

Analyzing Portrayal of Orthodox Muslim Women in Leila Aboulela's Minaret

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: May 14, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: August 30, 2021</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords : Muslim female, Hijab, Stereotypes, Islamophobia, the Subaltern, Orientalism</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5787460</p>	<p><i>The study aims to explore as to how the portrayal of orthodox Muslim women was challenged in their image in Minaret (2005) by a diasporic Muslim female novelist Leila Aboulela. The novel explores the religious journey of the protagonist in the United Kingdom. Western stereotypical discourses present Muslims and Eastern people as uncivilized, inferior, barbaric, backward, exotic, outfitted, oppressive and violent. Consequently, the perceived image of a typical Muslim female figure is a distorted one and is widely accepted throughout the [so-called] developed world. The analysis of the selected text was done through Qualitative Content Analysis. Said (1978) helped in understanding the concept of the stereotypical and biased representation of Muslim world as presented by the West. This stereotypical representation has affected the lives of Eastern people since the time of colonialization to the present day, e.g., Islamophobia, racial discrimination, etc. Spivak's (2003) discourse also helped to understand the position of the subaltern, who are always represented by the dominant group of community, either as rebellious or victims and are always denied their choices and rights. It is important for the subaltern to raise a voice and should be heard. The work of Aboulela has endeavored to overthrow the stereotypes that have surrounded the lives of Muslims especially the Muslim females. The author has portrayed Islam as a source of inspiration to help and empower her protagonist.</i></p>

Introduction

This study examines the portrayal of orthodox Muslim women in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. Orthodox is a person who believes in the traditional practices of a religion. Shabir (2017) describes Orthodox Islam as the act of embracing and following five pillars of Islam, i.e., *Shahada*, *Salat*, Ramadan, *Zakat* and Hajj along the six major beliefs, i.e., belief in oneness of Allah, Angles, Holy Scriptures, Prophets, in day of Judgment, and belief in Hereafter Life. These major beliefs are accepted and followed by people of all sects in Islam. Muslims construct their faith and guidance in light of the Quran and the Sunnah. The life and actions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the authentic source of guidance for Muslims because Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the first role model of Islam and interpreter of the Quran. A person having his/her firm belief in the traditional instructions and practices of Islam and seeks guidance from the Holy Quran and authentic Hadith is an orthodox Muslim.

The picture of East was differently portrayed in European traditional and systematic academic discourses. They distorted the true picture of East in their works for various reasons. West stereotypically presented Muslims uncivilized, inferior, barbaric, backward, exotic, outfitted, oppressive, and violent. Such hostile views can be inferred from the most popular sentence "Dogs and Indians Not allowed" was the signboard of many clubs and gyms during the British rule in India. The British colonizer considered themselves superior and the fear of mixing compelled them to prohibit Natives because they were inferior and savages in their eyes. These distorted and stereotypic presentations served imperialist in justifying their subjugation of Eastern countries. These phenomena expanded and shifted from Europe to America. America after World War II participated in the scene and carried on the same agenda but with different means and presentations. Muslims were portrayed extremists, terrorists and misogynists who spreads terrorism and subjugates women, "*Western image of Muslims is of backward, barbaric and violent nation directly and this verifies the oppression of Muslim women indirectly*" (Khan & Zahra, 2016, p. 41). Muslim immigrants, who live in Europe, America or other Western countries confronted many problems due to their distorted portrayal by Western writers and media. They were easily targeted and humiliated because of their faith, identity and race.

After the incident of 9/11, the London bombing (7/7), the Bali bombing, the Paris attacks and other traumatic incidents made the situation of immigrants miserable. The distorted and stereotypical image of Muslims turned into Islamophobia and terrorism. Westerns possess dual standards, as Lone (2019) pointed out that "*A Christian nun wearing a veil is seen as an image of sincere religiosity, purity and peace whereas Muslim women wearing*

a veil is to be seen as a symbol of the oppression of women and think that she might be supporting the Islamic terrorist organizations” (p.532). These misrepresentations and preconceptions are political stances for dominancy and are perceived by public in a negative way that resulted in creating numerous problems for ordinary immigrants.

Kassir (2016) gave the example of Paris attacks and 9/11 incidents, which kept immigrants and refugees as suspects who have nothing to do with such things. The novel under study also portrayed and evaluated the position of hijab and its ordinary wearer. The protagonist of the selected novel chooses to wear hijab, pray and observed fast in the month of Ramadan. She has confronted different situations and challenges due to her decisions of wearing hijab or other practices of Islam because of the attached stereotypes with it. Leila Aboulela's character is an ordinary Muslim women who struggles in her life and she is not exotic or alien. The protagonist has developed a strong bond with her Creator and wearing a Hijab is a part of that bond. Najwa considers it as an important component of modesty, faith and empowerment. This investigation highlights the true image of a hijab wearer and its importance in faith. The views of different authors have been analyzed in details which highlighted the issues created through stereotyping Muslims and especially Muslim women.

Leila Aboulela

Leila Aboulela Sudanese is one of the prominent and reputable literary figures of the present era. Aboulela wrote many fiction works from 1999 till present day that earned her a great reputation worldwide. Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Egypt and grown up in Khartoum, Sudan. She moved from place to place in different time periods and is currently living in Scotland. Aboulela is a practicing Muslim, which has a greater influence on her works.

