

## Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* as a Re-Inscription of Faith in Diasporic Discourses

Monir A. Choudhury<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts and Letters, University of Bisha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

\*Corresponding Author: [monirchy@ub.edu.sa](mailto:monirchy@ub.edu.sa)

**Citation:** Choudhury, M. A. (2025). Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* as a Re-Inscription of Faith in Diasporic Discourses. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(3), 510–518. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i3.2445>

**Published:** November 27, 2025

### ABSTRACT

This article critically reads Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2006) from both postcolonial and Third Wave Feminist perspectives to demonstrate how Najwa's, the protagonist of the novel, life and struggle in the diasporic contact zones of London is an attempt to reinscribe the mini-narratives of a woman who has often been portrayed as a victim of tradition and subjugation. Anchoring the hybrid approach, postcolonial and feminist, provided the critical frameworks needed to restore the dignity and identity of Najwa in navigating through multiple liminal diasporic spaces against the waves of denigrating metanarratives. The paper has demonstrated that Najwa, after analysing and disapproving of both the traditions of Sudanese Muslim patriarchal society and life in diasporic Arab communities in London, turned to faith and religion as her last resort to rediscover and regenerate herself and identity. The paper has underscored the need to reinscribe and give voice to the marginalised subaltern. Najwa's struggle is an attempt in that direction against the multiple subjugating metanarratives.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Feminism, Immigrant, Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, Postcolonialism.

### INTRODUCTION

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* is a depository of mini-narratives and a site of contestation for interpretations and arguments. The cultural crossroads, third spaces, and diverse diasporic contact zones that Najwa navigates throughout her life's journey demonstrate her experiences of liminality, hybridity, and in-betweenness. She interrogated, debated, and contested various subjugating metanarratives, often silently in her mind, as she encountered them during her formative years in Sudan and later in her life as a maid servant in a London suburb. Situated within the complex terrain of colonialism, neo-colonialism, Marxism, traditional patriarchal societies, and diasporic liminality, she developed her own acumen in making decisions about her identity and forming judgments about interacting cultures and people.

Stuart Hall (1990) argued that "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture" (p. 225). The text demonstrated how Najwa has been constantly forming her own unique identity through her reflective interactions with these factors. She demonstrated, in fictional terms, how to navigate through the 'third spaces' of 'liminal in-betweenness', both by 'reinscribing' and 're-worlding' her identity simultaneously, and giving voice to her perspectives, while challenging and deconstructing the impeding 'metanarratives'.

What distinguishes this reading is that it situates Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* at the intersection of two critical frameworks—postcolonialism and Islamic feminism—to investigate and interpret the synergic interface between postcolonialism and Islamic Feminism in the novel. The study attempts to answer the following research questions. How does Najwa's life resonate with the experiences of a subaltern, a Muslim immigrant, and a member of the African diaspora? How does Najwa navigate her way by deconstructing the impeding metanarratives of her traditional Sudanese Patriarchal society and those of the London suburb? How has she addressed the pejorative/Islamophobic image of a Muslim woman wearing hijab in modern times?

The novel is disruptive in many ways. It demonstrated how Najwa, groomed in elite Sudanese society, and after gaining exposure to the diasporic life of London, opted for a faith-based religious life. She reinscribes her life with faith and Islamic knowledge, and problematises the Islamophobic narratives of a Muslim woman practising faith as a victim of tradition and religion. Through her constant silent self-talks, she rewrites, reworlds and reinscribes her lively, reflective and dynamic life. However, she could not dare to speak out about that life and give voice to her dynamic experiences due to her traumatic experiences of being ignored, looked down upon or taken for granted as lying due to her status as a maid servant working as a nani, an African, an immigrant, and a muslim woman wearing hijab. Through the struggles of her life, she fragmented these pejorative images.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Interest in Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* has been growing among scholars worldwide, as it has positioned itself as a text that resonates with the stories and experiences of an African immigrant, a Muslim immigrant, a proletariat in a London suburb, and a subaltern woman in an African diasporic community.

