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A Post-secular Approach to Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*: Decolonizing the Exiled Muslim

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Abstract:

This paper discusses Leila Aboulela's employment of Islam as a de-colonial measure in her novel *Minaret* (2005). It utilizes a combination of post-colonial concepts, by Fanon, Said and Bhabha, on the one hand and Talal Asad's Anthropological notion of "Islam as discursive tradition" on the other. The aim is to show how Aboulela responds to the traditional western criticism of Islam and the recent scholarship on Islamic neo-colonialism. The findings highlight Aboulela's conceptualuzation of Islam as a post-secular system whose purpose goes beyond spiritual enlightenment. Consequently, the study presents Aboulela as a de-colonial author who, first, offers Muslim readership a de-colonial weapon fit for the varied contexts, and, second, corrects Western misconceptions about it.

Keywords: Leila Aboulela; *Minaret;* Islam; post-secularism; de-colonial measure; Muslim readership.

Introduction

Islam as a religion has been largely misconceived throughout history, starting from secular and liberal criticism to the infamous Western anti-Islamic sentiments, and reaching Muslims' varied (mis)conceptions of their own religion and its practices. The first stance is philosophical and is represented by Bernard Lewis, Sam Harris, and liberal, democratic Muslims like Ayaan Hirsi Ali.[i] The second is an ideological stance intricately accounted for by Edward Said in his seminal books *Orientalism* (1978a), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993c), and *Covering Islam* (1981b). The third is an internal, cultural attitude towards Islamic religiousity gradually gaining momentum among Muslim societies. It usually comes as an internalization of the Western misconception and intended inferiorization of this religion - as Frantz Fanon (1952a), Edward Said (1978), and Homi K. Bhabha (1994a) argue collectively[ii]; nevertheless, it can be an auto-generated misapprehension of one's own religion. In response to these attitudes combined, Islam nowadays, in the African continent particularly, is largely understood as a colonial institution that continues to occupy

the place of former European ones both politically and culturally. Marnia Lazreg (2000) examines Islamism in Algeria and its political conception of religiosity. He contends that it has "recolonized" individuals' lives instead of "re-Islamizing" them by imposing a new belief system and counterculture that thrives on nihilism. The title of his work, "Islamism and the Recolonization of Algeria", is outwardly telling. He also argues on how Islamism utilizes French colonial methods of social control to provide a total ideology of acculturation for political purposes. M. Moncef Khaddar (2002) makes similar arguments about Maghrib countries - Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya - and Egypt in "Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism".

Historically, Muslim countries proved to differ in their Islamic-governmental policies. While some insist on a strong incorporation of Islamic rule in their governmental systems specifically in the post-colonial eras, others prefer a moderate implementation. The former includes Iran after 1979, Sudan under Omar Al-Bashir's governance, and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. These countries are known for their extremist adaptations of Islamic religion and are mostly adopted in religion/identity studies concerned with post-colonial contexts. The latter countries can be exemplified with Algeria and Morocco among other North African and Middle Eastern countries that make rather humanistic adaptations of Islam in their post-colonial times. Considering these divergences, A. S. Sidahmed (2018) closely examines the political scene and the rising Islamic and fundamentalist movements in the Middle East and North Africa. His article "Islamic Fundamentalism", provides detailed case studies manifesting these movements in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen to ultimately show how they are mistakenly associated with the extremism and fanaticism of a monolithic movement. Anthropologist and critical theorist Talal Asad (1993a, 2009b, 2015c) theoretically argues about the solid link combining Islamic religion and identity preservation and restoration specifically in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Fanon (1961b) also accounts for it, though inadvertently.iii The case he makes in The Wretched of the Earth about religion and identity aligns well with Islam and makes a workable case in its favor, despite the anti-islamic sentiments he frequently expresses.

