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The Muslim novel in English: A New Canon of Postcolonial Spirituality

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Dedication

Above all, I thank Allah Almighty for His guidance, grace, and strength.

To my beloved parents and dear siblings, for their endless love, support, and encouragement.

To the memory of my beloved brother, who will always remain in my heart. May Allah have mercy upon his soul and grant him Jannatul Firdaus.

To my professors and supervisor, for their guidance, support, and for providing us with valuable knowledge and skills.

And to myself, for all the effort and little steps that brought me here.

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Dedication

My heartfelt thanks first and foremost to **Allah**, whose guidance, mercy, and blessings gave me the strength to accomplish this work.

To my beloved father, the first to believe in this dream long before it became a reality. Your unwavering support, prayers, and faith in me have been my greatest source of strength.

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May this achievement be the beginning of many more journeys in the pursuit of knowledge.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* (2005) as a representative 'Muslim novel' written in English. It argues that the contributions of this genre have shaped the emerging canon of postcolonial spirituality. The divine in Islamic spirituality is articulated through narrative forms, ethical consciousness, and struggles over identity. Using qualitative textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory and postsecular criticism, the study examines the novel's Islamic epistemology, with particular focus on diasporic displacement, female agency, veiling, and spiritual transformation, to demonstrate how faith operates not merely as a cultural marker but as a legitimate framework of knowledge and self-understanding. The findings show that Minaret challenges the secular marginalization of religion in literary criticism and instead presents piety as a source of empowerment, moral formation, and belonging. The dissertation concludes that the 'Muslim novel' in English should be recognized as an important literary mode that offers alternative intellectual and aesthetic paradigms for reading contemporary Muslim experiences.

Keywords: Diaspora; Islamic epistemology; postsecular; spirituality; Leila Aboulela.

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General Introduction

1. Background of the study

Literature and faith are areas of growing research interest in literary studies today. During the bulk of the twentieth century, literary criticism relies primarily on secular lenses that emphasize political, cultural, and socio-economic analysis of literature. The study of religion and spirituality is sometimes treated as a sideline in theoretical studies. In postcolonial studies, scholars work primarily within the fields of colonial resistance, hybridity, migration, nationalism and the formation of identity. Religious belief is therefore often seen as a cultural marker or as an ideological residue, and not as a worthy epistemological system in which it could exert a formative influence on ethics, imagination, and the meaning of narratives.

However, this critical tendency is increasingly questioned with the advent of the postsecular turn. Scholars such as Asad (2003), Taylor (2007), and Habermas (2008) question the assumption that modernization necessarily leads to the decline of religion and call for renewed attention to the role of faith in contemporary societies and cultural production.

It is within this intellectual context that the 'Muslim novel' in English emerges as a distinctive literary formation. In recent decades, Muslim writers in English produce works addressing migration, diaspora, displacement, belonging, gender, and cultural negotiation, while also foregrounding Islamic faith and spirituality (Chambers, 2019; Nash, 2012). Unlike earlier narratives that are often mediated by Orientalist discourses, these novels offer forms of self-representation that articulate Muslim subjectivities from within their own cultural and spiritual viewpoints. This makes the 'Muslim novel' a contested and liminal literary formation situated at the intersection of postcolonial, diasporic, and religious writing.

Leila Aboulela is one of the influential voices within this body of literature and receives substantial academic attention for her explicit exploration of Islamic spirituality (Alrasheed, 2015). In contrast to many modern postcolonial narratives that focus primarily on political resistance or cultural hybridity, Aboulela's fiction places faith at the centre of personal and spiritual development. Her novel Minaret (2005) follows the journey of Najwa, a Sudanese woman whose experiences of exile, social dislocation, and personal loss lead her towards spiritual renewal. This journey provides the novel with an alternative conception of identity, agency, and belonging rooted in Islamic belief. Most significantly, Minaret offers a rich text through which to examine the interplay between postcoloniality and spirituality and to discuss the formation of a new canon of postcolonial spirituality.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although Muslim fiction is more visible in English literature, the studies that are conducted on it are largely presented in terms of diaspora, migration, multiculturalism, gender politics, and negotiation of identity. Such methods produce valuable insights, but at the same time tend to de-emphasize the epistemological value of spirituality, defining it as a cultural indicator or sociological phenomenon. Consequently, there is a lack of focus on the role of Islamic narrative, ethics, and epistemology in modern Muslim fiction. In combination, This limitation is clearly manifested in research on Minaret in which spirituality is often used as a part of identity instead of the epistemological basis that organizes the entire narrative.

The purpose of this study is to point out that a purely secular or identity-based study of Minaret is not sufficient. Instead, it is the novel's spirituality that is a structuring narrative force that shapes character development, moral change, and understandings of home. This dissertation attempts to explore the literature of Minaret in the light of postcolonial theory and postsecular studies, offering a contribution to the growing scholarship that takes into account the role of faith as a legitimate source of literary meaning and critical inquiry.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research question:

- How does Leila Aboulela's Minaret construct spirituality as a postcolonial epistemological and narrative framework?

To address this question, the study investigates the following sub-questions:

- How does Minaret represent the Islamic spiritual dimensions?

- How does Minaret transform the diasporic experiences into an ethical-spiritual journey?

- How does Minaret contribute to the emergence of a new canon of postcolonial spirituality within the 'Muslim novel' in English?

