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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01** **Craving Homes in Ila Arab Mehta's Fence**
Metty Joby
-
- 12** **Muslimah Hybrid Identity in Amulya Malladi's
The Sound of Language**
Bandaru.S.S.S.S.K.Seshu.
-
- 29** **To Veil or not to Veil: Tracing the Hijab in
Contemporary Muslimah's Writings**
Neda Parvin Shaikh
-
- 43** **Homesickness in Dur E Aziz Amna's American
Fever**
Khoirotul Attiba, Hasnul Insani Djohar, Putri Savira, Yasmina Shafa
Salsabila
-
- 57** **Existentialist Feminism in Etaf Rum's A Woman
is No Man**
Dania Dedi, Nina Farlina
-
- 73** **The Badshah Begums: Interrogating Identity and
Power in Mughal Fiction**
Suman Kumari
-

To Veil or not to Veil: Tracing the *Hijab* in Contemporary Muslimah's Writings

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Abstract

This research examines the constructions of Muslimah or Muslim women's identity through the lens of religious clothing, specifically the *hijab*, as depicted in two contemporary Muslimah literary texts. Randa Abdal Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005) is a bildungsroman told from the perspective of a sixteen-year-old Australian-Palestinian Muslim girl who makes the life-changing decision to wear the *hijab*. The second novel is Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), tracing the journey of a young female Sudanese immigrant in London who finds herself struggling socially, economically and culturally in a foreign country after leaving behind a life of affluence in Sudan. Using theories such as Homi K Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity and Miriam Cooke's Islamic Feminism, the article analyses the protagonists' choice of veiling and the internal and external factors that influence this difficult decision. The analysis suggests that female hybrid identities in Western diasporic contexts are uniquely configured through religious and cultural markers like the *hijab* that forge feminist bonds and reignite connections to the Homeland and God. The decision to wear the *hijab* also helps counter Western stereotypes related to Islam and Muslim women. The *hijab* has also become a contentious issue in recent times. It is thus imperative to look closely at contemporary Muslimah literature that addresses this topic, especially those written by Muslimah authors. This research helps to reduce mainstream misrepresentation and contest stereotypes, thereby making space for newer ways of reading Muslim identities and feminist tendencies.

Keywords: *Hijab, Hybrid, Identity, Islam, Muslim Women Feminism*

Introduction

This research aims to study the constructions of Muslim female identity through the lens of religious clothing, specifically the *hijab*, as depicted in the contemporary works of Arab Muslim female authors. Using the qualitative method of textual analysis of two texts: Randa Abdal Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005); and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), the article seeks to analyse the protagonists' choice of veiling and the internal as well external factors that influence this rather difficult decision. The paper utilises theories such as Homi K Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity and Miriam Cooke's Islamic Feminism to argue that female hybrid identities in western diasporic contexts are uniquely configured through religious and cultural markers like the *hijab* that forge feminist bonds, as well reignite connections to the Homeland and to God. The decision to wear the *hijab* also helps counter western stereotypes related to Islam in general, and of Muslim women in particular.

The common threads that bind the two selected texts together are: firstly, the ways in which they deal with Muslim female identity and its relationship to the subjective expression of religious attire such as the *hijab* or veil; and secondly, that they are written in English by Muslim women writers within the last decade. The first novel, Randa Abdal Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005), is a bildungsroman told from the perspective of a sixteen year old Australian-Palestinian Muslim girl who makes the life changing decision to wear a *hijab*. The novel explores her thoughts and ideals as she navigates the consequences of this difficult decision, including social exclusion, familial anxiety and peer pressure and bullying. The novel is an interesting study as it presents a unique blend of characters from different socio-economic backgrounds, religions and nationalities, with Amal, the teenage protagonist, at the center. Although it is a Young Adult work of fiction, the novel examines some deeply complicated issues surrounding the *hijab*, hybrid identities in western diasporic contexts, Islamic feminism. The second novel analysed in this article is *Minaret* (2005). It is a fictional novel by Sudanese author, Leila Aboulela, tracing the journey of a young Sudanese immigrant woman to London. Najwa, the protagonist, finds herself struggling socially, economically and culturally in a foreign country, after leaving behind a life of affluence and comfort in Sudan. The novel is an intriguing narration of the process of transformation for a Muslim woman who once defined herself through her monetary and political affiliations but later finds her faith to be her only authentic identifier in a western/foreign space. Problems of belongingness, agency, cultural assimilation and gendered resistance constantly collide and unsettle the reader to question traditional notions of power, choice and feminism.