Muslim literary writers also have their say on this matter, contributing with personal stories framed within fictional narratives that support either ideological camps. On the one hand, one can take the example of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a work that assimilates Islamic fundamentalism to Western racist control mechanisms.[iv] Many critics[v] argue that Rushdie's use of Western lenses to view Islam is the motive behind his falsified conception. On the other hand, Leila Aboulela serves, among other diasporic and post-colonial authors,[vi] as a prominent figure defending Islam against such claims.

Scholars[vii] commonly celebrate her strong writing back to existing stereotypes on Islam in works such as *The Translator* (1999a) and *Minaret* (2005c). The present study comes to highlight a complimentary end of Aboulela's anti-colonial narrative on Islam. It argues that the novel moves beyond the portrayal of Islam as an intimate spiritual possession to presenting it as a de-colonial tool Muslims can use in the varied contexts. Islam in post-colonial times is claimed by Aboulela as strong unflinching identity marker.

This paper discusses Aboulela's fictional (though history-based) treatment of the recondite connection between the two issues - Islam and identity in post-colonial contexts - in her novel *Minaret* (2005c). More precisely, it discusses the novel's propagation of Islam as a de-colonial tool in post-colonial contexts. It uses post-colonial theory, mainly Bhabha's (1998b), Fanon's (1961b), and Said's (1978a), in association with Asad's concept of "Islam as a discursive tradition" that highlights Islam's adaptability to different times and places. In this regard, a set of questions are put forward: what are the post-colonial traumas addressed by Aboulela in *Minaret*? What role does Islamic religion (and culture by extension) have in treating (ex-)colonized people's traumas post-colonial resistance all together? More precisely, how does it help Najwa restore her identity and overcome the social and psychological traumas she suffers from in Britain?

The main objective of this study is to introduce *Minaret* (2005c) as a de-colonial Islamic novel, not merely a diasporic, post-colonial one. Ultimately, it describes Aboulela as a post-colonial intellectual who sets forward Islam as a part of the de-colonization methods in the Islamic world. This study situates itself in a dialogue with secular, liberal, Western, and westernized critics who consider Islam an orthodoxy that can only lead to re-colonization. Aboulela shows, along with other writers, how Islam could help its people stand on their own feet again after undergoing long periods of suffering and even overcome identity erasure. Aboulela, this study argues, does not only resist neo-colonial discourse on Islam and Muslims through her pen but also shows Muslims a path to follow in their anti-colonial struggle and resistance at a socio-cultural level. This bridging between Islam as a Sudanese identity marker and de-colonial measures in *Minaret* introduces another dimension for which Aboulela's work can be appreciated.

1. The Westernized Elite: Western Cultural Hegemony, Contamination, and Hybridity

Minaret (2005c) is a lucid example of a novel with a religious context. It is set in two intertwined settings. The first is post-colonial Sudan, a Muslim country where a large section of society has come under the long-lasting colonial influence of British rule and culture. This is exemplified primarily by the lives of Najwa's family members. The second setting is

London, the capital of the ex-colonial nation, where we follow the diasporic experience of Sudanese exiles who fled the political coup of the 1980s. A main focus of the author in this episode is Najwa's personal struggle for identity determination and the locus of Islam within it. Aboulela (2005c) tracks the shift in the main character's national identity and portrays how her religious identity quivers along the way, as if the two aspects - Sudanese identity and religion - are interchangeable.