4. Literature Review

A thorough review of the literature shows that there is a significant body of prior research that forms a foundation for this study. Early research on the 'Muslim novel' in English primarily focuses on issues of identity, migration, and representation. Nash (2012) considers Muslim writing a space for negotiating identity, where writers respond to the social and cultural dilemmas of Muslim communities in Western societies. Similarly, Chambers (2011, 2019) places British Muslim fiction within wider debates over multiculturalism, citizenship, and minority representation and draws attention to the increasing presence of Muslim voices in contemporary British fiction. Hassan (2011) examines Arab and Muslim stories in the context of Orientalism and cultural translation, illustrating ways in which Muslim writers contest dominant Western discourses on Islam. Although these studies establish the significance of Muslim fiction as a literary field, much of this scholarship remains sociocultural and postcolonial in emphasis, leaving room for further consideration of spirituality as a source of epistemological meaning.

More recent scholarship increasingly turns towards faith and spirituality. Mahmood's (2005) analysis of religious agency offers a crucial account of piety as ethical self-formation and cautions against equating resistance automatically with empowerment, a distinction also discussed by Longo and Zacka (2019, p. 1067). From this perspective, Morey (2017), Hunter (2013), and Talafha et al. (2022) study Aboulela's fiction as a contribution to postsecular literary discourse. Their studies demonstrate that faith and spirituality in Aboulela's novels function as more than cultural identifiers; they actively shape subjectivity, ethical consciousness, and forms of belonging. In contrast to earlier scholarship, these studies emphasize faith and spirituality as interpretative frameworks. However, their primary interest is religious representation rather than the epistemological role of spirituality in the construction of narrative.

Minaret is examined from different perspectives in literary studies, including identity, migration, cultural conflict, and religious practice. Koç (2014) discusses the portrayal of British Muslim identities and the role of faith in relation to migration and belonging. Bouregbi (2021) examines the reconstruction of identity and cultural conflict in the novel and the balance of fixity and flexibility within Najwa's character development. El Mouti (2019) discusses identity, place, and displacement in Minaret, while Javed and Rani (2019) examine the interplay of prayer, power, and patriarchy and interpret faith as a source of agency. These studies provide useful background on identity, displacement, and religious practice; the present study builds on this scholarship by asking how Islamic spirituality may function not only as a theme or cultural identity but also as a structuring principle of narrative form.

Although these contributions are very helpful, there is an important theoretical gap. While a number of studies address Muslim fiction in the postcolonial, diasporic, feminist, multicultural and religious dimensions, very few focus primarily on it from a postsecular critical lens. Moreover, scholarship on Minaret rarely examines Islamic spirituality as an knowledge system that structures narrative architecture, ethical imagination, and character formation. This dissertation, therefore,

contributes to the debates on the formation of a new postcolonial spirituality by examining it not only as a diasporic novel but as an epistemological narrative.

5. Aims of the Study

The primary aim of this dissertation is to explore how Minaret constructs spirituality as a narrative, ethical, and knowledge-based framework within the 'Muslim novel' in English. In pursuit of this goal, the study analyzes the depiction of spirituality in Minaret, discusses the connection between Islamic faith and diasporic identity, examines the formation of female agency through piety and ethical development, and examines the role of Islamic concepts in shaping character and narrative significance, while exploring how the novel is part of the development of a new canon of postcolonial spirituality.

6. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship in both theoretical and analytical ways. Theoretically, it brings together postcolonial studies and postsecular criticism in order to develop a more comprehensive framework for analysing Muslim fiction. In an analytical sense, it provides a nuanced analysis of Minaret that surpasses the conventional notions of identity politics and cultural representation by foregrounding spirituality as a core organizing principle of narrative meaning. The study makes a contribution to current discussions on religion, literature, and postcoloniality, and it reveals the importance of faith as a legitimate source of agency, knowledge, and literary expression.

7. Research Methodology

This dissertation uses a qualitative textual approach involving close reading and thematic analysis. Postcolonial theory and postsecular criticism are used as main analytical lenses in the study. By examining the novel in detail, it explores the ways in which spirituality influences the novel's portrayal of identity, agency, sense of belonging, and moral growth. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Islamic concepts and spiritual practices function as narrative mechanisms through which meaning is constructed.

8. Structure of the Study

This dissertation is divided into two chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the theoretical position and investigates the evolution of the 'Muslim novel' in English, its connection with postcolonial and diasporic literature, the postsecular turn, and the influence of Islamic worldview on the formal development of the novel. The second chapter examines a close textual thematic analysis of Leila Aboulela's novel, Minaret, where the themes of spirituality, ethical-spiritual transformation, female agency and literature's role in the construction of a new canon of postcolonial spirituality are explored. The progression from theoretical to thematic analysis aims to illustrate how spirituality becomes a significant narrative and epistemological force within contemporary Muslim fiction.

