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Questioning and Subversion of some Stereotypical Assumptions about the Muslim Veil/ Hijab: A Study of the Novel *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela

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Abstract:

The veil is an evasively constructed that does not have a 'fixed' meaning, and any cultural or literary discourse that involves a colossal insight of the veil should be questioned. In Minaret, Aboulela dwells upon religion, piety and humanity and manifests an affirmative picture of veiling. According to the protagonist of Minaret, for her, this concept of the veil is different as compared to the world's perspectives as she thinks it to be a sense of union, safety, security, shield and contentment. However, Aboulela represents a two-fold perspective of the veil and the Muslim women. These are either veiled and religious or unveiled and secular. The paper reveals that in many of them the Islamic faith in general and Muslim women, in particular, is often vilified and stereotyped. In many such representations, Islam is introduced as a backward and vicious religion, Muslim men as controlling, barbarian sadists and Muslim women as either Islam's victims or its fortunate survivors. This drift in the representations of Islam and Muslim people noticeably intensified following the terrorist attack 9/11. Hence, the paper attempts at breaking such stereotypes.

Key words: Subjugation, Hijab, New reflection of Islam, Secularism, Categorizations, Immigrant, Catastrophes, Muslim and non-Muslim Feminists, Autonomy, Emancipation.

Aboulela herself, as an educated female writer who wears the hijab, is a realistic counter to the image of the subjugated woman in Islam. Unlike those previous writers who attempts "to explain" or ridicule Islam from a western perception, she tries to "write from inside the experience of growing up and living with a network of customs and beliefs" (Philips 11). Aboulela through the novel has produced a new reflection of Islam and Muslims. Writing about Islam and Muslims, for Aboulela, is writing about herself. The portrayal of Islam is hers and in defending Islam, she is defending her own values. That is why, for all she has written about Islam and Muslims, she says, "I have so far written close to my autobiographical situations" (Aboulela).

Aboulela's interpretation of Islam and its relationship with the west does not challenge the western image only. Rather, it challenges some eastern ones too. Since Islam and western secularism is prevalent all over the world, Aboulela's fiction has emerged as a different voice in terms of much eastern as well as western fiction. In addition, Islam is generally considered as either a cultural or a political occurrence. Thus, following questions creep up the mind after reading the text: In what ways does Najwa's faith defy these easy categorizations? How does Najwa reimburse for the lack of protection she experiences? In Najwa, Aboulela depicts an independent woman whose faith is not a matter of abstract dogma or empty rituals, but rather a struggle within, between the lures of an individualist consumer culture and the promise of a communitarian religious experience. Does the position of women like Najwa confront western philosophy of feminism? How does she challenge typecast of Muslim women? Aboulela asserts to generate imaginary worlds that mirror Islamic logic worlds where cause and effect is administered by a Muslim justification and all these expressions can be felt in *Minaret*.

While wearing the hijab is the act of a conventional Muslim, Aboulela does not reject western culture for the sake of Islam. Rather, she tries to bridge the gap between the two. Unlike some of the western writers who look at Islam from outside, and unlike, too, those Muslim writers who look at the west from the outside, Aboulela appears, at the same time, to be inside both of them. She states, "I am considerably westernized [but] I am in this religion. It is in me" (Aboulela 22). As a result, one of the main themes of her fiction is the removal of misunderstanding. In addressing the relationship between Islam and the west, Aboulela argues: "This clash between Islam and the west actually first happened in Muslim countries, when the colonizer came, not when Muslims started coming to Britain" (Allfree). Out of the many controversial issues arising between Muslims and westerners, the hijab is one of the most striking examples. According to Aboulela: "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 a criticism of the hijab they haven't listened or read enough. They just think: 'oh these people don't like us.' But that's not dialogue. It's about people taking sides. And when it comes to getting to know each other better, taking sides hold us back" (Allfree). Regardless of the cause of this misunderstanding, then, Muslims 'haven't listened or read enough' to understand why they are criticized. For Aboulela, both sides must take part in the dialogue.

Minaret is the story of a Sudanese girl living a happy and comfortable life in Sudan. Her family is rich and aristocratic. Her father is a close friend of the president and her mother is from an important family. Brought up and educated as western, Najwa enjoys traveling to Europe, attending parties in the American club in Khartoum, and having fun generally. Then a coup in Sudan suddenly brings changes in her life. She becomes a refugee in London, her father is executed, her

mother dies, and her twin brother is put behind bars for drug dealing and fighting with a policeman. In London, she is free enough to have an affair with Anwar who was her friend in Khartoum University and who fled to London after another coup. After leaving Anwar and to moderate the feelings of guilt and find relief, Najwa turns to Islam; she wears the hijab and becomes religious. In London, without a family to help her, she works as a house cleaner in a Muslim house when she falls in love once again, with Tamer, the young brother of her employer. In spite of their different ages and positions, Najwa and Tamer's similar religiousness led Tamer to insist on marrying her, but his family refuses and Najwa leaves the house. As a compromise, she ends her relationship with Tamer; the family does not stop Tamer from studying his favourite major at university. She leaves Tamer but has before her the fulfilling prospect of going on hajj.