If we briefly analyze her works, we would find quest for faith, modesty and building a connection with God in her characters. *Minaret* (2005) is a story of young women Najwa, who got transformed from so called Muslim to a devotee Muslim. The tough situations of her life turned her into following Islamic practices, considering it as a tool of empowerment. Leila Aboulela in her literary career won numerous literary awards. Her works are acclaimed worldwide for her style of writings and themes. She won Caine prize for African writing and Saltire society Scottish First Book of the year award in 2000 and was shortlisted for many awards. She often refers to her characters as ordinary people who tries to follow their faith. She depicts characters of faith and their sentiments, feelings and emotions, towards their faith and Creator. She further stated to British Council that *“I am interested in going deep, not just looking at Muslim as a cultural or political identity but something close to the Centre, something that transcends but doesn't deny gender, nationality, class and race. I write fiction that reflects Islamic logic; fictional worlds where cause and effect are governed by Muslim rationale”* (British Council, 2020). Leila in her works has depicted Muslims who have faith and that faith is something personal which has nothing to do with outside world.

Minaret

Minaret (2005) is the second novel by Leila Aboulela which was well received worldwide. *Minaret* was long listed for the Orange Prize for fiction in 2006. It is a story of a young Muslim woman Najwa, who goes through a series of experiences in the course of the novel, which causes her a great tragedy by losing the life full of peace and comfort and faced hardship of life which she never thought of. In her early life, she was a Muslim by name but later on in London, we found her a devotee Muslim. *Minaret* was reviewed by Image in these words, *“Written with sensitivity and grace... a gripping story of one woman's spiritual awakening”*.

The story of *Minaret* spans in time and place, the setting of the story is Khartoum and London. The book has six sections and time changes in every section from 1984 to 2004. The author depicted the impact of colonization and incidents like 9/11 in each period. For instance, in Khartoum, Najwa is obsessed with Western ways of life and in London she faced problems due to exercising Islam. Aboulela has depicted Najwa as an ordinary Muslim woman, who struggles for a better life along with following her faith. Her faith in God and religion is the only way to keep her hopeful, stable and firm. Sufian (2014), wrote about the religious development of Najwa in these words, *“She finds peace and solace in her faith in God”* (p. 400). Due to 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, the negative image of Muslims are presented to the world. Mazloum (2015) argued that wearing veil or hijab is assumed to be violent and oppression of women in Western view but it is an authenticity of Muslim culture. *“Aboulela attempts to show veiled women, like herself and Najwa, enjoying a different kind of empowerment. This is part of her project to represent an alternative meaning to Western stereotyping of Muslim women”* (p. 557).

Purpose of the Study

Colonization and terrorism have changed the reception of Muslims throughout the world. Muslims are received and depicted worldwide with their stereotypical and distorted image presented by Westerners through their discourses and mass media. It is the main issue confronted by Muslims and especially immigrant Muslims who are living in West. Muslim scholars and authors have tried to portray a positive image of Muslim to the world. The portrayal became a complex phenomenon as it varies from author to author. They are trying to portray Muslims in different ways, to depict them normal and ordinary humans like the rest of the inhabitants in

the world. The selected novel, depicted an ordinary woman wearing hijab and following her faith traditionally. The Portrayal of orthodox Muslim woman is analyzed with the concept of Orientalism and Subalternity. The study explores the portrayal of a flexible female Muslim characters, who transforms into a devote Muslim or empowered by her decision. Furthermore, the present study is an effort to explore the grounds on which the protagonist of the selected novel is presented and examined through the light of Orientalism and Subalternity in Postcolonial theory, keeping in view, the problems of otherness and marginalization faced and overcome by them.

Objectives of the study

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyze portrayal of protagonist in *Minaret*
2. To analyze and explore the motive of the author by presenting orthodox Muslim women
3. To highlight the predicament of Najwa in *Minaret*

Literature Review

Post-colonial theory wraps a great numbers of issues within it. Post-colonial writers and critics throughout the globe wrote and argued in their own perspectives. Post-colonial writers consider colonization as an extraburden on colonizer which marginalized, buried and affected the culture of indigenous people. Nagarajan (2006) stated that the colonizer considered themselves as superior, civilized and advanced, on other hand considered the indigenous uncivilized, inferior, violent, backward and lacking morals. Colonizer misrepresented the Natives to the world to gain their ideological and material advantages. Post-colonial discourse aims to challenge the established Western standards and ways. In Post-colonial view, imperialist power and culture have dominated everything in their grasp around the globe but the recent criticism on shifted the focus of the 'first world' discourse to 'third world' discourses (Carter, 2006). The term 'Subalternity' according to Spivak (2003) depicts the hypocritical nature of Imperial power. The biased view of Western scholars based on their set values about Islam were criticized by Said (1978), "*The history of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice in the West, which is immediately reflected in the history of orientalism... the struggle between the Arabs and Israeli Zionism... the almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam*" (pp. 26-27).