Chapter ONE:

Framing the Muslim novel: Theoretical Foundations and the Emergence of the New Postcolonial Spiritual Canon

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Introduction

This theoretical chapter provides a critical groundwork for examining the emergence of the Anglophone 'Muslim novel' as a distinct literary formation and for theorizing the ways in which Islamic spirituality found what is described as a new canon of postcolonial spirituality. The chapter consists of four interrelated sections. The first section theorizes the concept of the 'Muslim novel', outlines its historical evolution, and investigates its role as a counter-discourse that shifts the colonial medium into a medium of Islamic epistemology. The second part places the 'Muslim novel' in the context of the postcolonial Anglophone novel and formulates the idea of metaphysical belonging, a mode of spiritual attachment that crosses national and diasporic boundaries. The third section explores moving beyond the secular/religious binary; it outlines the theoretical bases of postcolonial postsecularism, navigates the epistemological orientations of spirituality and secularity and maps the intersection of religion and spirituality in Islamic and postcolonial contexts. The fourth section looks at the narrative architecture of core Islamic concepts (the principles of Tawḥīd, Taqwā, Ṣabr, and Duʿāʾ) and the protagonist's journey as an ethical-spiritual quest, examines the question of language and translation, and considers the question of the sacred in writing Islam in English. These sections form the theoretical and analytical frameworks that will be used for the close textual analysis of Leila Aboulela's Minaret in chapter two.

1.1 Diaspora, Postcoloniality, and the Muslim Subject

Migration is not just between countries; it is a battle with two different moral frameworks, two different epistemologies and two different conceptions of human flourishing. Therefore, the Muslim subject cannot be explored and understood exclusively from a secular perspective of identity negotiation. Traditional postcolonial studies have been mainly concerned with the fragmentation of identity and cultural hybridity that colonialism has engendered (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Ashcroft et al., 2002). Thus, the 'Muslim novel' demonstrates that Islamic identity not reduced to ethnicity, nationality, or

political affiliation, but that faith constitutes a crucial dimension of the diasporic experience (Chambers, 2019; Nash, 2012).

1.1.1 The Corpus within Anglophone Postcolonial Literature

In postcolonial Anglophone literature, the 'Muslim novel' in English is a special and contested literary formation. It shares with postcolonial writing characteristics such as colonial history, migration, identity formation, cultural translation, and resistance to hegemonic representations; however, it cannot be fully understood through existing postcolonial categories alone because of the importance it places on Islamic faith, spirituality, and epistemology within its narratives (Morey, 2017; Nash, 2012). These dimensions have often received less attention in postcolonial criticism, which has focused on themes such as resistance, hybridity, exile, and cultural negotiation (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978). These concerns continue to surface in Muslim writing. Leila Aboulela, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and other authors frequently address racism, migration, and the politics of representation in their works, which are part of concerns long discussed in postcolonial literary studies (Kanwal, 2015).

The connection between the 'Muslim novel' and postcolonial literature, however, is not only one of inclusion. Nash (2012) suggests that Muslim writing engages conventional postcolonial frameworks while also extending beyond them. Morey's (2017) discussion of Aboulela's Minaret likewise places the novel within debates about postsecularism and the literary representation of Islam. Recent work on South Asian fiction has also revisited the problem of re-Orientalism, a concept developed by Lau (2009) to describe the reproduction or negotiation of Orientalist representations by diasporic writers; Ahmad and Ahmed (2025) extend this discussion to the burden of representation in South Asian fiction. These approaches draw attention to the pressures surrounding Muslim and diasporic self-representation, while also leaving room to examine how writers construct complex literary works on their own terms.

To gain a clearer picture of this double nature of postcolonial literature, it is important to differentiate three ways of dealing with Islam in postcolonial literature. The first type is texts in which

Islam is predominantly used as a cultural and political identity label rather than significant consideration is given to the epistemological and spiritual aspects of Islam. The second type consists of writings that recognize Islamic spirituality but that are subordinated to political or social issues. The third type, where the 'Muslim novel' stands out, consists of texts in which Islamic epistemology becomes an integral part of narrative form, shapes character development, moral outlook, and even the narrative itself (Morey, 2017; Nash, 2012). The 'Muslim novel' in this third category clarifies that the presence of religion cannot be separated from others; It is not one aspect of an individual's identity but must be viewed as root structure that shapes the perception of reality as well as defines the Collective memory of a group and reflects several sides of the moral existential experience like sense of visibility and agency.

1.1.2 Re-mapping Identity: Faith, Hyper-visibility, Collective Memory, and Agency

- Faith: In the 'Muslim novel', the role of faith operates as a formative element that actively constructs identity, moral thinking and the course of the narrative. In contrast to the secular stories in which religion is a private choice, the 'Muslim novel' depicts religion as a living system through which meaning, purpose, and moral attitude are developed (Mahmood, 2005; Nash, 2012; Chambers, 2019). Characters are built by practices of prayer, fasting and moral self-discipline, and this involves their experience of self being rooted in a transcendent moral scheme. Faith also offers resources for endurance through sabr (patience), enabling characters to face challenges and adversity with spiritual strength (Nash, 2012). This focus is a challenge to the secular idea that religious devotion reduces agency; rather, it is through religion that characters are provided with moral and spiritual resources with which to hold themselves together in situations of destabilisation (Morey, 2017; Santesso, 2013).
- **Hyper-visibility:** In Western societies, Muslims are living in hyper-visibility; the religious identity of Muslims is constantly questioned and reduced to stereotypes (Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Hai, 2022). Veiled Muslim women in particular become hyper-visible in public space, the site of stares,

suspicions, or even hostile interrogation. while it can also be seen as an oppression or foreignness by external observers (Al-Karawi & Bahar, 2014; Chambers, 2019).

