

Locating The Female Subject in British Muslim Fiction: A Reading of Leila Aboulela's 'Minaret'

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Abstract: Leila Aboulela writes faith driven fiction and focuses on British Muslim identity. The present paper focuses on the position of females in the Muslim world in the light of Islam in reference to the novel 'Minaret'. Islam is considered as a strict religion; especially for its female followers, but that is one side of the argument. In this paper, 'Minaret' by the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela has been taken up for discussion. The paper aims to discuss post colonialism as a condition affecting the lives of displaced immigrants as reflected in the character of Najwa, the female protagonist in the novel. Post-colonial criticism, which revolves around identity negotiation, diaspora and migration, has been discussed in 'Minaret'. Leila has made a daring effort to relate these with a single woman character. 'Minaret is a challenging novel which portrays how religious faith can be used as a power that eases the trauma of migration. It makes a significant contribution to how British Muslim identities are represented and how religion acts as an alternative way of achieving belonging in exile. For Aboulela, literature has a sacred status for its potentiality to create awareness of Islam and to strengthen religious identity. Aboulela's 'Minaret' is of paramount importance if considered in the context of reclaiming religious identity, which is liberated from culturally enacted practices of the country of origin.

Key Words: Muslim identity, female subject, Muslim diaspora

1. INTRODUCTION

Islam today is a fourteen hundred and thirty nine years old religion and has the second largest number of followers in the world. By far the biggest diaspora in the world are also Muslims: about 300 million[1]. The figure is quite alarming and raises some relevant questions as why Muslims contribute to the largest diaspora in the world and why 300 million is an alarming figure. The social situation and behavior of the Muslims, to some extent, is responsible for this. Attitudes, hatred, disdain or indifference to the Muslim community and discrimination has made them the world's largest diaspora community. Another thing which is a matter of concern is the position of Muslim women. The works of Muslim diaspora can very well be understood in the light of Islam. The depiction of female subjects by female Muslim authors can be an effective way to highlight the position of women in the Muslim world. Studying Muslim diaspora writers for research is gaining momentum these days because Muslims as characters, and to an even greater extent as writers, did not appear much in English literature. While the first successful Muslim authors in diaspora were men like Salman Rushdie and Khalid Houssini, the appearance of Muslim female

writers can be traced back to late twentieth century. To name a few they are Taslima Nasreen, Fadia Faqir, Kamila Shamsie and of course Leila Aboulela. These are female writers of Muslim ancestry who write in English irrespective of their geographical locations. The present paper addresses only one of them.

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer, who was born in Egypt and writes in England. She is a devout Muslim. Aboulela offers a very different portrayal of Muslim women in her works. Her women characters can very well be studied in the light of Islam and what is permissible for a woman as a follower of Islam. This paper is limited to only one of her novels and the themes covered in it. In the depiction of female characters, Aboulela throws light on five types of female behavior--- disassociation, withdrawal, linkage, co-option and creation of parallel structures. The identity issue of the Muslim female which she depicts comprises religious identity, personal identity, and national identity. Disassociation is lack of interaction with the other people of the community as Islam doesn't permit women to mingle much. Withdrawal refers again to lack of interaction not only among the community but with the host country, whereas linkage is actually those attempts by Muslim women to connect themselves with the people of their religion as well as their country irrespective of their religion. Then co-option is there when women coming out of their identity crises influence the community by standing against all the odds. Finally creation of parallel structures happens when institutions such as schools, banks, even houses of worship stand in favour of women[3].

Her novel 'Minaret', published in 2004, is a story of a Sudanese woman Najwa who leads a privileged life in Khartoum until she is forced by a military coup to flee to London with her mother and twin brother. In Khartoum she lives a lavish life, studies at university, wears western clothes, "In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty percent of students were girls-----that should make me feel good about myself"[2].

Soon orphaned, and with her brother sent to jail on a drug charge, her journey from pride to humility starts, she begins working as a maid in a flat. "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room for me to move.... Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become....[1].