Western scholar perceived Islamic feminism in two different ways. They either reject it because of attaching a religious male dominant adjective with a liberal movement and secondly for them it is a struggle for a liberal interpretation of religion (Islam). On the other hand, Muslim feminist feel uncomfortable with association of feminism or Islamic feminism with their names. Hesova argued that this uncomfortableness with Islamic feminism is due to the wrong perception of the notion both by religious and secular feminists. Islamic feminism has room for both aspects: religious and secularity. Secular feminism work on the level of social, political and professional equality for both gender in public sphere while Islamic feminism carry it a step ahead. Islamic feminists struggled for social, political and professional equality but along with religious equality for both genders (Hesová, 2019). The mass media plays an important role in development and remolding of an individual thinking, behaviors, conceptions and choices propagating racialized and prejudiced views of Western media especially the depiction of Muslim women were depicted prejudicially while neglected to stress on the importance of Islamic values and veil in a Muslim woman's life. Westerners have the license to imagine and call Muslim barbaric, backward, violent and oppressors of women due to some historical events that happened in the world which have nothing to do with Islam. The presumption of veil as a sign of oppression is to sustain Western dominance in the world. Muslim women living in West confronts discrimination because they are perceived negatively due to Western media. Westerners linked hijab with subjugation and terrorism while it means something else in Muslim world (Khan & Zahra, 2016). Western masses feel uncomfortable in the presence of Arabs or Muslims because of the deformed image and overgeneralization of them by Western media. These depiction and uncomfortableness got more enhancement due to ongoing terrorism throughout the world (Ridouani, 2011). Hunter (2013) argued that Aboulela portrayed characters, who were empowered by their faith with a slight contradiction. Her male characters are superior in comparison to female characters regarding faith. Aboulela represented her characters in response to misconceptions and misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam in the West. Islam and Muslims are associated with violence, oppression, backwardness and extremism. These presumptions and stereotyping have generated many problems for Muslim immigrants living in the West. The cultural or Islamic dress code are linked with violence and terrorism. Majority of the immigrants are assimilated with mainstream culture but those who cling with their faith or culture are discriminated. The formation of identity by using nostalgia happen when characters deny assimilation with Western culture and forge their Islamic identity by using past memories as a strategy. Muslim females were thrice marginalized (as African, Muslim & female) in a cross culture society. They confronted Orientalist and Islamist dominant discourses and both of the discourses have marginalized them in certain ways (Steiner, 2016). Muslim Women, confronted worse situations being immigrant and ordinary women. These displaced female protagonists have transformed their characters and found a place for themselves through the art of knowing.

Their displaced status gave them the opportunities to display the stereotypical views enacted upon them by Western and Islamic patriarchal discourses (Mazloun, 2015). Edwin (2008) argued that Islam or Islamic practices are not a hindrance in the ways of Muslim women bright future. She supported the hijab and challenged the 'othering' of Islam and Muslim women by certain writers in Africa. Several African feminist thinkers asserted that Islam is a barrier in way of women leadership and they followed Islam without their will. She responded to these assertions that Muslim women willingly practice Islam (especially hijab) which makes them capable of embodying leadership, education, independence and consequently a reaffirmation of their religious identity.

Bigotry and prejudice can be found in each community resultantly throwing the females to loneliness (Majid, 2015). Lone (2019) explored the perception of veil or hijab on two grounds, the Western and the eastern (Islam). The former links it with women's oppression, enslavement and subjugation while the later considers it women's modesty, protection and liberation. Hijab has become a complex object for debates and discussions in this era of modernization. There are many people around the world, who considered hijab as a hindrance and a tool of oppression in the lives of women (Gailani, 2019)

Methodology

The present study was qualitative in nature that included the understanding of cultural, economic, social and religious experiences of the characters in the chosen literary works. This approach of the study was considered to be the authentic method by researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The method of content analysis was applied to the text (White & Marsh, 2006) as a subjective method of evaluation which analyzed the themes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This process of qualitative content analysis provided flexibility in achieving the research objectives by analyzing the data (Bryman, 2016). The current analysis of the selected text was descriptive, text based and qualitative in nature. The aim of this study was to analyze the portrayal of Najwa as an orthodox Muslim Woman. Najwa being an orthodox Muslim woman had faced many challenges and overcame those challenges as an individual. Aboulela depicted Najwa as an ordinary individual who believed in Islam that was entirely different to the people of West as they were living with them in non-Muslim country and used to follow their Islamic doctrines. Their differences do not make them oppressed, terrorist or conservative. But in reality, as a Muslim, Najwa had strived to portray that religion as a path which empowers Muslims. Especially, Islam is perceived as a demoralizing force but in the selected novel it rather uplifts her moral standards. It is depicted that not only the moral standards are uplifted but it also empowers her socially and religiously as an individual. The content analysis was adopted by the researcher for the understanding and analysis of portraying the orthodox Muslim woman in the context of postcolonial theory (Kumar, 2011). The method of interpretation was primarily confined to the text of selected novel. The researchers analyzed and interpreted the dialogues of the protagonist as a reaction towards the stereotypical representation of Muslim women in the West. For the comprehensive interpretation and analysis of the selected text, postcolonial theory provided a framework to the study. The study of post-colonialism deals with imperialism, history of representation, attitude towards colonized and colonial ideas that are collected in the selected literary text. This research was designed primarily as analytical, that the analysis of the content in the selected novel produced values for analyzing the concept intricate to this research. Lastly, the analysis and interpretation has been indorsed with the help of previous studies in the relevant field.