- ❖ Agency: One of the dominant misunderstandings is that religious commitment necessarily diminishes decision-making capacity, especially among Muslim women (Said, 1978; Mahmood, 2005). Muslim fiction invites a reconsideration of this assumption by introducing characters who exercise decision-making through faith and religious understanding. Inspired by Mahmood's work (2005), such novels illustrate how religiosity can represent a sphere of decision-making in which characters choose to reinforce and develop their religious beliefs through prayer, fasting, and self-discipline.

- ❖ **Collective Memory and the Reclamation of Islamic Heritage:** In addition to personal faith, the 'Muslim novel' addresses collective memory as an important aspect of selfhood formation. Prophetic traditions (hadiths) and Islamic history are used by writers to bring people living in the diaspora back to their spiritual origins. The protagonists, and indeed the readers themselves, find moral guidance in the lives of the prophets, whose patience and trust in God offer models of righteous and wise conduct in the face of adversity (Chambers, 2019). The hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) offer ethical wisdom for Muslims to emulate, while historical narratives, such as the stories of the Companions (al-Sahaba), the issues of the Muslim community (umma) and religion as the Palestinian, and the stories of those who embraced Islam willingly, establish a coherent intellectual framework and a constant force in shaping Islamic identity (Malak, 2005; Nash, 2012). Thus, collective memory reinforces a sense of continuity, allowing faith to transcend colonialism and displacement and grounding identity in a shared, enduring, and constant spiritual heritage.

- ✓ **Re-mapping and reshaping the Identity:**

The 'Muslim novel' is characterised by the interaction of faith, agency, and collective memory. The characters are not just people moving from one culture to another; they are people whose faith is a moral guide, whose agency is exercised within the context of Islamic culture, whose hypervisibility affects their life and their lived experiences, and whose Islamic identity is not just a personal biography but a collective memory. This leads to generating narratives that are neither apologetic nor critical; it just provides a vivid illustration and description of Muslim lives (Nash, 2012; Morey, 2017). The remapping of identity is therefore thematic and formal – the novel becomes a site of epistemic decolonisation, a project to dismantle the secular frameworks (Chakrabarty, 2000; Asad, 2003)..

1.1.3 Metaphysical Belonging: Transcending Diasporic and Nationalist Borders

Muslims redefine the concept of belonging beyond the boundaries of diaspora studies and postcolonialism. While categories such as nation, ethnicity, and migration remain relevant (Hall, 1990; Clifford, 1994; Anderson, 1983), the 'Muslim novel' suggests that these categories are insufficient for understanding Muslim subjectivity. Its protagonists occupy spaces of attachment beyond geography and political membership to indicate metaphysical belonging, a belonging based on faith and spiritual orientation.

Faith offers a dimension in which national and local identities are connected to a wider moral and metaphysical framework; this results in a multi-layered sense of belonging in which national, cultural and religious identities coexist (Ahmed, 2015; Kanwal, 2015), challenging Anderson's (1983) 'imagined community' perspective, which depends on the secular nation that held together print capitalism and state institutions. For the global Muslim community, the Islamic Ummah, however, is an alternative model of belonging based on the shared faith, not on territory (Al-Faruqi, 1992). Thus, unlike the bounded nation, the Ummah is boundless, derives unity from religious practice, and draws legitimacy from theological perspectives (Anderson, 1983).

The practice of religion is significant in this process. In postcolonial contexts, where colonialism controls systems of knowledge, such acts as prayer, fasting, and Qur'anic recitation function as practices by which belonging is something that communicated and maintained, and this is what might be termed the Muslim sacred geography—the geography of the connection of individuals to a transnational network of meaning (Mahmood, 2005; Talafha et al., 2022). Nowadays modern secularism views that the the societal structure should redefines the notion of faith and creed as a personal private matter while the 'Muslim novel' takes another vision foregrounding modes of religious belonging which secular modernity has marginalized and perished. Modern secularism redefines the notion of faith as a personal private matter. The 'Muslim novel' takes another direction by foregrounding modes of belonging which secular modernity has marginalized (Taylor, 2007).

Overall, the 'Muslim novel' written in English offers metaphysical belonging that moves beyond geographical limitations and forms a substantial growth/expansion of postcolonial and diasporic theory. The 'Muslim novel' challenges the sense that belonging is only defined as being attached to a place or to a culture, designing an Islamic spiritual dimension that unites Muslims and their connection towards God, worship, and religious ethics. This sets the stage for the postsecular reconfiguration of the self and knowledge.

1.2 The Emergence of the 'Muslim novel' in English

The 'Muslim novel' in English is an important genre in recent Anglophone literature, as the community's voice is becoming more audible in English literary production in the late and early twenty-first centuries. It is not a new literary field but a growing corpus of texts that is situated at the intersection of postcolonial literature, diaspora literature, and postsecular thought. It has emerged from a variety of historical and intellectual changes, from the legacies of colonialism, the spread of Muslim diasporic communities, through to the increasing scholarly focus on religion as a new field for literary and cultural analysis. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002), postcolonial literature has tended to focus

on secular narratives, neglecting the "religious dimensions of colonial and postcolonial experience" (p. 89).

Similarly,the writer Edward Said (1993) in his book Culture and Imperialism, contends that the cultural representations of Islam in Western literature have been shaped by enduring patterns of Orientalist discourse, which continue to influence both the production and reception of Muslim-authored texts. These insights are vital and demand new literary genres that would be able to represent the experience of Muslims beyond the hegemony of Western representations.