In an interview, Leila Aboulela acknowledged that, sometimes, her focus on delineating characters was to make more "Muslim sense" (Rashid, 2012, p. 620), providing a direction for scholars to explore her novels from the perspectives of postcolonial African, woman, Oriental, diasporic, and Muslim landscapes. In her analysis, Steiner (2008) focused on how Najwa has been "triply marginalised" in her diasporic life in such a landscape (p. 8). From an alternative angle, Gilmour (2012) persuasively argued that the novel investigated "the possibilities, risks, and limitations of a life lived between languages" (p.207). Turning to another perspective, Hunter (2013) pointed out how Najwa, as a diaspora, needed "the emotional and psychological security" (p. 91). Shifting focus, Al-Karawi and Bahar (2014) highlighted, in their analysis, how the novel deconstructed the "dominant Western discourses on Islam regarding Arab women's experiences and identities" (p. 255). Consistent with this view, Morey (2017) demonstrated how the novel fragmented the metanarrative that "religious faith ... as peculiar, aberrant and incomprehensible" (p. 2).

Broadening the scope, Hasan (2015) illustrated the reasons why and how "the non-religious Najwa of Khartoum gradually becomes devoutly Islamic in London" (p. 14). Building upon this perspective, Aladaylah (2018) contended that the novel depicted Najwa's negotiated journey "in a new process of self-discovery" (p. 173). Echoing the same line of arguments, Ishaque et al. (2020) analysed why Najwa opted for "a Muslim identity as her priority in a globalised world" (p. 699).

In an interview with Parssinen (2020), Aboulela said: "I do sometimes think of my books as food that I am serving to readers", and Boumous and Benabed (2020), as if to prove it, highlighted that the novel "emphasises the role of spirituality and faith in women's mental health" (p. 103). In the same vein, Khan et al. (2021) demonstrated how Najwa's faith "gives her a drive for survival" (p. 816).

From another standpoint, Khalifeh and Muharram (2021) critically examined how the story is an example of "the postcolonial concept of 'writing back to the self'" (p. 132). Following this line of thought, Mazouzi (2021) investigated the novel to understand "the issue of Otherness" (p. 293). Extending the discussion, Ilyas (2021) comprehensively investigated the diasporic issue of immigrants and why they "accept hybridity and multi-ethnicity as their social practices" (p. 118). In consonance with the same thematic strain, Talafha et al. (2022) critically observed how Najwa coped "with the difficulties of her material(istic) world" (p. 447). In a more negotiated tone, Chebel (2023) elucidated why Najwa accepted her diasporic life and "refuses to go back to Sudan" (p. 512).

Mahir et al. (2023) contended that the novel offered an insightful critique of the West in their judgment of the Muslim people's "backwardness" (p. 79). Büyükgebiz (2023) successfully illuminated how the novel "delves into the complex experiences of Western Muslims who must navigate both cultural and religious identities" (p. 223). In continuation of this argument, Roshan and Al Tamimi (2024) draw attention to the fact that "Najwa, the protagonist, struggles to find her identity while encountering innumerable challenges in the diasporic route" (p. 653). Extending the argument, Ghanem (2024) critically reviewed how "Najwa transposes her nostalgic memories of home into a diasporic, theological form of belonging" (p. 247).

Murad (2024) eloquently argued that the novel "informs our understanding of the challenge of integration into Western countries, as well as the paradox of its lure and pain" (p. 64). In the same spirit, Parveen (2024) cogently articulated how Muslim women face "stereotypes" (p. 33). Along similar lines, Ben Amara (2024) comprehensively investigated how Najwa creates "space in which both agency and resistance become possible" (p. 68).

Bendjemil (2024) insightfully observed how education can become "a compelling catalyst" for society (p. 74). Ben Amara (2024) convincingly showed the challenges of a diasporic individual "within an alienating cross-cultural context" (p. 280). Zulfiqar (2024) illustrated that the novel embraces "cultural diversity and normative pluralism" (p. 578). Like Ben Amara, Rosman (2025) noted that the novel focuses on how Najwa faces "several challenges...in London" (p. 472).

It has been clear from the critical review of previous research that there is an extensive focus only on the challenges faced by diasporic people. Little attention was given to how Najwa critically challenged the established narratives and reinscribed her viewpoints. Much of the current research emphasises how and why the voices of the subaltern are not heard, rather than assuming they are absent. The current analysis is also more text-intensive. The significance of the present paper lies in its in-depth demonstration of the crumpling and impeding effects of metanarratives and how Najwa managed to address them.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper has attempted to analyse Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) from a postcolonial and Third Wave Feminist perspective to critically appreciate and envision the dynamics of Najwa's struggle in diasporic London. It attempted to demonstrate how she could position herself as an active agent of change and, in doing so, deconstructed some of the dehumanising metanarratives against the muslim women believing in faith and wearing hijab. It is the call of the Third Wave Feminism to recognise and appreciate women in different locations and cultures as they are, rather than imposing a universal definition of an ideal woman. The method is qualitative, text-based, and interpretative in nature, with Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* as the primary text. However, it has drawn inspiration from key critical lenses of postcolonialism and third-wave feminism to analyse specific passages of the text. These two critical approaches are complementary in nature and have provided interpretive strategies and theoretical frameworks.