Najwa's interaction with women in the masjid and the practice of wearing hijab can be viewed as a means of recovering the self from disturbing experiences she faces because of her gender and immigrant status. Islam becomes a way to get divest of these troubles and provides her with the momentum to establish a fresh life ahead. Her life is now a discipline one because of her newly found faith what she previously did not follow. Her journey to this new life has not been without catastrophes. Specifically, for wearing hijab, she endures painful experiences as people around her are 'critical and judgmental' of hijab, and they sense discomfort by the sight of hijab-wearing women. Because of her Muslim identity, she is attacked in a bus because her religion was determined by just a piece of cloth she wore on her head. Eventually, the bus driver who was the bystander of the event did not attempt to save her from any disgrace and just looked away. There is an assertion against hijab in the world by both Muslim and non-Muslim feminists; they assert that hijab is vehemently put on Muslim

women's head, and therefore it infringes the human rights. On the other hand, the protagonist Najwa does not wear hijab in the predominantly Muslim society of Khartoum, whereas she starts wearing it when she lives in London, which symbolizes a secular approach to life. In Khartoum, she used to fast only to lose weight. As she states, "Girls like me who didn't wear tobes or hijab weren't praying" (43). In Khartoum, she accepted colonial modernity and wore western-style clothes like short skirts and tight blouses, while she saw the village girls wear tobes that [cover] their slimness- pure white cotton covering their arms and hair. Before taking on hijab, Najwa has been in a predicament for a while to decide whether she should wear it or not. After a lingering thinking process, she decides to wear it, and there is no pressure from anywhere, as she states:

> I wrapped the tobe [hijab] around me and covered my hair. In the full-length mirror, I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than an offer. (246)

The same contentment she senses when she goes out wearing hijab, "When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not bad, not so bad'. Around me was a new gentleness" (247). Therefore, it is clear that she embraces hijab as a part of her humility, and prefers it out of her self-governing determination. Thus, Aboulela exposes the conservative unenthusiastic insight of the critics of hijab who assert that Muslim women are enforced to wear it. Finally, she defines hijab-wearing women by giving it a new light of understanding.

Through *Minaret*, Aboulela dismisses the chief accusation against Islam regarding the hijab issue. While it is conservatively accepted that Muslim women are forced to wear hijab and follow the Islamic way of life, Aboulela shows a strong

elasticity to wearing hijab and Islamic way of life. In *Islam In Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries,* Nilufer Gole underlines how the visibility of Islamic signs in public indicates the presence of many Muslims in European countries. Muslims, as Gole suggests, "With their multiple attachments to languages, ethnic group, religion and the ummah disrupt the national definition of citizenship and arouse suspicion of their loyalty" (388), and even though these attachments are mostly personal, they are still regarded as a threat to public as a result of which Muslims in European countries are radicalized as Tindognan underlines, "to the point of being perceived as contrary to democratic values" (83).

Minaret with its architectural structure, according to Gole "together with the dome has become a structural metonym of Muslim identity" (386), and as Minaret's foreground the Muslim actors, the veil, reveals the Muslim actor "as pious, as feminine in public life" (388). Thus, among other Islamic signs, the veil deserves special emphasis because while in itself it is a mute symbol, it has an agency that functions both in personal and cultural domains while at the same time as Gole argues brings the personal under public attention (390). Gole further discusses in *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, the veiled female body reflects the gender problems; thus "no other symbol than the veil reconstructs with such force the 'otherness' of Islam to the west" (1), and 'visible' signs of this attachment, such as hijab, become benchmarks on which European or the British and Muslim identities are negotiated.

Minaret showcases how hijab's meaning shifts from one culture to another either meant just to be an agency of diversions. For instance, while hijab might be perceived as oppressing by the West, *Minaret* portrays an opposite understanding where the veiled body might feel liberated through the veil. White British perspective is absent is the novel, the westernized youths in the narrative such as Randa

and Anwar have very negative views of hijab. For them, there is no opportunity for societal growth and economic development unless women dump Islamic dresses. For Randa and Anwar, women wearing black chadors are reminders of the threat posed by uncivilized, bigoted, puritan sides. Randa looking at magazine covers featuring Muslim women in black chadors, asks Najwa: "How can a woman work dressed like that?" (29). Elsewhere, Anwar, echoing Randa's words condemns those veiled women saying "We have to go forward not back" (34). Thus, as this attitude by two characters lay bare, veiling is regarded as an obstacle to progress, through a discourse in which "veiling is received as a force of 'obscurantism' and is often identified with women's subservience; […] as an affront to contemporary notions of 'gender emancipation' and 'universal progress'" (Gole 4).