The paper closely studies the concept of Islamic feminism within the context of the two novels. Islam covers many regions across the world with many diverse cultures – including several Arab, African, Bosnian, and Asian countries where it is practiced as a majority religion. Apart from this, there are numerous Muslim minority countries, especially in the Global South. Islam is also growing in European and American countries. Muslim women's role in both western and non-western countries has been the topic of serious debate for the past few decades. Amongst the western nations, the Middle East has long been seen as notorious for their unequal treatment of women. In the West, the common picture of a Muslim woman is the stereotype of a voiceless, silent figure of a woman hidden behind a veil, bereft of her rights. This is a widely popular stereotype mainly because this is how the Western media has been historically portraying Muslim women in the past decades (Said, 2008).

To address women's issues in non-western nations, the term Islamic Feminism came into being around the 1990s, finding its nascent roots in writings of Iranian feminist scholars like Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. Islamic feminism can be understood as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm", as advocated by Margot Badran in 2002 (Badran, 2002: 1). It derives its mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice for women and men, in the totality of their worldly existence and experience. Islamic feminism advocates for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice using Islamic discourse, and can be thus, highly contested and/or firmly embraced. Islamic feminism can be defined by [Islamic scholars](#) like Badran as being more radical than secular feminism, and is said to



be heavily shaped by feminists such as Fatema Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Aziza Al-Hibri, Rifaat Hassan, Fatima Naseef, Shaheen Sardar Ali, and Hidayet Tuksal, among others (Badran 2002). It is important to note here that all Islamic feminists do not necessarily speak with a unified or universal voice. Even within the Islamic feminist paradigm, they exercise subjective, local, diverse, and multiple evolving ideologies and femininities. They strive for gender equality and freedom for women, but they might not always agree on what constitutes equality or freedom, or the best ways of attaining them (Mir-Hosseini, 2011).

Arab Muslim feminism refers to the manifestation of Islamic feminism specifically within the Arab region. Margot Badran, in her book *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (1996), refers to Arab Muslim feminism as a movement within Arab Muslim societies that seeks to address gender equality, justice, and women's rights while drawing from Islamic teachings and cultural contexts (Badran 1996). One of the main aims of the Arab feminist movement is to dismantle the structures that gave birth to a culture of discrimination and enact a process of change to better the conditions of women in Arab society. Arab feminist thought rests on the basic premise that Arab women suffer from inequality because of a social situation imposed by a patriarchal system that elevates the status and role of men, and relegates women to a lower status that confines them to the domestic realm of familial functions. Despite its many successes, some critics argue that Arab Muslim feminism has not yet achieved its full potential in improving Arab women's living conditions.

The Egyptian-American scholar of Islam, Leila Ahmed, in her seminal work *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) clarifies that although women in the Middle East are subjected to oppressive practices, these are due to patriarchal interpretations of Islam rather than Islamic teaching itself. She maps the historical roots of the development of the Islamic doctrine to determine the basis of these misogynistic interpretations, and in doing so, demystifies several myths that surround the status of women in Islamic theology. In *A Quiet Revolution* (2011), Ahmed sets the context for the veil's resurgence in recent years by probing the delicate connections between the veil and colonialism. In recent times, the veil has taken on new meanings for those who choose to wear it. In addition to being an expression of personal faith, it serves as a tool against sexual harassment; as a critique of Western Feminism; as a political statement; and as a fashion statement. "Ahmed does not romanticize these rationales – she is clear about the growing pressure on women from both Islamist organizations and preachers and from families, peers and the media... a timely reminder that the veil today is a symptom less of an alien fanaticism than of a long political and cultural entanglement with the unveiled west" (Aspden, 2011: n.d). It is important to note that not all Muslim feminists and writers write in favor of the *hijab*. For example, Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist writer and activist, who writes extensively on the subject of women in Islam, has been vocally opposed to the veil, calling it nothing but a tool of oppression of women.