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) argued that people, after getting mentally colonised, suffer and live a subjugated life in "the liminality of the nation, (in) the margins of modernity, ... (in) ambivalence and vacillation" (p. 37). His concepts like 'third space' (p. 37) and 'in-betweenness' (p. 2), along with Spivak's concept of 're-inscription' (Spivak, 1999, p. 228), played an undercurrent in generating some of the critical discussions on the text.

What Stuart Hall (1990) contended was that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (p. 226). This argument is used to analyse how her identity as 'being and becoming' is shaped by her as a Sudanese, Muslim, immigrant, and woman in multiple locations and spaces.

In the colonial context, Spivak (1999) argued that colonially tainted content about one's life and culture would "force to make the 'native' see themselves as 'other'" (p.212). She reasoned that believing in such metanarratives is akin to accepting one's history as "an un-inscribed earth" (p. 228) and proposed to write back as "what is at stake is a 'worlding,' the re-inscription of a cartography that must (re)present itself as impeccable" (Spivak, p.228). Najwa had to write back to both the traditional Sudanese society and also to the secular culture of London to reassert her identity as a muslim woman wearing hijab and believing in religion.

The Third Wave Feminism—"third-wave feminism as a postmodern version of feminism" (Snyder 2008, p. 186) has been used to illustrate the 'mini-narrative' of Najwa to deconstruct the metanarratives of Western liberals' and feminists' assumption that Muslim women wearing the veil are victims of tradition and subjugation. Barry (2002) argued that meta-narratives "are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality" (p.64), and Najwa fragmented such illusions and asserted her voices, albeit silently, as a marginalised and diasporic subaltern.

Jackson and Jones (1998) reasoned not to make a canonical standard of the ideal woman as it will be "marginalising women not like 'ourselves', casting them as 'other'?" (p. 1). The third wave of feminism accepts and gives validity to the story of Najwa. In her famous 2013 book *Do Muslim women need saving?*, Abu-Lughod argued that "Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged." (p. 47). In the same vein, Abu-Lughod (2013) argued: "The veil has been turned into a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, but for many women it is an expression of modesty, morality, and sometimes even political resistance" (p. 44). A critical reading of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* underscores, in fictional terms, among other things, the truthfulness of such claims.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

A critical analysis of the text demonstrates Najwa's struggle and navigation through various liminal spaces and contact zones. Najwa navigates herself and her identity in London within the labyrinth of multiple social and cultural discourses. She secured her job in a London mosque, which is now the epicentre of her spiritual regeneration and cultural roots. She reflects and attempts to locate her position in the limited contact zones of that society. She portrayed her position among those who are "subdued, taken over by a fragile, neglected part of themselves" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 7). The text depicted how she has been a kind of mentally defeated person despite

her conviction that she has been spiritually getting reengenerated and on the path of the right direction. The novel narrates her struggle to carve out a positive and constructive identity in an environment of self-denigration and self-abasement. The novel critically portrays her oscillations between her past and present, her life in in-betweenness, her attempts to reinscribe her life, her mappings and reworldings into a cultural landscape criss-crossed by diverse religious, political, racial, and economic forces.

The analysis of the novel reveals that the locations do not play a decisive role in determining the characters of individuals. Najwa's brother Omar was so Westernised in ideology that he wished the British to continue to rule Sudan. He was convinced they were "better off under the British, and it was a shame that they left" (p. 14). When Najwa and Omar were growing up in Sudan, they were imbibing Westernised perspectives and attitudes to such an extent that they used to travel to European countries every now and then to explore. Anwar, at one time, protested: "Why do you go to Europe and not want to see your own country? Our country is beautiful" (p. 31). While living a dignified life in a privileged society in Sudan, they were adopting and enjoying the Western way of life on their own free will. Randa was proud to say that they did not fast at all in London last year, and Najwa agreed: "Really? I couldn't even imagine Ramadan in London, London in Ramadan. 'How can anyone fast in London? It would spoil all the fun'" (p. 27). Later on, due to the political turmoil, her family moved to London. Najwa started drawing her inner strength by turning towards Islamic faith and culture, and staying away from the Western ways of enjoying fun and nightlife. It has been demonstrated that Najwa's adaptation of Islamic life later in her life in London is not due to any external social pressure but because of her own conviction to empower her spiritual dimension of life.