The narrative begins in post-colonial Sudan where Aboulela (2005c) points out a few intruding socio-political phenomena; all of them prove to be remnants of the everlasting influence of past British colonialism: a contamination. First is the capitalist system towards which Sudanese people show a large-scale contempt. Revolutions, military coups, and political writing are all involved in the attempt to get rid of the system and its supportive government. The second aspect is the Sudanese westernized way of life, mainly represented through Najwa's family and friends. This latter aspect presents a main focus for the novel and the the present study as well. Aboulela highlights the extent to which Sudanese people stick to or go far from their Islamic culture in both contexts. Islam, the religion of the country, has become largely cultural or nominal. Muslims are turned into Westernized secular non-believers like Anwar (Najwa's boyfriend) and non-practicing Muslims (like Najwa and Randa early on in the story). The secular state in post-colonial societies, like Sudan, often demands that religious identity be subordinated to a putatively neutral national identity, whereas it is actually subjugated to the political ends of a modern state that rests on a project of making minorities (here, Muslims) and majorities (here, liberalists and secular citizens and governors). This is precisely the act of religious subordination, says anthropologist Saba Mahmoud (2016). This act is justifiably explained by Fanon (1961b) through colonialism's perverted logic. Colonialism, he says, turns to the past of the oppressed people to distort, disfigure, and destroy it (p. 149).

The daughter of a prominent bourgeois capitalist, Najwa inhabits a world of extravagance - marked by parties, club outings, and holidays - in the company of her brother Omar and friend Randa. They enjoy Western food and (Pop) music on these occasions (Aboulela, 2005c, p. 46). Najwa's clothes at university are no different from those at parties; they are explicit and attractive, although she bears the title of a 'Muslim' publicly. In fact, Najwa takes only the label of Islam. She does not fast unless the exam period is approaching, wishing that Allah may help her at that moment. Najwa's liberalism is evident in many other ways; she is one of the very few "emancipated …women who drove cars…[and attended] university" in Khartoum (Aboulela 2005c, p. 10). Such a liberal way of life is propagated by the magazines[viii] Najwa and Randa purchase regularly. Her twin brother Omar goes to the extreme,

experimenting with marijuana and hashish while convincing his sister these are common things that do not require their father's knowledge or consent (p. 30, 49). Bhabha (1998b) labels these as hybrid cultures produced in in-between spaces where two cultures coalesce not in the form of a reflective multiculturalism but a "a different, new and unrecognizable" one. "The [third space is]…an area of negotiation of meaning and representation…[that] enables other positions to emerge… [It] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives…" (p. 211). In his reading of Antonio Gramsci, Said speaks of an existing Western consensus about the East that is subtly producing a false consciousness about it, thereby maintaining this stable operation of hegemony. Hegemony as such, he says, needs to be transformed by intellectuals. The analysis spots light on the the points wherein Najwa meets Said's functional concept of the intellectual who, after attaining individualism, questions the intruding system and resists his (and his people's) absorption into it (1978a, p. 149).[ix]

2. Double Consciousness on Native Land: Najwa's Early Discontent

Before moving to London, Najwa often declares she feels something missing deep down her soul while endorsing this hybrid culture. This emptiness gets tenser in front of students' prayers and recitation of Qur'an:

> watching those who were praying…I gazed at all tobes of the girls, the spread of colours, stirred by the occasional gust of wind. And when they bowed down there was the fall of polyester on the grass…Anwar's voice next me. I felt as if he was iterrupting me - from what, I didn't know… [I] walked away … I couldn't see the students praying anymore and I felt a stab of envy from them. It was sudden and irrational. What was there to envy? (Aboulela, 2005a, pp. 43-44)

At this early stage, she develops a double consciousness in the Du Boisian sense: "one ever feels his two-ness […] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois, xiii). Looking around her, Najwa starts to be aware of the destructive effects this foreign culture had on her family. She questions the reasons for which her family members are blown away one after the other. At the heart of this capitalist, secular, hybrid culture, her father dies while keeping a strict hold on embezzlement, the income of which he directs to luxurious life plans. His family inherits from him a golden life, formed at the expense of the Sudanese population, and also political outrage of the government and its people. Her sick mother chooses to face death in one of the most luxurious hospitals; from the hospital room she goes in frequent visits to trendy shops in the area, enjoying the remainder of her life and wasting the last amount of money her husband