Method

The methodology of this study is qualitative in nature and mainly relies on the close reading and interpretation of the selected texts. The study utilises secondary sources



like books, research articles from journals, and other online sources like e-journals and scholarly websites. Two of the main theories used in this analysis are Cooke's Islamic Feminism and Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity. Miriam Cooke, a prominent scholar in gender studies and Middle Eastern studies, has written extensively on topics related to gender, Islam, and feminism. One of her notable works where she discusses Islamic feminism is *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (2001). In this book, Cooke explores how Muslim women writers use literature as a platform to express their views on Islam, gender, and feminism. She acknowledges that Islamic feminism is not a monolithic movement but comprises a spectrum of perspectives and approaches across different cultural and geographical contexts. Cooke highlights how Islamic feminism doesn't necessarily reject Islam but rather seeks to reinterpret and recontextualize religious texts and traditions to advocate for women's rights, equality, and justice. She often underscores the agency of Muslim women in navigating their religious identities while challenging patriarchal structures. In her writings, Cooke discusses the significance of Islamic feminism as a movement that draws from within Islam itself to promote gender equality, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim women. Additionally, her earlier book, *Gendering War Talk* (1993), co-edited with Angela Woollacott, also touches on various aspects of gender, politics, and Islam. Cooke's work often emphasizes the diverse perspectives of Muslim women and their agency in navigating their religious beliefs within the context of feminist principles. These works serve as significant contributions to the understanding of Islamic feminism and the ways in which Muslim women articulate their experiences, beliefs, and challenges within the framework of both Islam and feminism.

Furthermore, due to the heavy implications of the veil in navigating the diasporic identity formations of the two protagonists, it is important to highlight the Indian postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity within the context of this study. Hybridity for Bhabha's is a notion that iterates the presence and intrusion of the past which forces us to re-imagine our understanding of the cultural present. In his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha claims there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994: 4). These "in-between spaces" articulate cultural differences, in which "domains of difference" may overlap, creating an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (Bhabha, 1994: 2-4). Amal and Najwa both struggle with conceptualizing their subjective identities as diaspora subjects occupying foreign spaces. Their struggle with the *hijab* also opens up several interrogations into the aporias of assimilation, ambivalence, and the 'Third Space'. With the help of the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks, this study will explore how the two female muslim protagonists of the selected texts, Amal and Najwa, construct their respective identities and the role of the *hijab* in their journey. Furthermore, it also highlights how these protagonists can be read through the lens of Islamic Feminism to analyse their formulations of hybrid diasporic identities in western contexts.



Results and Discussions

Amal's Dilemma: 'to wear or not to wear'

Does My Head Look Big in This? is a coming-of-age story featuring a resourceful Arab-Western protagonist. Published in 2005, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* won the Australian Book of the Year Award for older children. The novel is about a sixteen-year-old girl named Amal Abdel-Hakim. Sixteen-year-old Amal considers herself an Australian-Palestinian-Muslim. She lives in a secular suburb of Melbourne. Amal and her parents—her father Mohamed and her mother Jamila—have shaped new identities by mixing their origins (Middle East) and Islamic convictions with the dominant Western culture of Australia. Amal is the only child of devoted but moderate Muslim parents who live in a safe Islamic area within Australian society. Her liberal parents give her the chance to ponder over her decision on veiling.

The novel is partly autobiographical, thus, understanding the author's life also helps the reader situate the novel in context. Randa Abdel-Fattah, a Muslim woman of Palestinian and Egyptian origin, was born in Sydney in 1979. She was raised in Melbourne and attended a Catholic primary school and Islamic secondary college. She currently works in Australia as an attorney and human rights activist, helping with numerous human rights, migrant, and refugee resource associations.

In *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Randa Abdel-Fattah presents the *hijab* issue, "to wear or not to wear" to her main character. Amal is a teenage Australian-Muslim who, after some anguished deliberation, happily decides to adopt *hijab* on a daily basis (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, 21). Amal attends McClean's, a private Catholic primary school in Melbourne, and confronts challenging personal and social repercussions after she embraces her choice to cover. The novel depicts *hijab* as a mystical and sacred practice that serves as an inspiring tool of coherence in Amal's life. For Amal, the practice of veiling functions as a device that empowers Amal to avoid a sexual encounter with her first crush, non-Muslim Adam Keane. Moreover, the love story between the two teens and the presence of the *hijab* between them portray the failure to resolve the fundamental communication problems between the West and the East. This novel also rejects the Western press's stereotype of the *hijab* as a means of jurisdiction over and suppression of Muslim women (Alreshoud, 2019).

Sharyn Pearce's article *Does My Bomb Look Big in This? Representing Muslim Girls in Australian Cultural Texts*, uses Homi Bhaba's theories of hybridized subjectivity in third space to analyze Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* The author uses Homi Bhaba's work on hybridity to explain how Amal, the main female character, navigates contradictory cultural expectations between her own ethnic Arab and Muslim culture and mainstream Australian culture as she commits to the *hijabi* lifestyle. Pearce explains that uniqueness in Amal's experience as she goes through the typical struggles of adolescent life plus being the only Muslim kid in her high school. Such juxtaposition of normal and unusual enriches Amal's experience and makes it worth examining. The author states, "Hybridity can involve both assimilation and destabilization, and does not always disrupt the hegemonic center" (Pearce, 2006: 61). Thus, in the novel, Amal seems to struggle to understand her liminal identity in the



beginning. The decision of wearing a *hijab* in an almost all-white school and neighbourhood is difficult, but she is convinced it will help her find her true self.