Najwa's fiancé, Anwar, was a hardcore communist in ideology in Sudan. He had an anti-capitalist and anti-Islamic attitude towards life and the world-view. She remarked Anwar "despised Western music, Western ways" (p. 24) and also observed, "He never fasted in Ramadan; he did not see the point of it" (p. 31). However, after the power turmoil in Sudan, he had to take political asylum in London and gradually changed his attitude towards the West. He became "less sharp in his criticism of the West. And this was the same Anwar who had led student demonstrations against the IMF and burnt the American flag" (p. 115).

The text shows the power play and corruption in African states. Anwar commented on how the elite ruling class gets a 'commission' on every government contract and squanders the money in European capitals on shopping and enjoying a fulfilling lifestyle. He protested, "Can't you see, it's corrupt?" (p. 37). This neocolonial elite class exploits its own people to maintain a European standard of living. Najwa agreed, "Every year we went to Europe, every summer we stayed in our flat in London or in hotels in Paris and Rome and did all our shopping" (p. 40). Anwar foresaw that this government "system is bound to fall" (p. 40). The rampant corruption, economic exploitation and the marginalisation of the ordinary people led to a coup and the elite ruling class were caught and punished. Najwa, along with her family members, had to flee to London to survive. In the multicultural environment of London, they started navigating their life afresh. Najwa explained very vividly their precarious liminal condition of life:

...all kinds of pain, degrees of falling. In our first weeks in London, we sensed the ground tremble beneath us. When Baba was found guilty, we broke down... When Baba was hanged, the earth... split open and we tumbled down... as if we would fall and fall for eternity without ever landing... a bottomless pit (pp. 48-49).

To survive and navigate out of this bottomless pit, she took refuge in religion. She started strengthening her faith and became committed to her religious practices to empower herself emotionally, spiritually, and socially. She constantly compared her present position with her past experiences. She wanted to hide her past Khartoum life to avoid the embarrassment of working here as a housemaid. The death of her father symbolises the end of her past rich life. Her father was the source of her emotional, social, cultural and financial strength. Her new life in London is based purely on her Islamic faith and epistemology.

Experienced and exposed to both the Sudanese elite class culture and the Western secular, liberal world, Najwa negotiated both and turned to faith as a source of power and a space to take refuge. She wanted to reinscribe her life with Islamic values and traditions to stand tall with dignity and culture. It is her choice, and she negotiated economic prosperity for that space. She described, "Wish that not so many doors have closed in my face; the doors of taxis and education, beauty salons" (p. 8).

That Najwa negotiated her identity had also been vividly presented on various occasions where she attempted to hide her authentic self: "My heart starts to pound as it always does when there is the threat that someone will know who I am, who I was, what I've become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?" (p. 55). Once a proud Sudanese, now living in a liminal condition due to the economic downfall, socio-cultural disorientation and locational change. Instead of narrating her pathetic story, she preferred to face the situation with dignity and honour by re-inventing herself and re-worlding her cultural life within a 'third space' in London.

The overgeneralisation of muslim women as a suppressed, homogeneous, passive community has been fragmented in the descriptions of Muslim women across the generational gap and locational space. For instance,

Najwa believed that there are various types of Muslim girls, some wear hijabs while others don't, some are conscious about how they wear it, while others don't pay much attention. She again compared muslim girls from London with those from Khartoum. All these descriptions of women from diverse sociocultural locations only demonstrate that women in Islamic society are not a homogeneous group and can not be narrated/represented through a single metanarrative. The individual Muslim girls were unique and distinctive in their own ways and different in many subtle ways. They also varied from nation to nation to such an extent that people from other cultures and countries cannot represent them authentically.

Najwa's liminal third space in a London bus epitomises how she empowered herself spiritually against a hostile environment. She was calm and composed and believed that she would survive the hostile "three young men" purely based on her faith and her personal relationship with Allah. She prayed, "I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak" repeatedly to get such protection (p. 62). This incident reinscribed that faith and religion had become a source of emotional strength for a Muslim woman rather than a symbol of oppression and suppression.