left for the family. She chooses this way of life over the insurance of her children's future. The children (Najwa and Omar) are ultimately exiled to London. Once there, Najwa displays a remarkable indecisiveness about her assumed identity, way of life, and religiousness. She initially feels nostalgic for the Westernized life of extravagance and liberalism she used to enjoy in Sudan during her parents' life; she misses its privileges. Nevertheless, she repeatedly feels doubtful about it and keeps it under check. Najwa's dubious mind would ultimately save her from the Western destructive curse, at a time when other Sudanese would remain stuck to their secular principles maintaining their Westernized identities to the last days of their lives. Notably, Aboulela (2005c) offers two foils to the path taken by this self-conscious, post-colonial girl: one is her old lifestyle, and the other is her peers (her friend Randa and twin brother Omar) whose life conditions compare to hers in everything but the decisions they take.

3. Exile and the Freedom to Choose : London as a Space of Negotiation

When Najwa is exiled to London as a result of her family's downfall, she finds herself all alone - her mother dead and her brother in prison for a drug-related case - estranged amidst this host culture and its people. She thinks she is finally free from external repressions (cultural, religious, and social), assuming full responsibility over her life. Now, she can negotiate her identity freely. At first, she experiences things she could have never done in Sudan, like her sexual relationships with Anwar. She does not fear pregnancy, she says, because no one is there with her to be scandalized for it, (Aboulela 2005c, pp. 174-175). “I was in the majority now, I was a true Londoner now. I could take a quiz in a magazine ‘How Hot is Your Love?’ Or ‘Rate Him as a Lover’ I could circle the answers based on experience not imagination” (p. 176). The only thing she seems to miss out there are the attributes of the bourgeois life she had in Sudan. This alienated space has granted her both freedom of thought and action. As Bhabha (1994a) explains, “it is in the emergence of the interstices…that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (p. 02). The negotiation continues, and exile would soon become the distance Najwa requires to question previous assumptions and assess new propositions about her lifestyle and identity of which she already has many doubts. Should she deny the voice of this evolving consciousness or accept it? Her brother Omar, who is experiencing the same ordeal as hers, chooses the former, hence strengthening his hold on Western culture. Whereas, Najwa chooses the latter after a long dilemma: "I'm tired of having a troubled consciousness”, she says (Aboulela 2005c, p. 244). Consequently, she looks back at her Sudanese origins and proceeds to investigate them seeking remaining roots to cling to, hoping to find an authentic source of

resistance. After regaining her Islamic ties, it becomes clear to her that the missing part of her soul she has been consistently looking for was nothing but a "yearning to go back to being safe with god" (p. 242). Fanon (1961b) argues that the colonized intellectual goes through three stages of liberation: the first of which is a period of assimilation to colonial culture, followed by a phase of turning back to native culture, and last an active liberation struggle (pp. 222-223). Although not an academic nor a highly educated person, Najwa still follows Said's conception of an intellectual. She is an exilic person who exists on the margins - between two culture - resisting conformity, questioning dominant narratives, and speaking truth to power.[x] Najwa's trajectory closely reflects Fanon's model of the colonized subject who initially "throws himself greedily upon Western culture", before becoming "disturbed" and ultimately feeling compelled "to turn backward toward [her] unknown roots" in search of psychological and cultural coherence (1961b, pp. 218-224).

4. The Discursive Tradition: How Najwa Reconnects to Islam

Anthropologist Asad describes Islam as a "discursive tradition". This concept particularly accounts for an anthropology of Islam that enables it to transcend the specific time and place of its origination and thereby its ability to stand as a functioning part in Muslim people's identity quests. Asad explains a tradition saying:

> A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. (2009b, p.14)