Jo Lampert, on the other hand, analyzes two Muslim young adult texts, one of them is Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, to understand how they present a challenging option for young Muslim women of hybrid identities in a modern world that is divided racially, religiously and socially. Lampert expresses how the novel is set in a world of 'Us versus Them'. Nonetheless, the young women are pressured to blend in and embrace a hybridized identity which might not be achievable. In Abdel-Fattah's work, sixteen-year-old Australian Palestinian Amal feels inspired by an American comic series that motivates her to assert her identity. She decides to put on a *hijab* as an act of courage and assertiveness. Her decision to wear the *hijab* affects her love life and the way she finds herself compelled to treat a boy she likes putting the teachings of religion before her heart (Lampert, 2006: 53). We see how Amal not only prioritises affinity and community through her religious expression of *hijab*, but she also considers it a tool to achieve closeness to her religion and God.

In a unique twist, Amal confesses that her inspiration to have the courage to wear a scarf, although it brings her closer to her religion, was actually not the religious teachings but rather it was her icon, Jennifer Aniston. Being a huge fan of the TV show *Friends*, she watched Jennifer Aniston's character, Rachel, feel embarrassed in front of wedding guests when the hem of her gown is stuck to her waist. However, Amal admires how Rachel is still able to enjoy the rest of the night dancing with the same guests despite how they are looking at her and what they are saying about her. Her behavior delivers a powerful message that she does not care about what others think and that she is proud to be herself. Amal also wants to achieve what every teenager strives for; a sense of self-confidence while being herself. However, despite a western influence like *Friends* being an inspiration for her religious expression of wearing the *hijab*, she finds it difficult to reconcile the two binaries. Abdel-Fattah shows that wearing the veil is not an easy decision that Amal or any Muslim woman can take lightly, especially as a diasporic subject living in a western country. Amal explains that choosing to wear the *hijab* implies commitment to a certain lifestyle. She describes how hard it is to commit. She says, "I can't sleep from stressing about whether I've got the guts to do it" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 2). Amal feels inspired by how some of her colleagues are so confident while they are wearing the *hijab* (Alreshoud 2019). She describes,

[She] met girls who were wearing it full-time outside of school, like voluntarily, and [she] started to really respect their courage. [She] was even jealous because there [she] would be, ripping it off as soon as [she] was off school property, and there they would be, calmly and proudly stepping into a train filled with students from schools all over without so much as a hint of fear or doubt. They looked so at peace with their identity and everybody got to know and respect them on their own terms. (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 13)

Even before wearing the *hijab*, as an Arab Australian, Amal has struggled with certain assumptions that she finds herself having to deal with and contradict. Although her parents are highly educated and have successful careers, her classmates at McClellans often assume that she comes from an uneducated and poor background. Amal's



ethnicity and faith have always been aspects that she has been teased about even before she wore the *hijab*. As she enters high school for the first time, she is aware that her decision to put on the *hijab* will attract more attention. Nevertheless, one reaction that Amal does not expect is the assumption that she was forced to put on the veil by her father. Such expectations imply that she is incapable of making a choice, that no one will ever choose the *hijab* willingly, and that the *hijab* is oppressive. Arab American feminist Susan Darraj comments on stereotypical images of Muslim women in America but her comment can be applied to Muslim women worldwide. She says, “the Faceless Veiled Woman...continues to harass the Arab American woman and the feminist. Even if she resembles nothing in our lives. . . we must confront and re-create her” (Darraj, 2011: 259).