Analysis

Minaret (2005) portrays the life and challenges faced by Muslim woman. The story revolves around the transformation of the protagonist Najwa from elite secular girl to modest women. The narrator of the story describes how a young girl transforms to a modest, dignified and mature women to whom Islam is the source of peace and solace. The first part of the novel depicts the life of Najwa at Khartoum in 1984-5. Najwa and her family frequently visits London for holidays and spent most of their leisure time in parties and gathering with their peers in American clubs at Khartoum. Omer the twin brother of Najwa, who becomes the victim of drugs in London and is imprisoned because of stabbing someone connected with drugs affair. During their time at Khartoum, people of their town were quite religious and had strong belief in religious practices. Najwa's family too participated to some extent, they too observed Fast but for weight lost, they did charity, prayed often and never wore hijab. Due to her life style, she became more and more alienated towards her culture and religion Islam. She found comfort in wearing miniskirts and was irritated by her servants waking up early in the morning for prayer though they used to be awoken as coming from late night parties. Unexpectedly, her father was imprisoned in money trail and her family was forced to live in exile in England.

Part two of the novel presents the alone and poor life of Najwa, working as a house maid in England in 2003. Najwa's relation with her employer Lamya's brother Tamer attracts the readers interest. Following of religious practices became the main reason of their relationship as both Najwa and Tamer were true devotees of Islam at that time. As time passes their relation came to the end as Tamer's family was not happy on their relationship. Part three of the novel depicted the life and relation of Najwa with Anwar in London back in 1989.

Their relation begun with the offer of meting in condolence letter of Najwa's mother. This time they did things that they never did in Khartoum (p.123), their relation went deeper and they for the first time had sexual intercourse. After sexual intercourse, Najwa felt guilt and Anwar delivered a lecture and considered her guilt as pointless by stating "Like every other Arab girl, you (Najwa) have been brainwashed about the importance of virginity" (p.175). Not to speak of sharing the same nation, identity discourse like gender and class plays a vital role in determining one's identity and their values. Najwa on one side having Western education found solace in traditional conservative norms and values while Anwar belief in Western liberal values.

Part four of the novel opens with celebration of Eid in Mosque in the year 2003-4. Najwa in this part is shown as self-confident being a firm believer of Islamic values. During this time, Najwa's relation with Tamer went deeper and they believed that their spiritual relation cannot be lost as they can sense "the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it" (p.208). Their pious dreams of being together has a harsh end by Lamya's slap on Najwa's face because they were caught while kissing. At this point, Najwa quits her job and left her lover behind. Part five is quite interesting as the protagonist of the novel realizes her abusive relation with Anwar and turning to be the modest Muslim women, praying regularly, reciting Quran and having strong bond of belief in Allah. The final section of novel, portrays her stronger relation with Allah and her longing for Tamer's love. She usually prays for Tamer's love but her compulsion made her accept the offered money in return of leaving Tamer. In the closing section of the novel, Najwa is quite ill and plans for the pilgrimage of Hajj on that money.

Challenging the Stereotypical Representation of Muslims by West in *Minaret*

The raise of *Minaret* is considered to be the turning point in representation of Muslim, concerning the stereotypical and prejudiced views about Muslims by Western fiction and other literary and non-literary discourses. In some ways, the purpose of Aboulela's writing is to provide voice to those Muslims, especially Muslim women, who were depicted prejudicially and stereotypically in Western fictional and non-fictional writings and dialogues. Interestingly, Aboulela is an educated writer, who likes wearing hijab which is a practical example of negating the ideology of oppression of women in Islam. Unlike other Muslim writes, she tried to "write from inside the experience of growing up and living with a network of customs and beliefs" (Chamber, 2009). Writing in the perspective of challenging stereotypes, she has depicted a new portrayal of Muslim women and Islam. Once the portrayal is changed the ideologies and concept regarding Muslim women and Islam will do the same because her female characters catch solace and peace in following the traditional practices of Islam.

Wearing hijab is linked with the conservatism of Islam, Aboulela, for Islam never rejected the Western ideologies. Reasonably, she in her works tried to bridge the distances between East and West. Unlike other Eastern or Western writers, she never looked at both the cultures from outside; rather she gave the impression of being in both the cultures at the same time. She stated that "I am considerably westernized (but) I am in this religion. It is in me" (Aboulela, 2007). As a result, the main theme of all of her works is to whitewash all the misunderstanding, stereotypical and prejudicial views hold by westerners about the Muslims, especially Muslim women wearing hijab. Hijab is the most conspicuous issue faced by Muslim women around the world. Aboulela on issue of hijab argued that "The problem with hostility to the hijab is that Muslims can't help but feel attacked. But I also think European Muslims don't understand why there is criticism of the hijab – they haven't listened or read enough" (Claire, 2010, p.96). It is important for both East and West should to study or listen enough for participating in the dialogue of discussing the two opposite cultures, religions and politics. The act of bridging the gap between East and West provided voice to the subjugated Muslims especially, those women who wear hijabs as something inherited from their culture, religion and costumes. Aboulela's literary works are entirely depending on the understanding of other's culture rather than replacing or negating. She thinks, Muslim women in West will never be forced to confiscate hijab, once the reason behind wearing it is understood by western culture. We can see some of her character wearing hijab in West is not neglected nor subjugated. The relation of Rae and Sammar in *The Translator* is an epitome of it. Conspicuously, they share different religion and cultures but their understanding of each other's culture and tradition turned into a very loyal relationship. The portrayal of their relation symbolizes the likelihood of coordinating and building the association between west and Islam without replacing or changing any practices (Hassan, 2008). The replacement of understanding by misunderstanding can pave way for a lasting solution of the problems between East and West. Through, her writing she succeeded in portraying the modified picture of Muslim and Islam with new perspective.