Islam is labelled as a "tradition" for it consists of a series of long established beliefs and practices. What makes these latter survive radical changes and erasure throughout history is Islam's "discursive" nature. Discursivity here is two-fold. First of all, it indicates how Islam is established through a "discourse" - a set of teachings originated at the time of its origination in a distant past - and preserved by it through out time. Second, this "discourse" is characteristically "discursive", that is to say dialoguous, and this is Asad's main contribution. To navigate varied times and places, Islam enters in a dialogue with the

newly evolving practices, institutions, and overall conditions of the specific time and place it is brought to. This adaptability enables it to maintain new forms fit for these new contexts. In London, Najwa's "materialistic, secular, westernized life did not provide an answer to her questioning self", whereas Islam did (Majed, 2015, p. 215). It is thanks to the discursively of the Islamic tradition that religious talk at The Regent's Park Mosque found an echo in her heart and mind: the "words [of Um Waleed, the Qur'an teacher] will stay with me…when she speaks about Allah, when she says, 'He is talking to us, aren't we lucky? We can open the Qur'an and He is talking directly to us,' there is a breakthrough in my understanding, a learning fresh as lightening. When she says, '*Ya Habibi, ya Rasul Allah*', I feel I love the Prophet as much as she does" (Aboulela, 2005c, p. 185). Those moments epiphanically endowed Najwa with an abundance of security as she found out how her attachment to Islam is similar to the attachment to one's family,[xi] country, and original identity: "I feel that I am Sudanese *but* […] while living here in London, I've changed […] I *just* think of myself as a *Muslim*" [italics mine] (Aboulela, 2005c, p. 110). The islamic discursive tradition, however, is not just about spiritual re-attachment and intellectual awakening. It also encompasses the revival of religious practices in "the minutiae of everyday living" through which this tradition is lived and felt (Asad, 2015c, p. 166). One of the most visible signs of Najwa's evolving identity is her decision to wear Hijab (veil), a symbolic act of her genuine embrace of the traditional Islamic identity and a displayed detachment from a secular, liberal past. In line with the concept of hijab and its religious connotations, Najwa is comfortable with her modest clothing. She is no longer interested in the fashion-focused attire from her former materialistic life. Moreover, she performs Sala (prayers) on a daily basis and fasts more regularly in Ramadan. Weekly talks and Halaqas (study circles) led by Um Waleed and other women at the mosque become a central part of her routine and a key source of her spiritual awakening and religious education: "She tells us to try and keep up all the high standards of Ramadan, not to slack off like we usually do. The extra prayers, the extra charity, the daily reading of the Qur'an, not back-biting, not gossiping, not envying, not lying - we should make the intention of keeping them up throughout the year. 'And don't forget the voluntary fast of six days of Shawal" (Aboulela, 2005c, p. 185). She also maintains family ties with her brother Omar, while he is in prison for drug-related crimes. He rejects her attempts to share her faith with him, but still, Najwa keeps trying to bring him the comfort and security she has found in Islam, viewing this as her duty towards him. By the end of the narrative, Najwa decides to use the money she got from her employer to go on Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca).

5. Islam Beyond the Secular: Fanon and Asad

In an indirect act of acknowledgement of religious institutions' existence outside the modern, secular order, Fanon remarks that the masses who are often rooted in "sacred" institutions are the ones who remain authentically anti-colonial (1961b, p. 19). The point here is that when a colonized society is systematically stripped of its political structures, economic autonomy, and educational systems, what remains is the culture reflexes, Fanon argues. These are the most deeply embedded, hardest-to-eradicate elements. Religious institutions, with their roots in daily life, ritual, and community, can be seen as the perfect embodiment of these reflexes. They are the last to dissolve because they operate at a level the colonial state cannot fully penetrate. These institutions preserved what Fanon called a "national culture" that was essential for both psychological liberation and political mobilization of the (ex) colonized people (1961b, p. 217).[xii] The institution of Islam in this context is specifically functional for being a tradition first of all, and second for enjoying a discursive adaptability for the evolving cultures and ideologies they are built on.