Resonating with the anguish of Gayatri Spivak in her powerful essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Najwa's reactions to diverse incidents, experiences, and dreams demonstrated how the voices of the subaltern are being constantly marginalised, misrepresented, ignored, and subdued under the powerful social, political and economic power structures. The incident where the three young men harassed her in a London bus demonstrates how Muslim women were doubly marginalised in society. Being in a liminal third space, she had to face two powerful social structures: the androginic society of London and the Islamophobic attitudes of some local young people. The three young men taunted and harassed: "You Muslim scum, then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends – they are laughing. My chest hurts, and I wipe my eyes" (p. 62).

While working as a housemaid in a Muslim family in London, Najwa was conscious of her identity and had always wondered if her stories and identities would be heard, respected, and honoured. She knew that her position as a domestic worker made her voice, stories, and morality subject to perpetual suppression under the dominant hegemonic power structures. She wondered, "If I tell Doctora Zeinab that my mother died in such an expensive hospital, would she believe these words coming from her granddaughter's new nanny?" (p. 56).

The novel demonstrated the dynamic and lively voices of the people living in the liminal third space, which were otherwise considered voiceless and silent. It depicted their rich ethics, polite culture and humane behaviour. The novelist had deconstructed the perspectives of the dominant group and described vividly the ways of life of the subaltern people through the reflections of Najwa. Once she was a privileged girl, she recounted how she perceived the working class people: "All the ingratiating manners, the downcast eyes, the sideway movements of the servants I grew up with. I used to take them for granted. I didn't know a lot about them – our succession of Ethiopian maids, houseboys, our gardener – but I must have been close to them, absorbing their ways, so that now, years later and in another continent, I am one of them" (p. 65). What seemed to be routine, 'granted' ways of life of the subaltern class could be so vibrant, engaging and dynamic world-views, as minutely portrayed in the character of Najwa in London.

In London, after the death of her parents, Najwa sought refuge in faith and religion as a way of surviving and navigating through life and society. She considered it a sign of her strength and emotional, social, and spiritual empowerment. Faith helped her stand tall and go ahead in the socially and economically turbulent times, and she had peace now in her heart. She felt secure and composed. She did not consider it a sign of oppression and religious coercion as portrayed in some of the Western Islamophobic feminist literature. Her ardent faith and sincere devotion urged her to motivate her brother Omar to give up his vagabond and drug addicted life, and return to faith and religion. But he refused to accept such a religious way of life whenever she took the initiative to convince him. Using metaphors, Najwa suggested his disapproval of religion and falling back to his old drug-addicted life, "Ever since I started to pray and wear hijab, I have been hoping he would change like I've changed. He puts his glasses back on" (p. 74). These glasses symbolise his past world views and points of view towards life and society.

The novel depicted the working-class people and their dynamic personal lives, their hopes and aspirations, and their past regrets and future dreams through the character of Najwa. She found her imagination getting wings along with her more profound understanding of Islamic knowledge, and found meaning and peace in her submission to faith. She narrated: "The religious programmes 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...'" (p. 74).

The diasporic experiences of Sudanese people in London are dynamic and vary extensively from individual to individual. Tamer has visited Sudan as a guest but has never lived there for an extended period. He has spent most of his life in Oman, Egypt, and London. He received a Western education and felt he belonged there. However, he can't identify himself strongly with any of the identities and nationalities and finally settled into "being a Muslim is my identity" (p. 83). In the same vein, Najwa initially claimed to be a Sudanese, but due to twenty years of prolonged living in London, she said, "I've changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim." (p.

83). They have been grappling with and negotiating their roots and identities, and navigating themselves into various third spaces.

Najwa's navigating into third spaces, often grappling with ambivalence, is clearly more visible in her reflection: "For a brief moment I am not sure who I am, the Najwa who danced at the American Club disco in Khartoum or Najwa, the maid Lamya hired... (from) the Central Mosque" (p. 84). It is not a journey from a Sudanese traditional Muslim society towards Western disco dance in London. This active journey of hers from an open American Club disco society towards a mosque and faith-oriented, veiled, traditional way of life deconstructs the Western Feminist universalist narrative that Muslim women are oppressed within their traditional societies and reinscribes that women's turning to religion is an active decision for emotional and spiritual empowerment by taking faith as an agency of security and fulfilment.