This growth in texts is also a response to the inadequacy of available postcolonial frameworks to explain explicitly religious varieties of identity and cultural expression. While postcolonial criticism offered valuable and critical tools for analysing colonial power, migration, and hybridity, the increasing visibility of Muslim writers revealed the need for critical approaches capable of engaging with Islamic epistemologies alongside questions of culture, nation, and diaspora. In fact, the rise of the 'Muslim novel' has not only been a reaction to the new historical reality but also a result of the new theoretical discourses in the field of contemporary literary studies.

1.2.1 Conceptualizing the 'Muslim novel'

In his seminal work Orientalism, Said (1978) contended that the Orient and Islam have been represented in Western scholarship and literature as a caricature and stereotype. Not only is this discourse a benign literary genre, but it is also a weapon of power and cultural domination that excludes non-Western subjects from their own representation. Classical European literature frequently stereotyped the Islamic world as backward, enigmatic, unchanging, and basically flawed. Overall, this basic critique is an argument to free oneself from these old colonial perspectives about Islam.

Sura Qadiri's 2014 book "Postcolonial Fiction and Sacred Scripture: Rewriting the Divine" presents a compelling view as to how these contemporary Muslim writers interact with their religious heritage. She argues that these novelists do not write about sacred scriptures as ‘themes to explore' but as

‘a way to break away from limited exegetical horizons, while remaining within the faith' (p. 45). These writers do not see Islamic practices from the point of view of secularism or Western culture, but rather they are actively engaging the Islamic scriptures to challenge narrow interpretations. In this engagement, she shows how the 'Muslim novel' establishes an authentic space in which both religious orientation and narrative techniques coexist, providing the author with the opportunity to recover his or her spiritual narrative, and to redefine the spiritual identity of the author from inside the faith.

This counter-discursive function can be understood through postcolonial theories of representation and writing back. Said's (1978) critique of Orientalist representation and Ashcroft et al.'s (2002) account of postcolonial writing as a challenge to imperial literary authority provide a broader framework for understanding how Muslim writers can contest inherited representations. Within this framework, the 'Muslim novel' can become a space in which Islamic customs, postcolonial critique, identity, spirituality, and political agency are negotiated rather than merely represented from an external perspective.

One of the major developments in the theorisation of the 'Muslim novel' has been the effort to define its genre and thematic concerns. In his professorial inaugural lecture titled The 'Islamic Novel': Style and Structure, Aliyu Kamal (2014) defines this genre as a literary form that:

> it tackles any serious topic or discipline in whose pursuit men and women amass knowledge and impart it to those interested to know, making the writing undertaking partly enlightenment and partly entertainment. The writer maintains a balance between the two by the choice of suitable themes that have a bearing on mu'malat (or human relations) and a deft handling of the task at hand, such that the reader is easily persuaded that the reading is worth their time and effort and is not done just for pleasure alone. (p. 2)

From this perspective, the 'Islamic novel' is framed as a didactic and ethically grounded form, one that presents a comprehensive account of a way of life rather than a merely aesthetic or entertaining narrative (Kamal, 2014). This definition, however, derives from a particular scholarly tradition within Islam and highlights the moral-educational purpose assigned to the novel within that tradition.

A further challenge in conceptualising the 'Muslim novel' concerns the terminology used to define it. The distinction between an 'Islamic novel' and a 'Muslim novel' raises questions about whether classification should depend primarily on the author's identity, the subject matter of the text, or the presence of an explicitly Islamic worldview. Existing scholarship on Muslim writing does not reduce these questions to a single criterion; rather, it shows that Muslim literary production is connected simultaneously to questions of identity, representation, religion, and literary form (Nash, 2012; Morey, 2010). This distinction is important for the present study because Minaret is examined not simply as a novel written by a Muslim author, but as a text in which Islamic spirituality participates in the construction of meaning and character.

One possible approach is therefore to understand the 'Muslim novel' as a flexible critical category rather than as a fixed genre. Such an approach allows attention to texts in which Islamic consciousness, religious practice, ethical values, and Muslim social experience interact with literary form. It also avoids reducing Muslim fiction either to authorial identity or to a predetermined set of religious themes. In this dissertation, the term is used as a critical category for examining how Islamic spirituality can operate within narrative, rather than as a rigid generic label.

This broader understanding also allows the 'Muslim novel' to be approached as a site of dialogue between Islamic traditions and literary modernity. Rather than assuming a single definition, the present study focuses on the ways in which a novel can negotiate religious commitments, postcolonial experience, and literary form. The debates surrounding the category therefore support a multidimensional

approach to Minaret, in which spirituality is considered alongside identity, diaspora, gender, language, and narrative structure.

The relationship between the 'Muslim novel' and postcolonial fiction can similarly be understood through their overlapping concern with colonial power, hybrid identities, migration, and the negotiation of tradition and modernity. At the same time, Muslim writing may foreground religious and spiritual dimensions that are not fully captured by approaches concerned primarily with cultural hybridity or political resistance (Nash, 2012; Morey, 2010). This distinction is central to the present study because it creates space for examining Islamic spirituality as an epistemological and narrative dimension rather than treating it only as a cultural marker.

The 'Muslim novel' can therefore be approached as a complex literary formation in which postcolonial critique, Islamic thought, diasporic experience, and literary modernity intersect. Rather than presenting the category as easily definable, this dissertation treats its boundaries as contested and uses that openness to investigate how spirituality can participate in narrative structure, ethical imagination, and character formation.

