has intended Najwa's journey to achieve an individualised sense of faith that grounds her in a location she calls home.

Najwa's identity is multi-layered: She goes through social, class, political, and religious negotiations in order to form an identity of her own construction. Najwa is different from Tamer not only in age but also because she compromises and is able to accept the seemingly inevitable outcome of them not getting married. She gets the strength to accept her fate through her faith in Allah's mercifulness and generosity. Not able to marry a young man she loves and admires for his faithfulness, no longer employed, Najwa seems strong rather than weak in the end. Unlike her friend Randa, who is admitted in a university in England, Najwa enrolls into Khartoum University with much difficulty and does not have any particular plan for a career or further studies even later in England. If political upheavals had not turned her life upside down, she would have probably settled for the sort of lifestyle her mother led and envisioned for Najwa that included a suitably rich husband, a big house with servants and travels abroad (p. 52, p. 132, p. 198).

A reading that views *Minaret* as a denial of feminism and individual agency fails to see the protagonist's frustration with all the male characters that play a central role in her life. Najwa's father, her twin brother, her first lover Anwar, and even the devout Tamer all have serious flaws that "disappoint" her (Chambers, 2009, p. 111). She does not rely on a man to authorize her, she needs to be connected to God to be able to succeed. She is strong through her decision for focus on making the *Hajj* pilgrimage, going back to school as a mature student, and preparing to help her brother who will soon be released from prison. She tells Tamer: "[i]f my *Hajj* is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh" (p. 209). Najwa, by wearing her veil and clinging to her religion, not out of fear but out of excitement for life-like her *Qur'an* teacher-always knows where she is regardless of what situation she may find herself in. The *Hajj* is Najwa's way of symbolically ending her liminality through achieving a new identity in Islam. As Waïl Hassan asserts about Aboulela's novels, they are "narratives of redemption and fulfillment through Islam" (p. 300). Choosing Islam, publically represented by wearing the veil, Najwa is able to accept her past and settle in the present.

CONCLUSION

The veil is the primary symbol in analyzing Aboulela's narrative of Najwa's spiritual journey through liminality and acts as a metaphor for the hybrid identity achieved through the struggles and feeling out of place in London. For Aboulela, the veil does not represent outdated tradition or ignorance. The veil is rather a sign of religious awareness. The belief that women who wear the veil and attend mosque are uneducated or from the poorer social classes is not supported in *Minaret*. Aboulela's protagonist, Najwa, is educated and comes from an elite family. Therefore, her journey is full of detachment, alienation, and loss until she connects herself to a place that grounds her subjectivity in a sense of belonging, which is her religious identity and attendance at the local mosque. In doing so, Najwa creates a third space that is mindful of religious tradition but very modern and in a very Western city: London. So, for Muslim women in the West who embrace Islam, doing so is not grasping the past. Embracing religion for these women is their means of expressing themselves and reinventing themselves as a blend of East and West, tradition and modernity. Najwa increasingly turns to the emotional and psychological security that she gains from her faith and her visits to the mosque. Indeed, Najwa's embrace of Islam is an acceptance of herself in London and allows her to overcome the trauma of migration and loss. This provides her with a means of individual mobility, empowerment, and agency through which liminality is successfully negotiated in order to achieve a hybrid identity of Eastern and Western cultures.

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