Minaret is a novel in which the depiction of Islam and Muslim women is actually the reaction to that of colonial discourses (Ahmed, 1992). Colonial discourses allege Islam for the oppression of women, considers Islam as inferior and backward and harshly criticize Hijab. The interest of West in Muslim women shows their hatred and hostility towards Islam. The hostility towards Islam was the main motif of colonial discourse that made them think to save women from Muslim patriarchal violence. The obsession of colonial discourse with harem, polygamy, excision and Hijab resulted in considering Muslim women as symbols of a religion that were

once believed to be violent, exotic and inferior (Amireh, 1997). This point towards the existing stereotypical and colonial pictures of Muslim women in West portrayed by the western media, fictional and fictional writers, challenging the colonial perspective in particular and western in general adds more to the importance and fame of Aboulela's literary works.

For purpose of challenging the presented stereotypical pictures of Muslim women and Islam, Aboulela depicts modern world as instable, confused and transformed in which holding the stable status is like pie in the sky. In *Minaret* (2005), the characters are dissipated. In a coupe, Najwa, as an aristocrat in Sudan became a maidservant in London. London, then is no more a place for rich on the other hand Sudan for poor only. In conservative Islamic country Sudan, Najwa is westernized and in secular and liberal country like England she is a conservative Muslim. In London, it quite shocking be a conservative and falling in love with the person sharing conservatively adds more to it, and it is depicted by Aboulela in the relation of Najwa and Tamer, both at the same time were true devotee and conservative Muslims (p. 198). It can be inferred that the portrayal of instability in modern world is indispensable for the understanding of stereotypical and prejudiced concepts of colonialism and present day western society. The above discussion signifies globalization of Islam, that holds back people of different races in a single circle that provides the feelings oneness in a different and alien place.

Najwa's Transformation from Liberal to a Devotee

Najwa being daughter of privileged parents and a student in Khartoum University had enjoyed a good life. In her earlier life, we see her prosperous, wealthy and liberal but after her middle age we see her work as a maid and a devotee person. Why Aboulela presented Najwa both as liberal and devotee? Western stereotypically associate Muslim women and especially those who wear hijab with oppression. And if hijab wearer considers it her personal choice or duty they either neglect her or associate her with backwardness or terrorism. Aboulela wrote a counter alternative against such misconceptions. She provided for the reader to know and understand the journey of female Muslim devotee protagonist.

Firstly, Aboulela depicted Najwa as a liberal person to show to the readers that she was brought up in liberal home where they do not care about praying or other religious practices. "*We heard the dawn azan as we turned into our house. ... I could hear another mosque echoing the words ... They were getting ready to pray. I was wide awake and I didn't* (pp. 31-32). Najwa and her brother was returning from a late night party at the time of dawn prayer their servants get ready for prayer but they do not offer the prayer. Najwa feel something inside her while she was hearing the azan but could not understand or comprehend. There is no external pressure on her to pray or dress traditionally. She dresses like Westerners, listen to Western music and goes for parties in clubs. Najwa and her brother Omar loved Western way of life and were very much affected by it. Omar often wished to move to Britain and also wished "*Omar believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame they left*" (pp. 11-12). They both love liberal life style, listen Western music and dress like Westerners. In Sudan people who follow Islam or their tradition never go to clubs or pools. The elite class or highly liberal people use to go for parties in clubs or go for swimming in pools. "*I dived into the pool and the January water was a shock. ... Some foreigners were on deckchairs sunbathing, slathered in Ambre Solaire reading Sidney Sheldon, but I had the whole of the pool to myself*" (p.40). It illustrates that she was living her life with full freedom. She was living her life according to her choices and decisions.

Najwa has no restriction from her parent's side. She was allowed to study, to wear according to her well and to enjoy herself. She did not use to wear traditional dress like some girls in university. "*With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses*" (p. 14). She used to wear skirts which is western dress code and never wore tobés or hijab like other girls in university. "*I wore my denim skirt that evening. It was my favourite, tight and longish, with a slit at the back... I wore my red short-sleeved blouse with little blue flowers on the collar*" (p. 42). "*Girls like me who didn't wear tobés or hijab weren't praying...*" (p. 43).

She liked and followed the Western way of life. In university, many students both male and female offered their prayers but Najwa did not offer any. The effects of westernization were driving her away from her religion, culture and tradition. She was not just using to dress like Western but also visits clubs. "*The party at the American club was in full swing when Omar and I arrived*" (p. 23). Omar and Najwa both frequently used to go to clubs and enjoying themselves it was their way of living. We in the entire story see her free from any external pressure whatever she is doing is doing by herself. Aboulela depicted her a fully free person that she is controlling her life and whatever comes in her life is her choice.

Secondly, her fate provided her the opportunity to live among the most secular and liberal nation of the world; the British nation. When her father was imprisoned she flew to London with the rest of the family. While living in London she gradually realized the value of her own culture, tradition and religion. As in London, she got attached with Anwar, a university friend and meeting frequently. She was wondering about her intimate relationship with Anwar that after knowing it Khartoum society would be shocked and in London no one care. "*And now nothing, no one. This empty space is called freedom*" (p. 175). Here the importance of family, culture, tradition and religion is depicted that how much it means to Eastern societies. As human beings, when

we see things from far away, it seems great and fascinated but once we enter to it all the fascination ends. And the reason behind it is that we are not used to it because we believed in something different.

