Identity (Re)Construction and Cultural Tensions in Leila Aboulela's Minaret: Fixity, Flexibility, Variability

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Abstract

Leila Aboulela's novel Minaret is a kind of recovery and discovery of identity in a space different from that of the root – the homeland. For Aboulela, identity is not ever fixed and stable, it, rather, metamorphoses and transmutes under the effect of new spaces. The challenge, the Minaret's characters have, is dialogically related to the external circumstances that undermine their choices. Najwa, the protagonist of the novel, experiences bouts of negative reactions that push her to live in reclusion. Having chosen to wear the veil (Hidjab), in a society, which demonizes it and considers it as regressive, she has found a way out and become her own.

Keywords: *Minaret, Leila Aboulela, Postcolonialism Discourse, Identity Reconstruction.*

Introduction

In this global Western culture, Immigrant writers try to challenge the uniqueness of Western discourse by abrogating and appropriating the colonizer's language and challenging the centrality of discourse within their novels. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* is a good example of such appropriation. This modest article tries to delve within the novel and see the extent to which Aboulela succeeds to establish this new mode of expression and the manner she decenters the center and uses a new discourse, which recreates an identity that harmonizes between the relics of the old and the ingredients of the new.

Postcolonialism: Between Race and Culture

Adoption of the colonizer's language has become an alternative, which allows the post-colonial writers to escape the hegemony of Eurocentrism and

"authenticate" the language use by centering the margin and marginalizing the center. In the words of Ashcroft et al.:

> *[The] notions of centrality and the "authentic" were themselves necessarily questioned, challenged, and finally abrogated.… Cultural practices can return to some "pure" and unsullied cultural condition, and that such practices themselves, such as the use of vernacular terms or grammatical forms in English literature, can embody such an authenticity.* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2002, p. 40)

Establishing a new discourse, different from the metropolitan language, is revisiting the language and reshuffling it so that it fits what the postcolonial writer wants to communicate. This new language practice is "alimented" with the postcolonial life, its culture and everyday experiences. Subsequently, the language gets a new discourse and becomes the center and marginalizes its metropolitan use and practice. In the words of Ashcroft et al.:

> *In writing out of the condition of "Otherness," postcolonial texts assert the complex of intersecting "peripheries" as the actual substance of experience. But the struggle which this assertion entails – the "re-placement" of the post-colonial text – is focused in their attempt to control the processes of writing.* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2002, p. 77)

Such process of controlling the text's artistry is a tool and a potential power to subvert the over dominating discourse imposed by the cultural predicament of the colonizer.

The acts of abrogating and appropriating the language of the center are in themselves revalorizing it and gauging it through a new cultural referent and new linguistic embedment. Writers restructure, or transplant, the diversity of culture and ethnic and domesticate it. In a way, they hybridize it. It is an original, yet, it is not. It fuses both the "I" and the "Other", "the Colonizer" and "the Colonized," "the Eurocentric" and the "Eurocentred," "the Subject" and the "Object". So, language dimension has extended beyond its cultural cradle and linguistic formulation. Such transformation has specified the language of the colonizer to the colonized writers. It is adapted to represent more the cultural bath of the marginalized than the center.

The subversion of imperial language is a way to decolonize the mind of the colonized and conceptualize a new discourse for the colonizer, which makes the European reader understand, through his language, the specificities of otherness, which are natural and made different because of race, belief and mode of being. That is, there is a variety of cultures in the world, and no culture is ever disposed to degrade the other. In this context, the critic Terry Eagleton (1980) points out that:

> *The Other is what allows me to address myself to it by evading me; I speak from where I am not, from the place of the Other (the entire network of significations) that-most obviously in the verbal slip.* (p. 156)

Eagleton extends further claiming that the ideology forces language to serve the writer. It, thus, becomes a tool of propaganda of the center more than a tool that tries to be too near to the "reality" of the colonized. He writes:

> *If ideology lays claim to an oppressive plentitude of meaning, then textuality is at hand to reveal its hidden places of "castration"; if ideology assumes a secure hierarchy of meanings, organized around some privileged set of transcendental signifiers that close it upon itself, then textuality will show how one signifier merely displaces, redoubles, and stands in for another in a potentially infinite chain that can be arrested only by violence.* (Eagleton, 1980, p. 149)