The conceptualisation of the 'Muslim novel' remains an open and contested scholarly endeavour, shaped by ongoing debates over terminology, generic boundaries, and theoretical frameworks. As the preceding discussion has illustrated, there are varying views regarding the term "Islamic novel" versus "Muslim novel',' as well as the inclusion of textual consciousness or authorial identity in the definition, and whether "Islamic novel" is a literary genre or a thematic variation of postcolonial fiction. Although they differ in their understanding of how this novel relates to Islamic practice, they all share an awareness of the "Muslim novel" as an active, provocative, and conversational element that shapes the text's moral framework, spiritual landscape, and form. The 'Muslim novel' cannot be simply defined and cannot be simply theorized as a counter-discourse to orientalist images or as a means for moral or spiritual

transformation, or as a contact zone where several discourses meet. It requires, however, a multi-dimensional critical approach that is sensitive to its theological richness, postcolonial commitments, aesthetic innovations and yet is aware of the historical and cultural context that remains relevant in its emergence and evolution, such as colonialism, diaspora and globalisation.

1.2.2 Historical Origins and Development

The historical roots of the 'Muslim novel' in English are a progressive process that does not involve the creation of a new literary genre but rather a gradual transformation due to the colonial past, migration, and the spread of English throughout the world. It is closely linked to the emergence of postcolonial Anglophone literature, in which English is not only used as a medium for cultural expression, but also as a vehicle for articulating alternative knowledge-based and ethical visions (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Said, 1993).

Muslim writing in English began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Muslim travellers and intellectuals from India, Egypt and Sudan who were documenting their experience of colonialism in the language of the coloniser. But they were largely autobiographies or anti-colonial reports and not yet independent works of fiction. Peter Morey (2010) suggests that the break started with the migration of mid-twentieth-century Muslim writers to Britain and the United States, where they faced many of the problems of integration and self-representation in societies with little prior experience of the structural presence of Muslims as citizens and literary producers.

Earlier scholarship on British Muslim fiction also draws attention to the ways Muslim writers negotiated identity, migration, representation, and the expectations placed on minority writers in Western contexts (Chambers, 2011; Morey, 2010). Such pressures help explain why early Muslim writing in English could be read in relation to questions of cultural explanation and self-representation.

The historical trajectory can be systematically understood through three distinct developmental phases:

- Phase One (pre-1990): This phase is marked by what Chambers (2011) describes as 'isolated voices' and 'fragmented diasporic narratives'. During this period, individual works had not yet formed a clearly established literary movement or corpus. They were shaped by postcolonial literary frameworks, with plots focusing on cultural fragmentation, the sociological clash between East and West, and the psychological and social effects of colonialism. Religion was often treated primarily as a folkloric or ethnic element within representations shaped by Western modernity (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Said, 1993).

- Phase Two (1990–2001): This phase witnessed the emergence of a new generation of Muslim writers, particularly second-generation immigrant authors who were raised in the West or migrated at an early age. It is characterized by the exploration of hybrid identities and efforts to negotiate spiritual and religious affiliations with the sociopolitical realities of life in Western nation-states (Bhabha, 1994; Chambers, 2011). Authors such as Hanif Kureishi (1990) represented concerns about integration and transcultural struggle. Nevertheless, although religious themes became more prominent, the narrative structure often remained subordinate to cultural politics and the secular narrative conventions of the traditional Anglophone novel, which presented difficulties for the integration of transcendent worldviews (Morey & Yaqin, 2011).

- Phase Three (post-2001): For the purposes of this study, the post-2001 period can be understood as a phase in which the 'Muslim novel' became increasingly visible as a literary formation in debates about Islam, representation, and postsecularism. In the wake of September 11 and the emergence of intensified 'Neo-Orientalist' discourses, Islam increasingly became a central concern in a body of fiction that engaged both thematically and structurally with Muslim experience (Morey, 2017; Chambers, 2019).

What distinguishes this formation is the increasing ability of Muslim writers to express Islamic spirituality through literary methods that challenge dominant representations. This historical development raises a key question: how does the 'Muslim novel' function as a site of resistance to dominant discourses while also developing as an autonomous literary formation? This question positions the 'Muslim novel' as a potential form of counter-discourse.

1.2.2.1 Literature as Counter-Discourse

The 'Muslim novel' in English has increasingly developed as a form of counter-discourse that challenges dominant literary and cultural narratives about Islam and Muslim identities. These novels do not simply react to the colonial or Orientalist depictions but instead create new forms of narration based on ethical, spiritual and epistemological Islam. By doing so, they move away from the notions of external interpretation of Muslims as objects to the articulation of Muslim subjectivities in their own intellectual and religious traditions (Said, 1978; Ashcroft et al., 2002). This counter-discursive process is expressed mainly in two aspects:

1.2.2.2 From Orientalist Stereotypes to Muslim Self-Representation

Muslims were presented in many texts as fanatics, oppressed women, patriarchal men, terrorists or foreigners who couldn't integrate into modern society. The issue of negative representation was compounded by the absence of Muslim voices in the production of knowledge about Muslim lives (Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Hassan, 2011), which became more apparent after 11 September 2001, when Muslims became more conspicuous in the public debate of Western countries. Post 9/11 representations were influenced by concerns about security, pressure from the media and terrorism concerns from political perspectives, which all narrowed Muslim identity down to the concerns of extremism, surveillance, and integration (Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Hai, 2022). Islam was often referred to as a problem that needed to be explained, not a religion that needed to be known (Morey & Yaqin, 2011).