Najwa in London was experiencing everything by herself, there was no one to stop her. She did everything to please herself but in the end of the day, she always felt emptiness that something is missing. Whenever, she encountered something religious always felt something inside: *"What do we know? We don't pray. Sometimes I was struck with guilt"* (p. 29).

"The sound of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me, it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place" (p. 31).

She was living a liberal life in Khartoum, whenever encounter something religious, it compels her to think but she was unable to understand it. She has the likeness and feelings for her religious values but was weak to grasp its' meanings. London's liberal environment provided her the opportunity and platform to understand her way of life according to her religious, culture and traditional norms.

Religion influences culture and tradition, culture and tradition influences religion. Some traditions are often Islamized by the people of different locale (Lukens-Bull, 1999). The protagonist, Najwa was with Anwar in his flat and it was the month of Ramadan. She was unaware of it and when she listened that it is the month of Ramadan she got upset. Although, she did not observe fast or observe fast to lose weight but it still was important for her because she perceived Ramadan traditionally. *"He smiled, its' Ramadanbreakfast, you heathens! I caught my breath. Oh no! ... its' important. Its' Ramadan. I should know about it. It shouldn't happen without me knowing"* (p. 230). Anwar and his friends smiled at her when she was explaining to them that it is a part of our religion. She slowly and gradually was coming towards her religion. It was the time she needed someone to guide her. She was unfamiliar with her religious doctrines and Wafa came in her life as a teacher. Wafa, a woman who had washed her mother in her funeral. She told Najwa to pray for her mother and taught her some prayer. the prayer influenced her and sparked her thinking about Islam, *"I became aware of that hollow place. Perhaps that was where the longing for God was supposed to come from and I didn't have it"* (p. 135). Wafa came in her life as the source of redemption and salvation. Due to her she got the opportunity to know and think about her religion.

When she agreed to visit with Wafa to the mosque it changed her life after that. At first it was tough for her but later on she found it calm and peaceful.

Slowly, surely I was settling at the bottom. It felt oddly comfortable, painless. It felt like the worst was over. And there, buried below, was the truth (p. 240). *Now I wanted a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence. I yearned to go back to being safe with God* (p. 242).

The more I learnt, the more I regretted and at the same time, the more hope I had (p. 247).

The nearness to God cleans all her pervious liberal and secular thoughts. She felt sorry for her earlier life because of her detachment from her religion and God. Najwa was becoming a devotee by her personal learning not by some external pressure. It was a journey for her in which she learnt different things and in last she found peace and comfort in it.

In London, she was working as a maid and visits mosque daily for prayers and recitation of the Holy Quran. Now she is a changed person:

It being a Monday, I have my Qur'an Tajweed class at the mosque (p. 74). *I learn how to pronounce the letters correctly ...* (p. 78). *The religious programs make me feel solid as if they are telling me, don't worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this, all of this will be meaningful and worth in the end* (p. 98). *More than anything else, I say, I would like to go on hajj. If my hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again fresh* (p. 209).

It was the voice and journey of a devoted person which made her firm and determined towards her religion. Najwa is depicted an ordinary person and is not oppressed or threat to someone. She experienced both religious and liberal ways of life and choose religious path to live her life in. she believed in something different from the Western society but it does not mean she is oppressed or 'other'. Western should first know about a devotee or Muslim and then should hold view about him/her.

Aboulela's portrayal of Najwa, both as liberal and devotee has a motif. She challenges the misconceptions or distorted image of Muslim women and especially those who wears hijab. Muslim women in Western media and literary works are depicted oppressor or rebellious and *Minaret* is a counter narrative against those depictions. Najwa transformation is to present to the readers that as a young girl she had no restrictions or external pressures. She learnt and adopted her religious doctrines willingly. Najwa challenges the misconceptions that Muslim women are either rebellious or oppressive and choose her identity as a devotee Muslim woman.

Fear of Veiling and Unveiling

The subject of "*Hijab*" is mostly highlighted in literary discussions by postcolonial novelists, critics, feminists and researchers in contemporary literature. Multiple writers of contemporary era devoted their attention towards emotional safety, physical security and individual liberty of Muslim women in globalized and

secular world. Aboulela is one of devoted writer, who produced her literary works on the subject of *"Hijab"*. *Minaret* (2005), the second novel of Aboulela depicted the life of Najwa who belong to influential Sudanese family living in London having opposite life to that of Sudan. She in this novel, portrayed her standard life in past and struggle of present life for surviving. Moreover, the novel presents the challenges faced by her after the transformation of her religious life from secular to firm believer of conservative traditional Islamic practices.

In London, she was left alone as her mother died of nervous breakdown and her brother was imprisoned for fifteen years for stabbing a police man in drugs deals. Being disillusioned by having no money, she felt physical and emotional insecurity. For meeting the required needs, for the first time, she has to do something and she accepted working as maid in Muslim family. The novel has shed light on various striking issues, one of them is the feelings of loneliness and dislocation of the protagonist in a big alien and secular city like London. Her feelings of accompanying are explored in the opening lines of the novel as she stated,

"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. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become" (p.1).