Then Najwa meets Tamar who is the younger brother of her employer. They find a common faith, bond and fall in love. The novel depicts her transition from a westernized teen in Sudan to a dedicated Muslim and touches all the major themes of diaspora writing. Like her heroine, Aboulela spent her childhood in Khartoum before leaving for Britain for pursuing her Ph.D. The novel in this context also has an autobiographical element. To quote the words of Aboulela:

“I can carry (religion) with me wherever I go, whereas other things can easily be taken away.”

For Aboulela, a personal religious identity provides more stability than national identity. She aims to make Islam and the female in Islam more familiar to the reader. Najwa in the novel becomes deeply religious as Aboulela in her life. In one of her interviews to Anita Sethi, she herself commented: “It is my desire to live in Britain and become a part of the UK literary scene while at the same time practicing my faith and reflecting it in my writings”[4].

In another candid chat with Vettath, she repeats that what she regarded as the misrepresentation of Islam in the western media fuelled her desire to write works of fiction with a Muslim vision and adds, “My ambition is to put practicing Muslims in English literary fiction, to write novels that are infused with Muslim aesthetics in the same way that many of the western classics were formed by a Christian ethos”(n.p).

'Minaret' is a novel that also highlights probably for the first time how clothing of a Muslim female has an impact on her identity. Najwa's first relationship with Anwar ended because she decides to wear hijab and Anwar always has a disdain for the faith of hijab wearing females. But Najwa, irrespective of her breakup with Anwar, turns to hijab wearing and mosque gathering and rediscovers her faith in Islam. Her faith provides her solace and her meetings with a group of women at Regent Park mosque gives her the confidence to start afresh. After wearing hijab, her first reaction is, “I wrapped the tobe [hijab] around me and covered my hair. 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 offer” (102) [2].

She is always haunted by the idea that someone will discover her former identity which the hijab now serves to hide. Thus religion becomes her rescue in an alien land. Hence Aboulela makes a brilliant attempt in telling the world that wearing hijab is not something to be wrongly understood. Najwa is faced with a dilemma regarding hijab but when she finally decides to wear it, her identity crisis is somewhat solved as she says, “It is as if the hijab is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed” (186) [2].

Her former identity is of a modern female who knows very little of her country Khartoum. Though she is a Muslim, she has been brought up to follow the Islamic practices as a mere formality

which means her religious identity is vague and does not hold much value to her in her life at Khartoum. At the end she leaves for pilgrimage to Mecca, leaving everything behind. The religious space gives her a satisfaction as she says, “I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room...”(74-75).

Leila Aboulela is a typical feminist writer. Her novels truly adhere to the temperament of the Muslim women among whom she lived. Fraser Cameron suggests the same view that among young Muslims in Europe, identification with Islam may be felt more strongly than identification with a particular ethnic heritage.⁵ Through Najwa, Aboulela wants to convey that Muslim women may maintain their religious identity over national identity and should not feel alienated. As Najwa says to Tamar, “I feel that I am Sudanese, but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed, and now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim” (110) [2].

Shahnaz Khan, a prominent feminist, speaks of fluid identity of the Muslim diaspora. According to her, a fluid identity is more relevant for their settlement in their diasporic life.[6] Najwa tries to adapt herself to her changed life but does not succeed fully because of her religious setting. This type of situation is often seen with Muslim women as even after following their faith strictly, they somehow live an obscure life. Certainly identity of female Muslims has a room for negotiation, interpretation and transformation. This fluid identity is more relevant during the earlier stages of their settlement in the diaspora.

Najwa is a character who gets hardened to all the bitter facts and learns to live with them. This sense of one life ending and another commencing is an impelling factor in the works of Aboulela. Her depiction of Najwa is unique in British fiction since she writes with a “more authentic Muslim voice” (Majed 2) [7]. As Ameri comments, “Aboulela's characters do not feel the need to assimilate because, given their spiritual identity, home is where the faith is” (114), and faith is found in Muslim circles. Aboulela is a mature writer who, through her writings and her female characters, attempts to shatter the misconceptions about Islam as a religion particularly in Europe. Contrary to the perception that Islam is strict for its women and is against the European way of life, Aboulela describes practicing Islam as a tool of women empowerment. All that women have to do is to redefine and reposition the religion and involve it in their lives and struggles as Najwa does in the novel and she did in her life.

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