Randa Abdel-Fattah reveals that every woman who wears the *hijab* has her own reasons that might differ from another *hijab*-wearing woman. *Hijab* does not necessarily reflect how devout a Muslim woman is. Abdel-Fattah explains, “Every girl is going to interpret the *hijab* differently. It depends on their culture or their fashion sense . . . There’s no uniform for it” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 72). This is a significant point that undermines the assumption that all *hijab* wearing women are highly religious. In fact, some women practice wearing the *hijab* to emphasize their ethnic culture and not due to any particular religious convictions. Amal mocks the tendency to assume that since she wears that *hijab*, she must be very pious and that everything she does is backed by religious beliefs. No matter the reasons for choosing to wear the *hijab*, it can still pose a threat to the one wearing it, especially in the West. *Hijab* wearing women have been targets of hate crimes in several Western countries, especially in recent times. In the novel, Amal also discusses the repercussions of wearing the veil in public and how it affects Muslim women in highly public and crowded places like the bus. According to Amal, one of the biggest challenges that *hijab*-wearing women deal with is wearing it in public transportations. Public buses and trains are usually crowded with people from different walks of life, different educational backgrounds, and economic classes. They represent a sample of the entire population and confine such different people in a small space which makes confrontations less avoidable. However, such spaces can also help build solidarity amongst *hijab* wearing women, which can help forge feminist connections. One could also argue that by repeatedly referencing women from other faiths and cultures who practice the veil, Abdel-Fattah urges women from all backgrounds to support each other, focus on their shared interests and struggles, and to not subscribe to patriarchal values, which is a core principle of Islamic feminism (Alreshoud, 2019). Although Amal doubts her decision in the beginning, she later admits that,

As sacred as I was walking around the stores in the *hijab*, I was also experiencing a feeling of empowerment and freedom. I know I have a long way to go. I still dressed to impress and I took ages to get my makeup, clothes, and *hijab* just right. But I didn’t feel I was compromising myself by wanting to make an impression. I was looking and feeling good on my own terms, and boy did that feel awesome (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 29).

In the novel, Randa Abdel-Fattah also elaborates on the difficulties that Amal starts facing the minute she makes up her mind about the *hijab*. Amal’s parents never talked



to her about the *hijab* nor did they expect her to be interested in it. Amal describes the moment she shares her decision with her parents, "At dinner I tell my parents that I'm thinking about wearing the *hijab* and to my disbelief they look at each other nervously" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 22). Even though Amal's mother wears the *hijab*, her parents are understandably protective of her and sacred to see her start wearing it at such a young age and during a time of raising Islamophobic sentiments. Amal, on the other hand, was expecting her parents to welcome such a big decision. She comments, "I can't believe you guys aren't even happy for me! I thought you'd be ecstatic! Sheesh! A little support would be nice!" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 23). Given her young age and limited experience, Amal seems oblivious to the connotations that came to be associated with the *hijab*. She is shocked at her parents' reaction about something she thinks is a mere piece of material, but her mother provides a reality check when she asks, "since when do people see it as a mere piece of material?" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 24). Not only did Amal choose to wear the most controversial piece of cloth, but she also chooses to do so at a very critical time, as the only Muslim teenager in her all-white high school (Alreshoud 2019).

Amal encounters backlash from her school mates too. Some laugh and make fun of her for the cloth on her head, calling her names such as "wog", "nappy head", "tea-towel head", or "camel jockey" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 49). However, Amal thinks of her *hijab* as the message that others' judgments of her physical appearance do not mean much to her, which is how the *hijab* empowers her. For her, it is a powerful statement against setting standards for beauty and dress for women. It is her way of saying that others' opinion of my physical appearance does not matter to me. The *hijab* also empowers her by bringing her closer to God when she feels that she is following religious endorsement (Alreshoud 2019). Amal also opts to wear the *hijab* because it gives her a sense of who she is. It connects her to her Arab heritage and religious identity. She states, "I want that identity...that symbol of my faith. I want to know what it means to be strong enough to walk around with it on and stick up for my right to wear it" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 24). As a young woman who is a first-generation Australian having a hyphenated identity can be confusing. Amal describes herself saying, "I'm an Australian-Palestinian-Muslim. That means I was born an Aussie and whacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 6). These hyphens are almost literal proof of her hybrid existence. She is all of them at once and yet none of them individually without the other. Wearing the *hijab* enables Amal to navigate this plural identity, empowering her to figure out who she wants to be as she grows up. She gradually comes to realize that she can be a proud Australian Muslim without worrying about being judged or belittled. While Amal sometimes feels alienated, the *hijab* helps her forge sisterly bonds with other women all over the world (Alreshoud, 2019). She explains,

I begin to understand that there's more to *hijab* than the whole modesty thing. I am experiencing a new identity, a new expression of who I am on the inside, but I know that I'm not alone. I'm not breaking new ground. I'm sharing something with millions of other women around the world and it feels so exciting. (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 28)

Najwa's Journey: Before, During, and After the Veil



Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* follows the protagonist Najwa's voyages in England and Sudan through multiple isolated, passionate, and mystical stations to discover a secure spot to locate her identity. Aboulela covers three sections of Najwa's life: before, during, and after wearing her veil. Each section of the narrative portrays Najwa's fight with her emotions regarding her decision of whether to veil or unveil. Her internal negotiations with herself become careful conversations about her real identity. The veil's place in these communications steadily remains a touchstone that emerges finally to provide Najwa the means of self-appreciation and satisfaction regarding her diasporic identity and immigrant conditions. Aboulela's *Minaret* works with and within notions of Islamic feminism and Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity to reveal Najwa's process to secure her life along spiritual lines by pulling on her veil and healing her marginalized and vulnerable identity as an immigrant person in a major Western metropolis, London.