In the same vein, Arif Dirlikpp acknowledges that there is a strong trace, or clerics, of the post colonial in the other's text. He writes:

> *The generalization of the postcolonial has resulted also in the generalization of the problematics of ethnicity and race above all other questions. The meaning and politics of postcoloniality have been transformed as postcolonial criticism has suppressed important elements that earlier structured the concept of the postcolonial.* (Dirlikpp, 2001, p. 9)

Literature and the Representation of the "Other"

Literature is a space where realities, of both the subject and the object, the "I" and the "Other," are, directly or indirectly, revealed. Out of the fabrics of the literary constituencies, the reader can imagine and re-imagine, guess and perceive, interpret and conceive the meaning, or meanings, the text folds within its entrails. Voices at the center and voices at the margin can be heard. The reader has only to listen to them. He could restore the senses and sensibilities of characters, who populate the text, and investigate their insights, which are quelled by the dominating voice of the subject – the Eurocentric "I". Such signification could be known through the elusive suggestiveness of words the other utters, and the manner he behaves, or made to behave, by the subject, the European. Kerstin W. Shands (2008) states that:

> *[Postcolonial literature] enables us to listen to and participate in a cross-cultural and multi-voiced dialogue. Introducing new aesthetic norms and modes of appraisal and challenging notions of English exclusiveness, postcolonial writers are laying bare submerged histories, bringing minority interests and ethnic diversities to the forefront, and reconfiguring cultural forms and ways of life previously relegated to the periphery.* (p. 13)

Though literature is the product of the author's self and identity, it is, nonetheless, bathed within the culture of this author. It literaturizes culture and encodes its specificity as diverse, authentic to itself, referential to its place and time. Øyunn Hestetun (2008) claims that:

> *The stories of others may offer evidence of the ways in which we – as humans – construct our world through our narratives, our stories, our fictions. Narrative constitutes, in other words, in itself a way in which humans make sense of the world and the human condition.* (pp. 45-46)

The Orient, the other, is seen through the Eurocentric eye as a place of mystery, fantasy, extavegence and exoticism. It is highly exaggerated and romanticized as a place of uncommon cultural traditions. But beyond such illusion, it is seen as regressive and naturally "savage" and needs to be civilized. Kerstin W. Shands (2008) points out that:

> *Even though some orientalist accounts were admiring and even romanticizing, the orient was usually described as less developed, civilized, and rational, as a negative mirror image reflecting the self-described positivities of the occident.* (p. 6)

Andrew Gibson explains further such subversive judgement the "I"/the Logo-European when attempting any explanation of the Other's literary production. He points out "the oddity and the incompatibility, from one cultural perspective, of value-systems that are apparently congruent enough from another" (1999, p. 198).

Such dichotomized inequality makes the East backward and regressive and the West civilized and progressive. Thus, the East cannot remain as such. It rather needs help and education by the West. In other words, the West is the mirror of civilization and the referent that gauges the extent to which the East is civilized. Such binary opposition features the literature of the West and makes it a reference to the other, who is made to ignore his race and civilization. Edward Said (1979) claims that:

> *The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.* (p. 1)

This style of thought, or artistic representation, is a kind of discourse made by the West to create, through European culture/referent, an Orient thoroughly different from them and, yet, he replies colonization for the sake of culture and civilization. But what is paradoxical with this logocentric view of the West is that they do not consider themselves as others, who are geographically and culturally

different from other peoples. Said (1979) maintains that: "As much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West." (p. 5)

So, diversity in/of artistic representation is dialogically related to the diversity of culture and linguistic practices. Therefore, the constituents of identity, as race, ethnic, dress, belief, moral values, etc., have become parameters to gauge and assess the postcolonial writer's artistic production.