The lower social status and feelings of alienation disturbs Najwa. She was lost as she was no more controlled by her religion or parents. Here in London, her identity was redefined as she was not a wife, daughter, sister or even an eye-catching woman. Here in London, she thinks of herself as unimportant, invisible and transparent. The fact of being alone in liberal city resulted in distress and fear. Her geographical and cultural displacement made her think that she should not sit restaurant all alone *"I felt silly sitting all by myself, self-conscious"* (p.128). This fear of being alone annoyed and disturbed Najwa as there is no one to look after her.

The unstable and insecure financial and emotional condition made her search for meaningful things for her life. She thinks of her identity more disturbed, blurred and weak. In the modern world of globalization, she was alone and abandoned. Her mother's death made her helpless. She has less knowledge of managing all the funeral ceremonies but the women in London helped her out quite gratuitously. That was for the first time she felt relieved because there she saw the hope for finding her true identity. In London, the women were united by religion (Islam) not by their national identity nor ethnic (Ball, 2010). Najwa was never a devoted Muslim, so it was quite fascinating for her to be a devoted Muslim because she observed girls in Sudan wearing hijab, *"I remember the girls in Khartoum University wearing hijab and those who covered their hair with white tobes. They never irritated me, did they?"* (p.134). Even though her best friend Randa and Boyfriend used to despise them but Najwa never think of them like that. Unfortunately, Najwa became the victim of deprivation from *"guidance and wisdom, grace and forgiveness"* (Aboulela, 2007, p.46). In her own country, she was given security, financial and emotional support but she never belittled the true devotee and in London she was all alone but found her security and solace in religion.

The transformation of Najwa from liberal girl to a devoted Muslim was slow but steady and the transformation took place from her childhood memories,

I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am small and back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room, wanting to get up and go to my parents' room. Men's voices come from downstairs, a low rumble, a cough. I wake up and the cough reminds me of my father, the dream of my parents' room (p.p.74-75).

After her frequent visits to Mosque for prayers, everything in her life changed and at that point she felt the need of expanding her religious knowledge. She reminded all her childhood memories when students of her school and college in Sudan following their tradition, culture and prayer on a regular basis. She always admired the student who recite Quran in an *"an effortless, buoyant style"* (p.43). Najwa used to gaze at the Tobes of students, *"the spread of colours, stirred by occasional gust of wind"* (p.44). She sometimes got jealous of them, *"I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it"* (p.134). The mysterious condition gave birth to uneasiness and anxiety that accompanied Najwa in London.

Najwa most of the time described her reactions on hearing the recitation of Quran like she stated, *"whenever I heard the Qur'an recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. I usually didn't notice it, wasn't aware that it existed"* (p.134). In Sudan, once driving her luxurious car she heard on radio *"would tap at this inner sluggishness, nudge it like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them"* (p.134). All these perplex memories helped in reminding all her unnoticed fear of something.

Najwa's frequent visits to Mosque gave her new perspective of her life. Her conversion made her more secure and emotionally strong. Moreover, she realized that her conversion from liberal girl to the devoted Muslim girl was not an accident, she stated *"My guides chose me; I didn't choose them [...]. The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it"* (p.240). Her greed for Islamic knowledge was increasing day by day, the more she learned, the more she desired to discover. *"Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me. Explain to me why I am here, what am I doing. Explain to me why I came down in the world."*

Was it natural, was it curable?" (p.240). Najwa, being ignorant of the meaning and understanding of religion in her past, she now is in quest for understanding the meaning and significance of challenging questions about faith. In this phase of life, she wanted to make herself more secure and emotionally strong as well to find her true self with the light of religion (Islam).

Najwa's decision of converting and wearing hijab was quite complicated as it took enough time for considering it determinedly. Still, she has to face more complicated situation after her decision of covering her whole body and wearing hijab. Finally, she attempted wearing hijab, a futile attempt of wearing hijab does not dishearten her,

"I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material squashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears. I pushed them back, turned my head sideways to look at the back and it was an angular hump, a bush barely covered with cloth. The cotton scarf was almost a threadbare" (p.245).

She was surprised by her new looks in wearing Hijab, *"I didn't look like myself"* (p.245), she unintentionally uttered silently. She was convinced by wearing Hijab. She, afterward established her courage and felt more safe and comfortable turning a deaf ear to the harsh experience of geographical displacement. This was the time, when she completely accepted and was feeling contended with her new appearances. Furthermore, this was the time that put an end to her agonizing journey towards finding and building new self with new identity in alien place. Her attempt of escaping from tempted and corrupted world and finding peace in converting to devoted Muslim women succeeded.

In the first stages of her transformation was not easy for her because she experienced humiliation and exploitation by Western people in streets of London. Western people, working in streets tried to provoke her. She was harassed by *"a whistle and a laugh as one of them shouted something"* (p.130). Although, Najwa did not comprehend the people rather she understood the implicit manner, *"flushed, aware that all the weight [she] had gained settled on [her] hips"* (p.130). After covering herself in veil, Najwa decided to go back to that streets but she noticed none of humiliating sounds. Her physical appearances of body, even her eyes were ignored by them. They felt her invisibility and unimportance which gave her the feelings of happiness because of her success in piousness and surrender to the true belief of Allah. Wearing hijab and appearing in traditional Islamic attires do not pledge your physical security all the time. Najwa, once coming back home in a night bus was victimized and humiliated by teenagers of London making fun of her dress and Hijab by throwing things on her head's back. *"You Muslim scum", she heard, "then the shock of cool liquid on her head and face"* (p.81). Their satire and humiliation added more to the development of her belief and devotion to Islam as she always prayed during her journey in bus.