Minaret depicts the failure of secular nationalist regimes in post-colonial Sudan through images of corruption, episodes of economic stagnation, and the military defeat of the capitalist party. By the 1970s, political Islam took place in Sudan to amend the situation. Thinkers like Sayyid Qutb and movements like the Muslim Brotherhood framed the struggle of Islam in such post-colonial contexts as one not just against a former colonial country and culture, but also against the post-colonial secular state itself which is not but a continuation of Western cultural and intellectual colonization. In this regard, Asad (1993a) argues that the very categories of "religion" and "the secular" are mere modern, Western constructs set to be mutually exclusive. Applying a rigid secular-liberal template to Islam ignores how other Ideologies, cultures, and societies - like Islamic ones - may have different pathways to modernity. For this reason, a truly de-colonial approach in Muslim societies may involve rethinking politics and society outside this imposed categorization, he says. Islam, here, can be understood as a potent post-secular de-colonial resource providing a language, a set of ethics, and a historical narrative that can be mobilized to challenge and compete with the universal claims of Western liberalism, capitalism, and secular modernity. It offers a different foundation for knowledge, justice, and community, allowing communities to imagine their future outside the dominant secular/religious binary imposed by Western modernity. Many Muslim liberals, like Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001), argue for the necessity of an internal change from within the tradition using Islamic legal tools, attributing the problem in Islam's universal image to patriarchal and authoritarian interpretations, not Islam itself.

6. De-secularizing Islam and Re-centering Islamic Tradition

While Aboulela (2005c) does not get into the phase of political Islam or what Fanon refers to, in general terms, as active liberation movements, she still insists on the post-secularity of Islam, considering it a self-sufficient institution that accommodates all contexts, even post-colonial and diasporic hybridized environments. It is remarkable that Najwa does not reclaim her Sudanese national identity on the whole, but this part 'her Muslim identity'. Sudanese culture is no longer pure or nationalistic as it used to be before the colonial encounter; it is contaminated and hence cannot serve the post-colonial struggle of self-restoration as much as Islam does. In the hybridized environments of North Africa, West Africa, and South Asia, Islam functions as a unifying identity marker that transcends tribal, ethnic, and linguistic divisions found among people. It unites them against a foreign Christian intruding culture. Historically, its institutions (mosques, madrasas, Sufi orders) remained, most of the time, outside direct colonial control and became centers for preserving indigenous culture, education, and political dissent just like the mosque Najwa attends in London.[xiii] In a similar argumentative line to Aboulela's, Abdelaziz El Amrani (2021) calls for the de-secularisation of resistance. He argues that post-colonial studies have historically disregarded the role of religious anti-colonial movements in favour of secular, nationalist, and Marxist liberation movements (p. 1240).[xiv] El Amrani solidifies his position with the example of Morocco, in which both Salafism and Sufism functioned as "mobilising ideologies" for anti-colonial consciousness through Islamic frameworks, both culturally and politically. He ultimately insists on re-centering Islamic spirituality.

In an interview, Aboulela (2020e) declares that, as a Sudanese post-colonial Muslim, she has faced the same ordeals in Sudan and Britain as her protagonist Najwa. In Britain, she says, "Muslims were unjustly portrayed…Europe expects them to [abandon their faith], is waiting for them to do so, but this does not happen" (Aboulela, 2020e).[xv] Aboulela was not totally submissive to these systematized descriptions, nor was Najwa (ibid). Najwa, being Aboulela's persona, takes more pride in her religious identity as the narrative progresses. She confronts her boyfriend Anwar, who has always looked down on her faith, with her devotion and decision to wear hijab giving him a choice of either marriage or separation. She gladly takes on his humiliation and society's as well, proud that she has finally found herself. She refers to her previous uprooted life as the misspent past. Sadia Abbas (2011) notices that in all of Aboulela's works, "Islam functions as a socio-psychic tranquilizer" (p. 453). Najwa attests that she has always "wanted a *wash*, a purge, a *restoration* of innocence," and now, being a devout Muslim, she "felt a kind of peace" [italics mine] (Aboulela, 2005c, pp. 237-247).