In this context, literature came to be a significant space for Muslim writers to contest the discourses of the outside world and to assert control over their own experiences. The 'Muslim novel' is a counter-discourse which introduced postcolonial resistance and at the same time incorporated spiritual and ethical issues. It does not treat Muslims as mere objects, but as thinking subjects, whose inner lives and moral struggles and spiritual experiences inform the meaning of the text (Amin Malak, 2005; Nash, 2012; Chambers, 2019). This shift moved Muslim characters from the margins to the centre of Anglophone fiction.

This is especially significant in the representation of Muslim women. Orientalist discourse has frequently described Muslim women as passive objects waiting to be liberated from religion. However, modern Muslim female authors present female protagonists who exercise agency through religious commitment in ways that challenge this perception (Mahmood, 2005). This transition from objectification to self-representation is not simply a replacement of negative images with positive ones. As Nash (2012) argues, Muslim identities can be defined from within Islamic ethical frameworks rather than solely from outside them. The Muslim protagonist is therefore represented not merely as a victim of colonialism or Islamophobia, but as a reflective subject whose political and religious identity is actively formed. Hassan (2011) similarly argues that Muslim Anglophone writers challenge assumptions through which Muslims have been read and invite readers to reconsider the terms of representation.

Finally, Muslim self-representation is not just about identity, it's also about cultural authority and knowledge. The question that Spivak (1988) has asked here is particularly significant: "Can the subaltern speak? " The 'Muslim novel' is one response to this question because it provides the room for the Muslim to speak; to remember; to explain his/her own reality rather than being defined solely by the outside. Through this, Muslim writers become an integral part of a larger epistemic decolonizing initiative that contests the hegemony of Western discourses in literary and cultural knowledge production (Chakrabarty,

2000). This shift from Orientalist stereotypes to Muslim self-representation is not just a theme change, but a change in the authority of the narrative itself.

1.2.2.3 Deterritorialising the Colonial Medium

If Orientalist discourse sought to control the representation of Muslims, colonial language functioned as one of its most powerful tools. English occupies an ambivalent position within postcolonial writing: it carries the historical memory of colonial domination, yet as a global literary medium, it also provides access to transnational audiences. This means that colonised writers do not just adopt the language of the coloniser, but actively transform it. This process involves two interrelated strategies articulated by Ashcroft et al. (2002): "abrogation" and "appropriation". Abrogation refers to the rejection of the imperial claim to correct or standard English, refusing the notion that the colonial language holds exclusive authority over cultural representation. Appropriation, on the other hand, is the process by which postcolonial writers capture the language of the coloniser and adapt it to express their own distinct cultural, spiritual, and historical realities. In the context of the 'Muslim novel' in English, Muslim authors appropriate the English language by infusing it with Islamic terminology, untranslated sacred concepts, and faith-centered aesthetics, thereby transforming a traditionally secular or colonial medium into a vehicle for Islamic self-representation and spiritual expression.

Writers resist the cultural authority of standard English and transform it to convey local realities and different worldviews. The 'Muslim novel' is a product of this postcolonial approach, in which English is no longer only a colonial tool but also a means for representing Muslim experiences, values, and epistemologies. Muslim writers attempt to make English capable of expressing realities, concepts, and experiences rooted in Islamic traditions, including meanings that may not be fully captured by secular Western discourse (Malak, 2005).

This process can also be interpreted through the concept of deterritorialisation, created by Gilles Deleuze and Guattari (1980), which describes a process of displacement of linguistic and cultural forms

from their contexts of origin and their reconfiguration within new systems of meaning. In the context of the 'Muslim novel', deterritorialisation helps to show how English can be freed from its colonial past and redirected towards Islamic epistemological and ethical vision. English is reconfigured from its historical relationship with colonialism and secular modernity and reterritorialised in an Islamic epistemological framework in the context of the 'Muslim novel'. This does not involve the rejection of English, but rather the transformation of it into a medium through which meanings from the Qur'an and Islamic ethics, devotional exercises and spiritual consciousness are transported (Talib, 2002; Hassan, 2011). In this way, Muslim writers can show that English is not the exclusive domain of the cultural centre that once owned it.

One of the most salient features of this shift is the use of Arabic expressions, Qur'anic terms, and Islamic notions in English narrative discourse. The Islamic concepts of Tawḥīd, Taqwā, Ṣabr, Dhikr, Duʿāʾ, Hijab, Ummah, and Qadar are often used in modern Muslim stories in Islamic Arabic but not fully translated into secular English. Muslim writers tend to maintain the semantic differences of Islam, leaving the reader to interpret the ideas in his own way, rather than trying to fit them into Western categories (Talib, 2002; Alghamdi, 2014). Language here becomes a place of epistemological resistance and guards Islamic meanings from reduction and assimilation. Importantly, this approach to language witnessed a new form of hybridity that has typically not been celebrated in mainstream postcolonial literary works. Writers such as Chinua Achebe composed fiction by utilizing English while incorporating words from native African languages without providing glossaries or explanations. These attempts were intended to challenge the dominance of English as a neutral medium for representing other cultures; for instance, in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, he integrated the Igbo language. In parallel, the 'Muslim novel' incorporates a set of Arabic religious terms and sacred expressions to assert its Islamic cultural and spiritual heritage.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) postulation of hybridity highlights the disruptions of colonial rule and the mixed, ambivalent qualities of culture. Muslim fiction, of course, is involved in these processes, but