Leila Aboulela and the Dilemma of Representation in Minaret

In *Minaret*, Lelia Aboulila seems to reproduce some of her insights that represent her past events and reminiscences that have been haunting her all along her life. She was not satisfied with the life she spent in Sudan, where everything was mapped up and where any objection or rejection seemed to be a transgression to the already established rules of patriarchy. Right at the first pages of the novel, she draws our attention to the restricted life in Sudan, her birthplace. She suggestively writes: "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." (2005, p. 7)

Aboulela is much concerned with culture and belief in her novels, mainly *Minaret*. She provides us with a dexterous plot of her major thematic concern, Islam, in two different geographies she lived in: Sudan and Britain. The same as herself, her characters are parted between two driving forces: one that keeps them to the first space and location of Sudan, and the other that urges them to adopt, or adapt, their culture in Britain. Hasan Majed (2012) points out that

> *Muslims are always asked to be more western which means, undoubtedly, to be more modern, more civilized and much better human beings. Yet it seems that for some western people it is impossible for Muslims to be accepted as western even if Muslims want to be so.* (p. 64)

The characters of *Minaret* live under the constraints of two different geographical spaces. The former instructs and dictates; the latter seduces and induces for change. The critic Cristina Riaño Alonso (2017) states that:

> *Aboulela's diasporic characters have to confront alienation, but on the other, they are asked to be grateful, to accept the treatment that is given to them and surrender to the system of new spaces – and social structures – they inhabit.* (p. 57)

Speaking about the novel, Susan Taha Al-Karawi (2014) maintains that:

> *In [Minaret], 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.* (p. 256)

The novel reports the life of some protagonists, who are mainly from Muslim world and who are trying to assimilate to the culture of the new geography they live in. It foregrounds differences and difficulties and points out the sense of metamorphoses and changes. Most of the characters of the novel have become what they were not. In the words of Youcef Awad, the plot of *Minaret* centers on "a displaced Arab woman who either chooses to live in Britain in order to pursue higher education and work or is forced to live in Britain as a (self) exile or refugee. The protagonist is cut off from her country of origin for most of the narrative." (2011, p. 42)

The third space that seems to be a niche for immigrants is only a means to dissociate themselves from both the first and the second spaces: the old and the new. But can it be possible to be both and hyphenise two differing cultures? How can one possess the new geographical space and claim it to be his? How can one keep his space's tradition within this new space, which is, in most of the time, different from his own and attest that his is assimilated? How can one fashion an identity out of the relics of the old and the ingredients of the new? Furthermore, is it possible and manageable for mature individuals, whose identities have been already mapped up by their source cultures? In other words, the third space, of H. Bhabha, is only a mirage on parched sand: a space that only exists in art or in one's imagination. The artist finds refuge in the world he creates for himself and by himself. The hyphenated identity, that Awad **(**2011, p. 41) refers to, is only a myth, because the hyphenated individual becomes either intradividual, or a selfless person: either he belongs to himself and, thus, reverts from society, or he belongs to both cultures, but not to himself. This idea of appartedness or / and in-between-ness is pointed out by Aboulela herself in her interview of 2018. Aboulela seems to tell us that she fails to accommodate with both Arabic dialects of her mother and father: she is neither her mother the Egyptian, nor her father, the Sudanese. She, rather, finds herself at ease in English language. She says:

> *I, however, couldn't and so I often spoke as little as possible. What aggravated the problem also was that I "felt" Sudanese and yet my speech was not reflecting that. Among Egyptians, I felt like a fraud, passing as one of them but being an outsider. I think that this was one of the reasons why I gravitated towards expressing myself in English. It was a third language, refreshingly free from the disloyalty of having to choose between my father and my mother's tongues.* (Gabi-Williams, 2018, p. 2)

A closer reading of Aboulela's *Minaret* reveals that there is a paradox: there are two settings and spaces: one foregrounds the Islamic doctrine, the other legitimizes secularization. The first forbids the second; the second accepts the first but through adaptation and renunciation. How can it stand? Is Najwa really happy? Has she really accepted the first in the second, without renouncing? Agnieszka Stanecka points out such uneasiness and difficulty to decide mainly when the mind is mapped up by her culture. She says:

> *The state of insecurity and unstable emotional and financial situation make Najwa search for deeper and more meaningful things in her life. She recognized her identity as blurred, weak and disturbed. In the world of fast cars, determined, well educated women she felt abandoned and lonely.* (Stanecka, 2018, p. 77)