The transformation of Najwa's life into devoted Muslim, wearing traditional dress and covering her head with hijab became salvation for her. For Najwa, *"women who start wearing traditional clothes "report a heightened sense of self-confidence and self-esteem, arising in part from a sense that they are now treated as a person rather than as a 'sex-object', and also from the fact that they are no longer dressing to please men"* (Zebiri, 2008, p.64). This time, it more than enough satisfaction from getting rid of looking attractive. And Hijab, she now wears enriched her emotional support and physical security. Arimbi (2009) claimed that the vital role behind wearing hijab in previous times *"was to protect Muslim women against men's harassments"*. *Minaret*, however, does not aim to demonstrate the covered women body as a sign of resistance. In novel, she has attempted to bridge the gap between the stereotypical representation of Muslim, especially, Muslim women by injecting voice in them filled the power of vivid Islamic doctrines. Arimbi in her/his research approved that, *"veiling grants women security and protects them against men's lust"* (p.34). In Najwa's situation, veiling her body was more than that, she wanted to have more and more knowledge about the teachings of Islam and Qur'an moreover, knowing the secrets of liberating herself spiritually. In her case, she veiled her body and face for the purpose of unveiling anxieties and fears.

Conclusion

In this modern era, the world has become a global village. Through modern technology, people easily access one another. People from different cultures, traditions, race, community, religion and regions interact with each other easily. And this way they build views and influenced one another on different levels. Muslim in this era, are the victims of biased and stereotypical representation of Western media. The negative image of Muslim world in this present era is shaped by colonial discourses. The image of Muslim is different from their true image in European traditional and systematic academic discourses. Western discourses stereotypically presented Eastern as uncivilized, inferior, barbaric, backward, exotic, outfitted, oppressive and violent. In this era of war and terror, the distorted image of Muslim becomes more distorted: Muslims or Islam is associated with terrorism, extremism and violence. The terrorist incidents like 9/11, Bali bombings, London bombings and many others are thrust upon Muslims by Western media.

Muslims' beliefs, rituals, culture, tradition and dress codes are targeted to validate their views. Muslim women who wear hijab are very negatively perceived. They are either considered oppressed or collaborators of terrorist.

Muslim women's dress, especially hijab became a debatable issue now a day. Muslim women who wear hijab are depicted in two ways. They are depicted either as oppressed, victims or rebellious who challenge their culture, tradition and religion. The portrayal of orthodox Muslim woman, Najwa in the selected work was analyzed. The analysis in the light of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) cleared the concept and history of the biased and stereotypical representation of Muslim world by the West. Spivak *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2003) also helped us in highlighting the neglected voices of the subaltern class and represented them as rebellious or victims. It is important for subaltern to raise voice for themselves and it is more important that they should be heard. Aboulela's works has endeavored to overthrow the stereotypes surrounding the lives of Muslims especially Muslim women. The author portrayed Islam as a source of inspiration to help empower her protagonist. In the selected novel, the female protagonist instead of moving away from her religion rather became a practicing Muslim. Islam is not portrayed as a demoralizing tool; it rather empowers woman against the external evil forces.

It is concluded in the light of the data analyzed that Western have associated Muslims with violence while the women are portrayed as domineered by Islam. The analysis showed that Western in order to justify their dominancy, portrayed the Muslim women as being oppressed by Muslims. Islam was shown as a patriarchal tool which forced women to wear hijab. But this research paper showed in the light of the selected novel that the protagonist without any external pressure wore hijab. The protagonist, Najwa is portrayed much more liberal in her homeland but once she goes to the West it is only her faith which gives her a drive for survival.

The main motif of Aboulela is to whitewash the stereotypical and prejudiced views of Western held about Muslims and especially Muslim women who wear hijab. In *Minaret*, we see Najwa in her early life affected by colonialism she was living a westernized life in Khartoum but in London we see her committed to her religion. A person who is secular in Muslim country and later becomes a devotee in a non-Muslim country depicts that adopting one's own religion is something personal and it does not mean that he/she is oppressed or a terrorist. The Islamic practices are central to the life of the protagonist but she never harms anyone. Islam or Islamic practices are something personal, i.e. a relation between the Creator and creature. The essential components of knowing and understanding 'interaction' was found out. It is important to interact with people who we think are different from us for forging a better society. Najwa being ordinary humans had some flaws: such as Najwa's bad experience with Anwar and earlier secular life. Adopting religious practices helped her overcome her flaws. She participated religious rituals, practices and tried to improve her morality and personality. Najwa represented a positive picture of a devotee Muslim woman who is empowered by religion to demolish the attached stereotypes with Islam and Muslims. Najwa is depicted as being a devotee ordinary Muslim woman working as a maid and portrayed a positive picture of devotee Muslims. Her devotion to religion was depicted as a personal path which provided her the opportunity to be morally good by overthrowing the stereotypes attached with Muslim community. By adopting and sticking to her religious doctrines, Najwa ultimately becomes tolerant inhabitants of her society.

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