7. A Transnational Humanitarian Identity: Muslims' Solidarity with Other Minorities

Speaking of Islam's existence outside the Western binaries, one can notice Aboulela's use of "Islamic post-colonialism"[xvi] in *Minaret* for universal, humanitarian purposes. It is not solely presented as a method for reclaiming one's identity and resisting colonial influence over oneself. Islam in this novel is discussed in association with other minorities in London with whom Muslims identify. Najwa sees her image in the Blacks and Indians around her. One of these is an Indian friend she remembers from her university in Sudan. In the London mosque, she becomes close to another Indian woman. These are people whom Aboulela set as Najwa's equivalents, given their previous colonial experiences and a shared humanistic essence. In one of the instances, Najwa refers to skin color as a factor of discrimination between people and even countries' statuses in this Western secular society (Aboulela, 2005c, p. 116): "What was wrong with us Africans? … [Me and Anwar] wonder how it would feel to have, like them, a stable country… [to be] unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused" (p. 174). Islam in this sense is portrayed as a transcendental institution that is not only post-secular but also cross-national, unlike the Western secular state.

Historically speaking, Arab Muslims in Britain were exclusively discriminated against based on racial differences, as has been the case with Africans and Asians. Later on, precisely after 9/11,[xvii] they faced further discrimination under the racial, religious label "Arab Muslims" (Koç, 2014, p. 22). This explains much about Aboulela's sympathy with other minorities on a humanitarian basis. In this sense, Aboulela's novel is ideologically post-colonial in that it rejects the superiority of Western culture all together, and precisely in relation to the Sudanese, Islamic one. Her identification of Najwa with other oppressed minorities makes her work concerned with the universal, humanitarian case of anti-colonial resistance on the whole. Aboulela is thereby revising Western, colonial assumptions about the world's cultural order and the place held by Islam within it. She undermines the universal workability of Western culture, giving the example of Najwa the Sudanese girl who reaches a high degree of self-satisfaction only after embracing her previously denied Islamic roots. Islam here works as a substitute for Western and hybridized cultures, being a testified system that remains largely untainted by modern ideologies and transcends ethnic and national diversities in post-colonial contexts. Anita Sethi remarks that Aboulela's women "seek solace in their growing religious identity, rather than yearning to embrace western culture" (Aboulela, 2005b).

Conclusion

Aboulela's discourse on Islam gains further significance when taken in context, an "age that promotes liberalism […] and insists

on the *fluid* nature of identities" [italics mine] (Koç, 2014, p. 37). Through her narrative, Aboulela makes sure to comment on the conditions accompanying this contemporary state, such as instability, transformation, and confusion. She indirectly blames colonial intervention for introducing foreign notions to 'third world' countries and holds them responsible for shaking native cultures and identity markers in the newly established hybridized cultures or third spaces, to use Bhabha's term. Nevertheless, she celebrates Islam's functionality for identity restoration in these unstable, threatening environments by enlivening it to a post-secular level.

Hassan (2008) identifies Aboulela's de-colonization technique as the materialization of the slogan "Islam is the solution," that was held by the Islamist movement emerging in the mid-1970s (p. 300). Aboulela's "narratives are [those] of redemption", from the colonial curse, "and fulfilment through Islam" (Majed, 2015, p. 204). *Minaret*'s point of strength as an anti-colonial work lies in its being a writing from the inside, about one's own self, experience, and identity, "writing about the self 'disrupts' the colonial image of the other" that maintains the superiority of colonial culture; "because of that, writing about the self becomes post-colonial" (Aboulela, 2005c, p. 224).