Najwa reviewed her position as a caretaker in Lamya's house and debunked the myth that London's diasporic society is all about equality, fraternity, and humanity, and that there is no room for any religious prejudices and racial discrimination. Even within her own Arab diasporic community, after a prolonged negotiation with Lamya, she concluded, "She will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin colour... She will see these things and these things only; she will never look beyond them" (p. 88). If in London, women are victims of religious prejudices, classed as economic underdogs and face racial discrimination; in Sudan, the condition of women is no better. Najwa was aware of how women were treated as passive agents. She agreed with Answar's comments that the Sudanese society has "double standards for men and women." I (Najwa) remembered how Omar was allowed to smoke and drink beer and I was not. The seedy parties he went to without taking me" (p. 130).

After critically observing Sudanese hypocritical attitudes and double standards, as Answar described, for men and women, and after experiencing religious prejudices and racial discrimination in secular London, Najwa turned towards faith and religion as the last resort in her search for a safe third space. Faith became a great source of emotional and spiritual empowerment. It created a liminal space where individuals can regenerate and navigate for a more fulfilling life experience. She vividly narrated her life-changing experience during the preachings of Um Waleed:

...when she says, 'He (Allah) 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 lightning. When she says, 'Ya habibi, ya Rasul Allah' I feel I love the Prophet as much as she does (p. 135).

She is now exploring a space in an apparently crowded mosque. It was implied in the very description how faith has become a source of her emotional and physical strength and created space for her to breathe, "...going straight to the mosque. There I would break my fast, wedged in the crowd, sometimes there was hardly a place to sit and then we would all stand up to pray, and suddenly there was more space. (p. 137)

Najwa searched a liminal space and found the best of it in Ramadan in the local mosque when she prays next to the wife of a Senegalese Ambassador: "She prayed next to me, shoulder to shoulder" (p. 137). Even in such a close and intimate relationship with the wife of the ambassador, she did not have the courage and confidence to speak out about the stories of the dynamic, secular, and modern lifestyles of her childhood. The stories of the subaltern, despite the best of its kind, have always been suppressed due to the socio-cultural stigma and stereotypical images as she works now as a maid servant in a London suburb. She realised that her stories, even if she speaks, will have no impact: "I didn't tell her that, once upon a time, diplomats like her husband and even the President of the Sudan were regular visitors in my father's house. I didn't tell her more than my name and what I did. There was no need – we had come together to worship and it was enough" (p. 137). This reinforces what Spivak once doubted in her powerful essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat (p. 25)

The story of Najwa, who always wanted to share her proud past, found herself in a silenced margin due to her position as a manual worker in a London suburb. This demonstrates that stories of the margins are being wishfully neglected, marginalised, and discouraged from getting foregrounded in the social discourses. She described her fall into the lowest strata. She was convinced that no one would believe her rich, vibrant and dynamic stories, and so she could not speak out. On another occasion, she reflected:

If I tell Doctora Zeinab that my mother died in such an expensive hospital (The Humana Wellington Hospital), would she believe these words coming from her granddaughter's new nanny?

After being alienated by the bias, hypocrisy and double standard of the people in the traditional culture of Sudan, and after being marginalised at the bottom of London's economic strata, she described:

What they could see of me was not impressive: my lack of religious upbringing, no degree, no husband, no money... came from a disadvantaged home... Slowly, surely I was settling at the bottom. It felt oddly comfortable, painless... And there, buried below, was the truth. (p.174)

The emotional and painful narration of her story as being 'buried below' underscores that the stories of the vast majority of the people working at the lowest strata of a society, carrying dignity, honour and culture, need to be respected, explored and narrated. It is a tragedy that these mini-narratives have often been ignored and left unheard under the grand stories of society. Najwa turned to faith and mosque to reinscribe her identity and regenerate her emotional and spiritual power, believing that, "if I keep plodding this path, Allah will give me back that happiness again, will replace the past with something grander, more potent and enhanced" (p. 137). Here she reverses the projection of the Western feminist narrative that turning a Muslim woman into faith and Islamic tradition is like becoming a victim of suppression and oppression. She deliberately rejected many jobs, like driving, and ignored the prejudiced perspectives of the economically privileged people to become a faith-based, confident, and optimistic individual. Faith has become a source of emotional power, dignity and mental strength rather than a sign of weakness and suppression, and the mosque has become a liminal space as she herself clarified, "In the mosque no one knew my past and I didn't speak of it" (p. 174).