The event that happened to Najwa in the bus illustrates her uneasiness and difficulty to negotiate her integration:

> *Laughter from behind me... I hear footsteps come up behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, You Muslim scum', then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends – they are laughing. My chest hurts and I wipe my eyes.* (Aboulela, 2005, p. 126)

The critic Nesrin Koç maintains that "[*Minaret*] narrate[s] the painful state of displacement through foregrounding the binary opposition between the East and the West, to expose how postcolonial subjects longing for belonging negotiate British Muslim identity positions." (2014, p. 9)

The subaltern speaks but differently. He uses the same language of the Subject, but with a special discourse, which is, frequently, suggestive and reflects his identity. Leila Aboulela speaks out of the situation she has been made in both spaces, through language suggestiveness. Her novel, *Minaret*, reflects the dichotomy of two differing attitudes, which are the subsequent outcome of culture and lived experiences. Koç states that:

> *While in Sudan, she [Aboulela] was in a privileged position, thus avoided intriguing remarks about her identity; whereas while in the West, she finds herself in the position of the Orient, just because she is wearing the hijab. The centre freezes Aboulela's identity as the oppressed Oriental female; her westernized upbringing, university education in London hardly ever becomes visible to western eyes.* (2014, p. 20)

But what Koç seems to neglect, or, rather, underestimate, is Aboulela's identity in Sudan. Even if she is in her homeland, she is not herself: the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. She is theirs, but not herself. Sudan is a space of security for her, and, thus, she has to restrict herself to the social values

and tradition of society. But being in Europe, Britain, Aboulela has become Leila, herself, without imposed restriction. She only follows personal conviction. In this way, she has, to a certain extent, synthesizes the old and the new. But has she succeeded to be almost free? Or is she more passive and remote due some value conventions imposed by secular society?

Recreating one's homeland in this new geography makes the person face to face with the established conventions and orders of the British culture. Thus, being in the guest land, Aboulela is constrained to engage a relationship, which responds positively to the space she lives in. The migration to the new land is not an identity displacement as far as the moral background of the displaced is preserved. It is, rather, a relocation of one's identity in another space, whose background is different and has some recommendations to follow and conventions to obey. In other words, there could be a clash between both worlds. Two "divided and dislocated" worlds, whose "parts are not continuous or coherent with each other" (Spivak, 1988, p. 276). Speaking about the heroines of Aboulela novels in *The translator* and *Minaret,* Sara A. Al-Asmakh (2009) comments:

> *The heroines of both novels hold to religion in multicultural settings. The heroines are displaced in the land that they migrated to. They feel like strangers in an unfamiliar setting where both of them long for their native land, Sudan. As a result they both try to take advantage of the multicultural setting in Aberdeen and London. They go to the mosque and gather with minorities like them to create a sense of home.* (pp. 1-2)

But this sense of home within the new home-space excludes them more if they don't adapt and rearrange it so that they integrate the conventions of Western society. Though Britain is an open space for all cultures, it, nonetheless, makes of these cultures "Others" within their own space. In the words of Al-Asmakh, there is a perpetual struggle to belong to the majority culture (2009, p. 2).

Creating a home within a home is, somehow, preserving one's origins and race and belief within another home, which is not similar to his, yet, accepts his reclusion in a diasporic world. Christiane Steckenbiller (2013) states that:

> *The dwelling space emerges as a heterogeneous, open, and fluid space that complicates traditional conceptualizations of the home. Home is never ideologically neutral. Closely linked to domesticity and frequently used interchangeably with the private sphere and the household, it is often envisioned as a place of rootedness and safety, the domain of the family and of intimacy.* (pp. 38-39)

Displacement begets either change in the immigrant's identity, by the adoption of some of the values and conventions of the new land, or reclusion

within a free liberal space. People, who come from the ex-colonies, such as Sudan, are under two constraining choices: either they change or they do not. In both cases, they become uneasy and their identity reverberates. Koç points out that: "They [Immigrants] are now trying to define an identity position for themselves as exilic subjects located in the colonial centre." (Koç, 2014, pp. 6-7)

Home creates a sense of belonging; thus, its construction is basically cultural. The latter qualifies one's identity and existence. The sense of home, thus, is more than the external material construction. It is more inner and intrinsic. It is the extension of one's identity. Steckenbiller maintains that:

> *More than a mere physical structure, home is a highly complex concept that can refer to the actual living arrangements, the homeland, the nation, the attachment to a time and place, and the feeling of or longing for "being at home."* (2013, p. 38)

The Veil as a Vehicle of Muslim Culture: Home Belonging

Minaret is a novel of negotiation between two values of two spaces that are different in background and mode of life. Aboulela tries to gauge her origins against a referent, which is liberal and humanistic. Firouz Ameri (2017) maintains that:

> *Significantly, this depiction of the spiritual world of the Muslim characters is offered through the genre of the realist novel, a genre very familiar to western readers. Thus, [the text uses] a familiar vehicle to convey points about Islam that are different to those conveyed by more mainstream representations.* (p. 4)

In the same vein, Susan Taha Al-Karawi (2014) claims that:

> *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. To speak of the veil is to speak of security/insecurity, ambivalence/security, and struggle/comfort.* (p. 256)

In this quote, Al-Karawi argues that the veil (hidjab), in this new space, is no longer imposed on women. The latter are free to act the way they want and according to their own convictions. Najwa's "freedom is associated with doing things that would have been prohibited or at least unacceptable back home" (Fouad Mazloum, 2015, p. 556). Najwa remembers well how it happened in Sudan:

> *It wouldn't be done in Khartoum for a woman to be alone in a restaurant. "I' m in London", I told myself, "I can do what I like, no one can see me".* (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 128)

But though Najwa is able to find a place for herself in the West through her own choices, "these choices are far more complex than the simple privileging of Western over Islamic values" (Fouad Mazloum, 2015, p. 559). Though this patriarchal culture is absent in effect, it is ever present in the mind. Najwa's decision to wear the veil is free and is under no pressure or restriction. Probably, she has assessed what she accumulates in her mind as souvenirs and learning of her homeland and decides, finally, that it is better to be veiled and show her need to integrate the new culture, which does not harm since individuals are all bound by some rules and norms that guarantee a peaceful social life in Britain. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016) states that there is

> *An awareness of the heterogeneous perspectives on the migration-religion nexus, [which] permits a deeper understanding of the multiple ways in which age, generation and life stage influence, and are influenced by, migratory experiences and religious identity and identification alike.* (p. 155)

But this peaceful social life is only a façade, which hides internally a kind of uneasiness and restlessness. Immigrants see themselves as others and a minority seen from afar by the Euro-logo-centric society. This is a kind of antagonism between accepting one's rootedness to religion, which is comfort and safety and becoming a source of subversion by the external world, which looks at them as regressive and even reactionary in a world, which seeks modernity and progress. In this quicker mutating society, authenticity is no longer a return to one's roots, but rather an embracement of this newness and its multiple services. In the words of Taha Al-Karawi (2014):

> *This religiosity cannot be truly liberatory because it is held hostage by what it perceives as a threat: …its conservatism, its rejection of existential freedom and political responsibility, and its unreflective (or desperate) embrace of an idealized past.* (p. 316)

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* crystallizes the existing conflicts and challenges between cultures. Though antagonism is a necessary mechanism of change and/or readjustment that notify social dynamism, it, nonetheless, has some negative drawbacks that lie in the exclusion and reclusion of those who resist to its rules and laws. Ashraf Ibrahim Zidan (2016) points out that:

> Minaret *revolts against the racial stereotypes and the deep-rooted conventions about the concept of hijab and harem. The West thinks that both of these concepts mean invisibility and periphery. However, invisibility does not mean absence, but more freedom: Aboulela tries to correct these misconceptions and stereotypes.* (p. 37)

In the first stance of the novel, Najwa, the protagonist, spent a kind of life different from that of London. In Sudan, she lived in a decent family, who belongs to the noble of Sudan; a family that possesses servants and gardeners. Najwa exclaims:

> *I used to take them for granted. I didn't know a lot about them - our succession of Ethiopian maids, houseboys, our gardener - but I must have been close to them, absorbing their ways, so that now, years later and in another continent, I am one of them.* (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 129)