This post-colonial, or more precisely anti-colonial, dimension of her literary writing distances Aboulela's novel *Minaret* from the work of a great deal of Arab Anglophone writers usually concerned with the question of hybridity and progressive multiculturalism. *Minaret* is one of those works addressed to the natives of the land (ex-colonized). It has an unusual dedication to the restoration of the original identity of these people, especially the religious landmarks, one that is not frequently found except among the most indigenous traditions and nationalist writings. One is probably reminded of a rarity of works by non-Arab post and anti-colonial writers such as Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Junot Díaz (Dominican Republic), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), V. Y. Mudimbe and Pius Ngandu Nkashama (Congo), and J. M. Coetzee (South Africa). In reference to the anti-colonial dimension of her work, *Minaret*, Aboulela makes clear in an interview that "if you want to produce art, you want it to be more than defensive—you want it to be more than a response, it must be structured in such a way that it is self-supporting" (Aboulela, 2020e). Aboulela is therefore, not just writing back in "response" to the Western stereotypes about Islam, she is prescribing a "self-supporting" tool for her Muslim readership in their anti-colonial struggles which stems from her own experience.

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[i] See Harris' *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004), Lewis's "What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East" (2002), and Ali's autobiography *Infidel* (2007).

[ii] Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952a) theorizes colonial psychological internalization. He elucidates how colonized subjects begin to see themselves through the colonizer's gaze. This becomes an originating model for later postcolonial studies of identity, including religion and culture. Said in *Orientalism* (1978) discusses how Western knowledge systems construct "the Orient", whereas Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994a) specifically develops the idea of mimicry and discusses ambivalent identification with colonial discourse. He particulaly explains subtle forms of internalization and identity negotiation.

[iii] Fanon's argument here is a secular, Marxist one and does not account for Islam, it is rather anti-Islamic. Still, its alignment with Islamic religion is outwardly clear as Fouzi Slisli argues in his works: "Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*" (2008) and "'The Idea that One Could Come to Terms with the Arabs': How Frantz Fanon Found Common Ground with Islam in Algeria" (2012).

[iv] Dorritta Fong (2004) "Satanic v. Angelic: The World Welterweight Fight: Rushdie Takes on Hegemony!"

[v] Ebtisam Ali Sadiq (2013) "Acts of Negation: Modality and Spatiality in *The Satanic Verses*"

[vi] These include Mohsin Hamid, Ahdaf Soueif, Laila Lalami, Orhan Pamuk, Randa Abdel-Fattah, and Fatema Mernissi among others.

[vii] These include Sadia Zulfiqar (2024), Sanjida Parveen (2024), Hasan Majed (2015), Waïl S. Hassan (2008) and Nesrin Koç (2014).

[viii] These magazines - the *Times, Cosmo,* and *Marie Claire* - additionally propagate teens' love life and 'fashionable' ways of wearing tobe (hijab), in which the front of a girl's hair and arms are revealed, etc (Aboulela, 2005, p. 29, 176).

[ix] The questioning of a foreign system is not exclusively cultural and religious in *Minaret*, it is also political as Bhabha (1998b) indicates. This is seen in the character of the revolutionary Communist Anwar.

[x] See title 6.

[xi] This aspect she attributes to her association with other Muslim women in the mosque.

[xii] Notice Fanon's (1961b) frequent exchange between the two concepts: religion and culture.

[xiii] The Islamic order as such finds its explanation in Talal Asad's concept of "Islam as a discursive tradition" (2009c). He illustrates how Western secular discourse has reduced Islam to a private religion, where it is in fact a religious tradition with public, political, and communal structures operating according to a different logic than the secular-colonial framework. Fanon (1961b) too, despite his secular stance, cannot but observe the role played by mosques and Zawias (Sufi lodges) in the organization of Algerian resistance movement.

[xiv] He describes postcolonial studies' secularism as an odd tendency and a biased one.

[xv] Western cultural stereotypes and the novels' response to them are extensively discussed by Majed, Hassan, Koç, among other scholars and researchers.

[xvi] The term has been attributed to *Minaret* by Majed (2015).

[xvii] Aboulela has written *Minaret* in the wake of 9/11 attacks. It was her choice to focus on Islamic culture and identity and shift the focus away from political Islam that has been witnessing harmful turns like Islamism (Aboulela 2009D, 100).