Egyptian-Sudanese novelist, playwright, and poet Leila Aboulela draws on her own life experiences in creating a character like Najwa. Born in 1964 in Egypt to a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother, Aboulela grew up in an extremely liberal atmosphere, gaining a Western-style education by attending an American primary school in Khartoum where she learned English language and writing, as well as a private Catholic school, before undertaking an undergraduate degree in statistics at the University of Khartoum. After earning her Master's degree in Sudan, Aboulela studied at the London School of Economics (LSE). In 1990, she moved with her husband and their children to Aberdeen Scotland, the inspirational setting and cultural backdrop for most of her literary fiction. Since 2000, Aboulela and her family members have lived between Aberdeen, Jakarta, Indonesia, and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, making her life a constant mix and flux of Eastern and Western cultural experiences. Aboulela's experiences in Sudan and thereafter in Scotland, as well as her devout faith as a *hijabi* Muslim woman informs much of her widely acclaimed work. In addition to exploring Muslim women's issues through heavily female-centric texts, Aboulela's work grapples masterfully with aspects of female identity, diaspora/migration, Islamic feminism, and the *hijab*.

In *Minaret*, Aboulela fashions a narrative that engages with widely spreading post-9/11 Islamophobia. Aboulela depicts Islamophobia in the post-9/11 London of her novel through reactions towards Najwa's *hijab*. *Minaret* uses a journey motif of geographical and spiritual movement that centers on Najwa, an immigrant Sudanese teenaged girl who in the novel goes through a process to becoming a devout Muslim. In the novel, the heroine oscillates between two places, Khartoum and London, and she experiences many feelings and memories of the different geographical locations that she moves between. At each of these stations, Najwa lives as an outsider to the mainframe centers of power at each place and time. The novel is organized into three stages of the protagonist's growth, which occurs in two time periods through the use of flashback. The main character's maturation process includes her secular period in Sudan, prior to emigration; her in-between period, with geographical movement between London and Sudan symbolizing her spiritual movement; and her religious stage, referring to her immigrant life in London.

Aboulela's *Minaret* carefully plots the two parallel narratives of a rich Sudanese girl who experiences the trauma of exile in the bloom of her youth. The first is the



story of Najwa, the spoiled and ignorant Westernized university girl whose luxurious life relies on her father's controversial political career; the other is that of a deserted and exiled Najwa who seeks to cope in very difficult circumstances in London. The story moves between 1984 and 2004 and chronicles Najwa's pre- and post-exile attitudes towards the people around her. In Sudan, Najwa cherishes Westernized high-life parties and enjoys companionship with equal peers (Awad, 2011).

In 1984, Najwa's private life was shattered by a coup d'état in Sudan. Later, her father is found guilty and executed. In London, Najwa faces a radically different reality. Her brother, Omar, is jailed for stabbing an undercover policeman. Her mother's health rapidly deteriorates and she dies. Najwa finds herself cut off from her cousins who are no longer interested in her and she tries to fill the void by keeping in touch with other fellow Sudanese exiles. She also discovers the futility of her attempts to reconstruct the past. Encouraged by the warm feelings of a number of Muslim women from the Regent's Park Mosque who volunteer to wash and coffin her mother upon her death, Najwa begins to listen to a distant voice that she identifies with her home country, Sudan. She begins to visit the mosque and befriends new Muslim women of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. In a word, Islam ends Najwa's ordeal of being isolated through providing her with a new network of friends whose camaraderie is based on faith (Awad, 2011).