Since her perceived identity and the assumed reality of her life as a wealthy woman of elite Sudan had been shattered through migration and economic downfall, she had to rebuild her life's meaning, realities, dreams and identities. She pondered, "Sometimes I would stop and think what was I doing in this woman's car, what was I doing in her house, who gave me this (religious) book to read" (p. 174). This is a dramatic and metaphorical exploration of her search for identity, worldviews, and life, where she comes from and where she is headed. She turned to religion to find out the answer: "The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it. Refresh my memory" (p. 174). It clearly explains that she is not embarking on her life in a new way afresh, but her roots and trajectories of life have always been with her. She is now only reclaiming the very epistemological knowledge and attempting to reinscribe her identity and past. She asserted:

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. 174)

This is her most earnest attempt to find a direction in life. She attempted to find directions in a world that constantly changes its locational and cultural spaces. She is making sense of her life and mapping a terrain of life which is constantly swinging between her nostalgic past and an uncertain future.

Her conflict with Anwar was that of the clash between the metanarratives. Anwar puts "rationale, reason" (P. 176) forward before her search for faith and spiritual empowerment. While Najwa found faith in God as an inspiring, regenerating and reassuring force in her lonely struggle to carve out a space in the liminal spaces in London, Answer "believed it was backward to have faith in anything supernatural; angels, djinns, Heaven, Hell, resurrection" (p. 176). Najwa knew she was right in taking her decision to follow her path of faith and optimism, but could not defend herself against Anwar's metanarrative:

He regarded it as a weakness... Look at what happened in Sudan, look at human rights, look at freedom of speech and look at terrorism. But that was exactly where I got lost. I did not want to look at these big things because they overwhelmed me. (p 176)

She was determined to defend her position. She asserted, "I wanted me, my feelings and dreams" (p 176) and reassured herself with the self-talk,

It wasn't fundamentalists who killed my father; it wasn't fundamentalists who gave my brother drugs. But I could never stand up to Anwar. I did not have the words, the education or the courage. I had given in to him, but he had been wrong; the guilt never ever went away (p. 176).

She struggled to create a space of her own in the liminal spaces, against the waves of impeding metanarratives. She wanted to reinscribe her own script based on her own roots, "Now I wanted a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence. I yearned to go back to being safe with God" (p. 176).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the paper has argued that Najwa's navigation through her liminal life in London was complex and dynamic. She was aware of her life and her locational, social and economic circumstances. She critically observed her every single perspective and trajectory, reflected on and interrogated them, and actively engaged herself in the self-discovery process. Decolonial in spirit, she disrupted the pejorative and impeding metanarratives, albeit silently. She acknowledged that her turning towards God is an active choice. Self-introspective, she constantly asked the basic existential questions to interpret the condition of her life in diasporic, liminal, and hybrid contact zones.

Resonating like an African immigrant, a subaltern, and a Muslim woman living in liminality and in-betweenness in a diasporic London, she constantly problematised, intervened and coped with the pejorative, impeding metanarratives and synthesised her identity by continually drawing on the best from her past and her potential future. She anchored and synergised the best from all sources and became a part in the process of "*becoming as well as being*" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Disapproving of both her Sudanese patriarchal society and secular life of diasporic London, due to the marginalisation of the subalterns, she reinscribed her life confidently by anchoring on faith, her last resort to regenerate herself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is thankful to the Deanship of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at the University of Bisha for supporting this work through the Fast-Track Research Support Program.