In the words of Zidan (2016): "[She] lives in a society where class distinction and good breeding are more important than efficiency." (p. 34)

The hijab (Islamic veil) is considered as an essential part of a chaste good woman in Sudan, mainly in noble families. And so, Najwa should show this engagement and applicability of the dress. But the hijab, that one is constrained to wear in Sudan, is different from the one that Najwa has in Britain: the former is obligatory; the latter is voluntary. Taha Al-Karawi (2014) points out that:

> *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.* (p. 256)

Multicultural society and diversity in background could be a social good when there are some humanistic rules and norms that channel them. The culture of minorities should cope and embrace these new norms imposed by the unity of society. But does humanism succeed to link such differing cultures and make them unite? If yes, how can we explain the labels "minority," "otherness," and the like? Behind the façade of unity, there is a kind of antagonism and internal fear to lose one's culture within these humanistic principles. Losing one's culture and failing to be accepted by the dominating culture place the individual in an uncomfortable space: he is made to live under constraints to (re)contruct a third space, another world in this world. Thus, he excludes himself and lives in reclusion. Al-Asmakh (2009) claims that:

> *The cultural aspects that are presented define the characters and play a major role in their identity formation, and most importantly in their identity crises. Culture determines a person's affiliation to a certain geographical place, certain traditions and norms, and as well as determine certain behaviors. Culture proved to be a main component of one's identity and its loss is a reason for one's identity loss.* (p. 4)

All characters of *Minaret* have metamorphosed. They have become what they were not. The displacement and geographical changes have made them look

at the East through the West, mainly in approaching matters of belief, culture, tradition, norms and even ideologies. Even if some of the characters have stuck to some relics of their beliefs, they have done it through a Western eye, as the case of Anwar and Najwa. This double consciousness of being alienated from spaces, the new and the old, enhances characters to look for a niche and third space to secure them, as the case of Najwa, who has chosen the mosque. Najwa's double consciousness is very significant in this quote:

> *I wanted to pray in the same way that I wanted to sprout wings and fly. There was no point in yearning, was there? No point in stretching out. In my own way, in my own style, I was sliding. First my brother, and now it was my turn to come down in the world.* (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 277)

The critic Pankhuri Aggarwal (2018) maintains that

> *In Najwa, Aboulela depicts an independent woman whose faith is not a matter of abstract dogma or empty rituals, but rather a struggle within, between the lures of an individualist consumer culture and the promise of a communitarian religious experience.* (p. 1341)

The critic Nasrin Koç believes that *Minare*t is not an example of failure; it is, rather, an example of integration of the old within the new. She writes:

> *Leila Aboulela's Minaret portrays how faith can be used as a power that eases the trauma of migration, and in fact provides the individual with the sense of belonging and rootedness in the host country, and hence facilitating integration.* (Koç, 2014, p. 14)

But what Koç seems to underestimate, or neglect, is that the characters have been given a restricted choice: either to accept this new space, or to remain an "other". It means to renounce their culture and respond positively to the exigencies of the majority. So, such integration is only a façade, which does, in no way, reflect the insights of these characters. The following quote explains better the uneasiness of Najwa to decide whether to renounce and integrate or to keep safe within religion in this new space:

> *I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or with the one I like best. And I become anxious that someone's feelings will get hurt, or worse take serious offence, as sometimes happens, and stop coming to the mosque.* (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 123)

At the end, Najwa decides to stick to her religion. The mosque of Regent's streets is a lighthouse, which guides her and makes her decide over her life. She says: "We never get lost because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it." (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 319)

The Veil and Selfhood: Veiling vs Invisibility

All the characters of *Minaret* live in perpetual struggle. Such inner/outer conflicting state is very critical since it pushes them to decide upon what to follow and/or how to stick to one's identity and integrate the new world. No doubt, religion is the source of relief, easiness and comfort to characters, mainly Najwa, who suffers integration in the White-white culture.