Aboulela here explores the possibility of an Islamic sisterhood against the allegiances based on nationality and social class. Becoming a better Muslim is the common interest that ties Najwa to other Muslim women at the Regent's Park Mosque. It is significant that Najwa's personal and first-hand experience of slipping down the social ladder plays a fundamental role in her understanding and appreciation of the appealing power of Islam in an age of advanced capitalism. In addition to understanding these conditions, a properly contextualized reading of Najwa's decision invites us to look at certain principles within Islam as strategies of resistance that Muslim women employ. The novel presents Islam as the basis for a feminist movement which enables Najwa "to fight off the anonymity of being a migrant in Britain" (Aboulela, 2005: 94). Margot Badran urges us to consider the socio-historical conditions that contributed to the rise of Islamic feminism (Badran, 2005). Women, both secularists and religiously oriented, grew increasingly concerned by the imposition and spread of a conservative reading of Islam by Islamist movements which emerged in the early 1970s, and found it urgent to respond to this form of Islamism "in a progressive Islamic voice" (Badran, 2005: 95). This is linked to the disappointment with secular regimes in the Middle East that failed to deliver democracy to its people.

The way *Minaret* portrays how Islam provides a ground for a feminist solidarity and support network, reminds us of Cooke's argument that Islamic feminism is not oxymoronic (Cooke, 2001). For Cooke, however, Islamic feminism "does not describe identity, but rather an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women" (Cooke, 2001: 108). Islamic feminists, Cooke insists, link their religious, political, and gender identities to "claim simultaneous and sometimes contradictory allegiances" in their endeavors to resist globalization, local nationalisms, Islamization, and the practical system that pervades them all (Cooke, 2001: 109). In this sense, *Minaret* can be seen as performing an Islamic feminist standpoint.



It subverts misconceptions about the symbol of Arab Muslim culture that has been associated in the West with a repressive patriarchal authority, namely, the veil. Minaret explores the crucial role a mosque can play for Muslim women regardless of their social class, ethnicities, education and age. Wearing the *hijab* at the mosque unifies women and gives them a sense of belonging. Without the *hijab*, ethnic differences seem to alienate Najwa from the Muslim women she knows. To celebrate Eid, women put on new clothes and take off their *hijabs* in the women's section of the mosque. Najwa reflects: "This one looks Indian, as if the *hijab* had made me forget she was Indian and now she is reminding me – in the sari with her flowing hair and jewelry" (Aboulela, 2005: 186). Further on, Najwa notes: "But it is as if the *hijab* is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed" (Aboulela, 2005: 186). The *hijab* erases social class and ethnic differences. In this sense, the mosque is presented as the epicenter of an Islamic transnational feminist movement with the *hijab* as a symbol of unity. The mosque is Najwa's point of reference for regulating her life and providing her a space for socializing. The mosque, as Claire Chambers points out, "provides a sense of security, well-being and locatedness" (Chambers, 2009: 131).

Najwa's downfall into the world of menial work in London forces her to seek coalition with others outside her immediate circle. Her attempts to reconnect with fellow Sudanese exiles such as Randa and Aunt Eva break down and are gradually replaced by more stable, self-fulfilling Muslim feminist peers (Lazreg 134). Aboulela underscores that gender can never be the only basis for feminist solidarity unless other socio-economic determinants, such as social class, race, education and religion are taken onboard. In this sense, the novel reiterates Marnia Lazreg's criticism of Western feminists who have promoted universal conceptions of individual and institutional change "modeled after their own societies" (Lazreg 135). The novel makes a case for non-western feminist thought through the characters of Najwa, underlying a feminist solidarity that cuts across social markers and brings about lasting change in societies that do not resemble western life. Similarly, Haideh Moghissi criticizes the ideologically driven or uninformed arguments by some left-oriented and feminist intellectuals in the West, who, in the name of multiculturalism and respect for difference, "endorse indigenous solutions for indigenous problems" (Moghissi 137). Moghissi argues that this indigenized version of Feminism excludes core ideas of feminism, such as self-autonomy, gender egalitarianism, justice and sexual democracy. She criticizes this tendency which, she notes, is increasingly observable in academic and non-academic writings because it helps reactionary religious regimes in the Middle East and the Muslim World "to wall themselves off against internal and external challenges and impose their views and their own outdated moral standards on others in the name of Islam" (Moghissi, 2001: 139).