## REFERENCES

- Aboulela, L. (2006). *Minaret*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim women need saving?* Harvard University Press.
- Aladaylah, M. (2018). Negotiating narrative in transcultural spaces by Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 18, 173–186. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.18.1.9>
- Al-Karawi, S. T., & Bahar, I. B. (2014). Negotiating the veil and identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 14(3), 255–267. <https://doi.org/10.17576/GEMA-2014-1403-16>
- Barry, P. (2002). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (2nd ed.). Manchester University Press.
- Ben Amara, A. (2024). The politics of space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Jamal Mahjoub's *A Line in the River*: Khartoum, city of memory. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 24(1), 267–285. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v24i1.551>
- Ben Amara, A. (2024). A poetics of chaos: Spatial metaphors in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(6), 68–85.
- Bendjemil, K. (2024). Empowering narratives: Female solidarity and religious education in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *Ichkalat Journal*, 13(1), 74–90.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Boumous, M., & Benabed, F. (2020). Enhancing women's mental health through Islamic teachings in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* *Aleph: Langues, Médias et Sociétés*, 7(3), 103–115.
- Büyükgebiz, M. (2023). Western Muslims: Migration and identity in Aboulela's *Minaret*. *Asya Studies – Academic Social Studies / Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar*, 7(24), 217–224. <https://doi.org/10.31455/asya.1279170>
- Chebel, M. (2023). Reconceptualising Western freedom: Leila Aboulela's representation of displaced Muslim women in *Minaret*. *Tributaries Journal for Studies and Scientific Research in Social and Human Sciences*, 8(1), 504–521.
- Ghanem, H. (2024). The archive of hospitality in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*: A Sufi feminist revision. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 61(2), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2421399>
- Gilmour, R. (2012). Living between languages: The politics of translation in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47(2), 207–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412440433>
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hasan, M. M. (2015). Seeking freedom in the “third space” of diaspora: Muslim women's identity in Aboulela's *Minaret* and Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 35(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2015.1007666>
- Hunter, E. (2013). The Muslim "who has faith" in Leila Aboulela's novels, *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2009). *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 25(1), 88–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2013.795761>
- Ilyas, M. (2021). Critical discourse analysis of diaspora writings: A new paradigm. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 10(2), 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.23.2021.102.105.121>

- Ishaque, N., Bibi, S., Faheem, M. A., & Rasheed, C. H. (2020). Traversing the origin and diaspora: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* in the light of Miriam Cooke's transnational Muslim feminist sensibility. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 40(4), 694–706. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1836596>
- Jackson, S., & Jones, J. (1998). *Thinking for ourselves: An introduction to feminist theorising*. In *Contemporary feminist theories*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Khalifeh, A. G. J., & Muharram, M. A. H. (2021). Writing back to the self: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name Is Salma*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 64(1), 132–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.1948385>
- Khan, A., Ahmad, M., Hamid, A., & Rahman, G. (2021). Analysing the portrayal of orthodox Muslim women in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *Multicultural Education*, 7(8), 810–820.
- Mahir, N. A., Zakaria, Z. A., Idrus, M. M., & Massari, N. (2023). The hijab – Debunking the Western feminist framework. *Al-Azkiyaa – International Journal of Language and Education*, 2(1), 79–88. <https://doi.org/10.33102/alazkiyaa55>
- Mazouzi, H. (2021). Us and others: Gender otherness in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. *Revue El-Tawassol*, 27(2), 292–305.
- Morey, P. (2017). “Halal fiction” and the limits of postsecularism: Criticism, critique, and the Muslim in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 52(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989416689295>
- Murad, R. (2024). Resisting the allure: The West as fiction in the Arab immigrant novel. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 11(5), 48–67. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2042>
- Parssinen, K. (2020, Winter). Writing as a spiritual offering: A conversation with Leila Aboulela. *World Literature Today*. <https://worldliteraturetoday.org/2020/winter/writing-spiritual-offering-conversation-leila-aboulela-keija-parssinen>
- Parveen, S. (2024). Do Muslim women have choices? Reading Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*. *Scrutiny2*, 28(1), 33–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2024.2349055>
- Rashid, C. E. (2012). Islamic individualism and the logic of the narrative. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 14(4), 613–624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2012.730863>
- Roshan, K. M., & Al Tamimi, Y. A. (2024). Muslim women's diasporic identity: A critical discourse analysis of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 52(3), 653–670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.2321865>
- Rosman, R. (2025). A Muslim female *Bildungsroman*: Quest for identity and sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). *Intellectual Discourse*, 33(2), 457–474. <https://doi.org/10.32890/id2025>
- Snyder, R. C. (2008). What is third-wave feminism? A new directions essay. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34(1), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1086/588436>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Macmillan.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Harvard University Press.
- Steiner, T. (2008). Strategic nostalgia, Islam, and cultural translation in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Coloured Lights*. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 20(2), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2008.9678298>
- Talafha, H. M., Al-Badarneh, A. F., Alzoubi, N. A., & Almwajeh, M. O. (2022). Out of materialistic ideologies and into the mosque: The neutralising power of spirituality in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures*, 14(2), 433–453.
- Zulfiqar, S. (2024). Leila Aboulela, Islam, and the trajectory of the African novel. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 60(5), 578–590. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2415671>