Being perceived as regressive and hostile for the West, Muslims are seen as others even though they try to improve or "correct" their image for the European. Ashraf Ibrahim Zidan states that:

> *Being an Arab, you are not only deported, but suspected as well. The Arabs should forget their past and look into the future in order to live and coexist in Britain.* (Zidan, 2016, p. 34)

Najwa veiled herself voluntarily. For her, the veil is more than a religious symbol of piety. It is, rather, a means of protection from the negative look of the White-white culture. Veiling liberates her movement, mainly in streets and market places. It is a shield Najwa protects herself with against the modern civilization in Britain. This civilization could be harmful when it comes against her conviction as a Muslim. In other words, the veil secures Najwa's self and makes her comfortable. By wearing it, the external world looks at the dress rather than what is behind the dress — the body.

Najwa's traditional dress is a kind of self autonomy in a world, which is free, yet, conducted by secular rules that could deprive her of being herself. What is very paradoxical with Najwa is her position about the veil. At home when she was in Sudan, the place where the veil is imposed, she did not wear it, but being in Britain she has put it. In other words, she chooses to wear the veil in the absence of constraints. This shows that she wants it in a place, where it is frequently unwanted. In the words of Susan Taha Karawi:

> *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.* (2014, p. 258)

Minaret is a pulpit for Imams (preachers) to give sermons and advice to Muslims in Mosques. In Britain, it has become, mainly for Najwa, a pulpit for freedom and free speech. In the former, she was a listener to what is said and what has to be done. In the latter, she has become an actor, who generates words of humanity and love, mainly with Muslim diaspora: She becomes participant with

them and decides to work with them and for them: she works as a maid in immigrant household.

Najwa is wiser and mature enough compared to her boyfriend Anwar and her daughter Randa. Unlike Anwar and Randa, who are lost within the majority culture losing their own, Najwa has negotiated her state and, to a great extent, reconciled what she is with what she is needed to be. She is her own, yet, she has the sense of belonging to the majority culture. Anwar and Randa are very negative vis-à-vis their culture and have a negative view about the veil. They even claim that the source of regression of the Islamic world is the precepts of Islam. "How can a woman work dressed like that [With black Chador]?", (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 29) she asks Najwa. In the same context, Anwar condemns the veiled women and considers them as regressive and cannot embrace modernity. He says: "We have to go forward not back." (Aboulela, 2005, p. 34) But Najwa looks at the veil otherwise. It is the symbol of one's culture and does not harm its holder:

> *I remembered the girls in Khartoum University wearing hijab and those who covered their hair with White tobes. 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.* (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 134)

The veil of Najwa is very significant. It makes a change in her life:

> *I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained; something was deflated. And was this real me?* (Aboulela, 2005, p. 245)

She goes further wondering:

> *In the full-length mirror I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer.* (Aboulela, 2005 , p. 246)

Najwa's contact and interaction with Muslim women at the Regent's Park Masjid (Mosque) make her re-discover the bounty of Islam. In the words of Abu Sufian: "As time goes, her love and allegiance to Islam increases. She finds peace and solace in her faith in God." (2014, p. 400)

Conclusion

Najwa, the protagonist of Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret*, has clearly become what she was not. She has got a new identity, which is more inner, very

spiritual and more transcendental. Whether demonized or marginalized by the Euro-centric majority in Britain, she manages to be herself trying to find out a way to her life, in the way she understands it. Aboulela starts her novel by "*Bism Allah Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem" (In The Name of Allah, The Most Gracious and The Most Merciful)*. In the name of Allah she starts her story, and by confining herself to God, through pilgrimage to Mekka (Hadj), she ends it. Though her decision to go to Hadj seems, somehow, logical in the sense that she wants to cleanse the sins, she committed when experimenting dynamic life in Sudan and Britain, it seems that she has withdrawn from the feast of life and does no longer need to challenge the logocentrism of her new geography. What is also paradoxical is that she used to be served by Ethiopian in Sudan; now in Britain, she has become a house maid serving others: she serves the minority to which she belongs. Does this mean that she has succeeded to integrate the British society?

Remembrance of her father's home, Sudan, is a kind of reconsideration to her new home. The new can never displace the old: the skies do not change the soul. Her very last lines of the novel suggestively metaphorize the opening lines of the novel.

The novel explores spaces, moments and thoughts of minority characters. It also shows Najwa's commitment to her religion within a secular society, whose morality is moneytheistic backed up with rules and conventions, rather than faith and spirituality.

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