Social differences, especially social class, crucially inform each character's stance and belief in the novel. This idea is further developed in the narrative by introducing the character of Lamya, a London-based rich Arab PhD student, and her mother, Doctor a Zeinab. Although Najwa shares with them the same language, Arabic, their relationship is that of employer and employee. When Najwa gets a job as their maid and babysitter, she expresses her hope to become close to Lamya, but she



acknowledges that Lamya “will always see my *hijab*, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin color, which is a shade darker than hers” (Aboulela, 2005: 116). Najwa realizes that barriers of social class, ideological beliefs, nationality, ethnicity, race and level of education cannot be easily erased. Thus, the Muslim female diasporic identity is not just complicated through its negotiations with the Western society, but can also find itself in intra-cultural conflicts within its own diasporic community due to variations in class, caste, generational differences, religious interpretation etc. For example, for Lamya, the *hijab* stands as a marker of inferiority and a working class status. This association is reinforced towards the end of the novel when one of Lamya’s friends, dressed in *hijab*, arrives at the party and starts stripping to the standing ovation of other friends. Najwa discovers that this girl is wearing the *hijab* as a fancy dress: “Her smile and her gestures are theatrical; everyone is looking at her” (Aboulela, 2005: 222). The association of religious markers with a low social position seems to sanction the ridicule of upper class Arab Muslims. Najwa herself has previously discussed the Islamic expression of *hijab* years ago with her upper-class childhood friend, Randa. *Minaret* thus offers the reader an opportunity to look at the *hijab* from a different perspective. In this sense, the novel urges the reader to consider the socio-historical and political implications of the *hijab* in addition to its gendered dimensions (Awad 2011).

By wearing the *hijab*, Najwa, to borrow Claire Chambers’ words, “recognizes the subtle allure of concealment” (Chambers, 2009: 146). By highlighting this aspect of the *hijab*, the novel seems to write back to some unexamined assumptions regarding the nature of the *hijab*. In this sense, the novel enters into a dialogue with other feminist movements. Aboulela seems to suggest that it is futile to ignore and try to transcend differences amongst women of different cultural backgrounds because one cannot do away with them. Instead, feminist movements need to engage in conversations and listen to different voices. The novel seems to urge feminists to find ways of hearing “multiple, divergent and even discordant voices with clarity and resonance” (Chambers, 2009: 147).

Conclusion

This study looks at the two female protagonists of the selected texts—Amal in Randa Abdal Fattah’s *Does My Head Look Big In This?*; and Najwa in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*—to understand how their femininity and feminism is constructed through their experience of religious sartoriality in different diasporic contexts. It analyzes the texts and its female protagonist (who are loosely modeled on the respective authors of the texts) to highlight their negotiations and reflections as they navigate their individual journeys with the veil. Amal’s *hijab* dilemma is whether ‘to wear or no wear’ – a decision she must make by herself as a young Australian college student of Palestinian descent. Interestingly, despite backlash from peers and other members from her family, she decided to don the veil as it provides her with a much needed avenue to connect with her heritage. This connection is crucial for the teenager, as she struggles with her hybrid identity in a diasporic context. In her decision, she also manages to subvert countless stereotypes surrounding this Islamic sartorial choice, thereby establishing that the veil can indeed be a feminist choice rather than a religious



patriarchal form of oppression. The novel also makes the case for the importance of an Islamic sisterhood by incorporating *hijabi* women from different backgrounds into the narrative. Amal's exposure to the diverse reality of postcolonial feminism inspires her to make an informed decision and retain her identity as muslim, female, and product of the Islamic diaspora.

Najwa, like Amal, goes through similar issues with her veiling journey. Najwa's journey is impacted by the post-9/11 spreading of Islamophobia in London, after her migration from Khartoum, Sudan. Her journey is not just physically, but emotionally and religiously too. The narrative thus paints a vivid picture of her growth, using her *hijab* as a symbol. Although she is a politically privileged member of her society in her hometown of Khartoum, her exile places her in London, where she is an outsider. She loses whatever little privilege and power she had before and now finds herself at odds with her own identity and femininity. It is the sisterhood bonds that she forges with the muslim women in the nearby mosque that provide her with a sense of belonging and shared kinship in a foreign land. Here, she is part of an Islamic sisterhood (similar to Amal's experience at her mosque) that goes beyond the allegiances of nationality, class or color. She finds meaning in her choice to veil and understands the hybrid nuances of her identity. Aboulela, in this novel, also endows the *hijab* with the responsibility of unifying women and fostering resistances of a shared Islamic transnational and decolonial feminism. The novel, through Najwa's character, urges readers to reorient the *hijab* and read it within the context of its socio-cultural and historical implications.

Amal and Najwa's characters thus seem to problematize western notions of feminism and make for a more culturally rooted and decolonial conceptualisation of the *hijab*, as evidenced through this analysis. This study also opens up the scope for further examination of similar contemporary fictional and nonfictional works that challenge stereotypes and make space for newer ways of reading muslim identities and feminist tendencies.

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