In Europe, as Andreassen comment "veiling is persistently framed as being a threat to universal values and principles of gender equality, autonomy, emancipation, secularism and tolerance" (17), since it is perceived as a "visible indicator of difference" (Tarlo 131), as a result of which: women thus become physical markers between the two cultures, which are constructed as each other's conflicting in a hierarchical manner, hence making it impractical to be an incorporated part of both altogether. This addition into European national societies is therefore not merely a question of shared values and norms; it is also a physical integration. Muslim women become, with their bodies, physical symbols of the success or failure of that integration. (Andressen 28)

As an anticipated result of this attitude, as also argued by Jawad and Benn, "liberating Muslim women as part of the civilizing mission" (12) was a very common theme in literature produced from an Orientalist viewpoint. This viewpoint, represented in *Minaret* through characters such as Randa and Anwar, who cannot even bear the sight of veiled women, as

they associate veiling with backwardness, is strongly criticized in the novel where the negative view of the hijab is deconstructed. Even from the very beginning, despite the fact that Najwa cannot openly say it, she makes it known to the reader that she does not agree with Randa's comments on hijab-wearing women. She avoids Randa's intriguing questions with a simple "I don't know" (29). Then, in the following parts of the narrative, here and there the reader encounters Najwa's confessions of how she envies hijab wearing girls at the university for something she cannot quite name. Unlike Randa, who finds the sight of hijab-wearing students at Edinburgh University unbearable, their sight never irritates Najwa:

> I remembered the girls in Khartoum University wearing hijab and those who covered their hair with White tobes. They never irritated me, did they? I tried to think back and I saw the rows of students praying, the boys in front and the girls at the back. At sunset, I would sit and watch them praying. They held me still with their slow movements, the recitation of the Qur'an. I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it. Whenever I heard the azan in Khartoum, whenever I heard the Qur'an recited I would feel bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. (134)

Quite the contrary, the sight of hijab wearing girls, hearing the Qur'an recited, students praying at university give Najwa peace that she is trying to attain. When Najwa settles down to wear the hijab, she tries on a scarf. Putting the cloth on her hair, she looks at her image in the mirror and wonders whether this image was herself, "I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained; something was deflated. And was this real me?" (245). On the next page, Najwa is trying one of her mother's old tobes and describes wearing it as follows, "I tied my hair back with an elastic band, patted the curls down with pins. I wrapped the tobe around me covered my hair. In

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

Again, the undertone that hijab gives dignity is there, and in the second quotation, Najwa's determination to adopt the hijab becomes more clear. Once she decides she wants to "restrain," "to be invisible," she suppresses her past self, and as scarves conceal her hair, hijab as a way of life hides Najwa's past self. A page later, the reader witnesses, the pleasure Najwa derives from the sense of being visible and invisible at the same time. To this self-satisfaction, is added to the inner peace Najwa feels: "When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not bad, not so bad'. Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore" (247).Through this account, in the place of the discourse that frames the act of veiling as women's oppression because supposedly hijab makes them invisible as individual subjects, Aboulela offers a case where hijab is desired by the female character and the very same invisibility attacked by the counter-discourses becomes the very tenet of identity on which Najwa builds her selfhood. The following extract depicts how she rejoices upon realizing the builders cannot see her: "I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, 'Oh, so this is what is was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual.'"(247). The difficulty Najwa had with Britain was how she looked. Before adopting the hijab, she wore what she referred to as short skirts and tight blouses, with which she says she felt uncomfortable with. The male gaze she attracts with her looks disturbs her and she wants to avoid it.

While covering her body, she thinks hijab also gives her the dignity she has lost.

Minaret exemplifies cases where Muslims may be subjected to abuse due to carrying such visible signs of their religious identity, as the veil and the beard. Once Najwa is assaulted on the bus she takes home. Three young men throw a can of soft drink to Najwa spilling it over her head, calling her a "Muslim scum" (81). It is significant that the assailants do not use one of the derogatory words associated with colour racism such as *darkie, black, nigger, Paki etc.* "Muslim", here is a religious identity marker, which has become politicized and used against a woman only because she is expressing her religious affiliation through her Islamic dress. At another instance, Najwa tells the following sentences in relation to Tamer, again reflecting the fear of Islam in British society: "His voice is a little loud and, as we walk towards St John's Wood, I sense the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" (100).

Thus, she clarifies the position of Islam and the west for her in this important paragraph: "I appreciate the west. I love its literature, its transparency, and its energy. I admire its work ethic and its fairness. I need its technology and its medicine, and I want my children to have a western education. At the same time, I am fulfilled in my religion. Nothing can compete with the elegance, authority and details of the Koran" (Aboulela 22). In order to challenge the stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims, Aboulela depicts the modern world as full of instability, transformation and confusion in which it becomes difficult to hold on to stable images and concepts. In *Minaret*, people are unrooted. It could be argued that this depiction of the instability of the modern world is essential to understanding the transformational concepts and identities of postcolonial fiction. Like the world, the stable, fixed,

stereotypical concepts and images of Islam and Muslims should be challenged. This transforming world needs transformational concepts and images.

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