its engagement with language can also be understood through what this dissertation terms 'sacred continuity'. In this formulation, Arabic words within English sentences are not simply expressions of cultural difference; they may also retain religious meanings and functions. In contrast to forms of linguistic hybridity that primarily foreground cultural ambiguity, the 'Muslim novel' can preserve Islamic ethical and religious meanings while introducing them into Anglophone literary space (Al-Faruqi, 1992; Nash, 2012). Language therefore becomes not only a site of negotiation but also a vehicle for maintaining continuity of religious tradition.

Finally, the importance of decolonising the colonial medium is that the language is no longer just used for describing reality, but also becomes a place where epistemologies clash. It is clear, then, that the 'Muslim novel' is proof that the religious ideas do not need to be abandoned and the spiritual meaning diluted when it is written in English. Rather, it shows what it is possible to do with English itself to make it carry new forms of knowledge and new modes of subjectivity. It becomes capable of expressing spiritual consciousness, metaphysical belonging, and faith-based understandings of reality.

1.3 The Postsecular Turn: From Identity Marker to Epistemological Frame

The appearance of a new generation of Muslim writing marks a shift in the intellectual framework within which Islam is no longer merely a 'marker of identity' but an 'epistemological frame'—a way of knowing, understanding, and living reality. According to literary and cultural theorists, this shift is described as the 'postsecular turn', which challenges the secularist assumption that modernization necessarily entails the decline and privatization of religious belief (Asad, 2003; Neuman, 2014; Taylor, 2007).

However, scholars in postsecular studies indicate that religion has not vanished but has continued to appear in restructured forms that demand contemporary analytical frameworks (McClure, 2007; Neuman, 2014; Taylor, 2007). The postsecular condition is not a return to premodern worldviews but

rather an awareness that secularism is historically and politically multiple and not always normatively accepted. According to this conception, modernity does not simply eliminate faith; instead, it produces different and competing ways of negotiating the relationship between religious and secular forms of life. Most importantly, this shift does not invalidate secular criticism but encourages forms of criticism that are more open to recognising religious epistemologies as legitimate modes of inquiry (Morey, 2017; Neuman, 2014).

This intellectual shift is essential in the study of Muslim literature. It highlights the spiritual experiences that resist interpretation sociologically, politically, or psychologically. As a result, the postsecular principle moves beyond asking how religion is represented within literature to asking how religious epistemologies transform literary representation itself. The answer to this question is crucial to the modern 'Muslim novel', in which spirituality acts as a central and active element in character development, narrative causality, temporality, and ethics (Morey, 2017; Chambers, 2019).

1.3.1 Beyond the Secular/Religious Binary

A major intervention that the 'Muslim novel' has made is the systematic challenge of the secular/religious binary. In the dominant Western paradigms, these two spheres are often presented as antithetical: Religion is identified as being linked to faith and tradition; the secular is seen as the sole place of reason, individual autonomy, and modernity. This ideological opposition has had a significant impact on literary criticism, where secular values are assumed to be neutral and universal, and religious perspectives are viewed as outdated or just a matter of personal opinion (Asad 2003, Taylor 2007). The 'Muslim novel' destabilises this bifurcation, revealing it not as an ontological fact but as historically and ideologically constructed.

The contemporary 'Muslim novel' intensely interrogates this binary, studying the theoretical interventions of Talal Asad (2003). Asad argues that secularism is not a neutral space outside of religion but rather a particular configuration of political power that arose in the West to govern, to define and to

police what is legitimate to consider as religious practice, excluding the transcendent. Through this narrow yet powerful separation, the modern 'Muslim novel' creates what can be called a postsecular literary imagination, an imagination that does not reject secular modernity nor seek to isolate itself within religious fundamentalism but rather generates a third space that presents spirituality not just as a peripheral but as a central element for the creation of literary meaning (Ratti 2013; Qadiri 2024).

Ultimately, the significance of moving beyond the secular/religious binary lies in the possibility of developing richer and more inclusive forms of literary criticism. The 'Muslim novel' proves that the ways in which it has been read and understood in the past and present are not timeless or universal. The religious postsecular analytical frame foregrounds alternative epistemological strategies as a corrective to secular assumptions, making the texts an invitation to rethink the place of faith in modernity and in literary representation.

1.3.2 Religion–Spirituality Overlap in Islamic and Postcolonial Contexts

In Islamic belief, the concept of spirituality is not defined as a separate world from the world of religion. Spirituality develops as a result of the interaction with religious belief (Īmān), ethical discipline, ritual observance (Islām), and communal life. In this way, the spiritual and the religious are not opposed but rather supplement each other (Abdullah, 2022; Al-Faruqi, 1992), and this interconnectedness is one of the most defining features of the 'Muslim novel', where spiritual change is almost always a change due to and through religion.

The intersection of religion and spirituality also contributes to the portrayal of suffering and adversity in Muslim literature. In many secular stories, suffering is viewed psychologically, socially or existentially. These dimensions are always there, but 'Muslim novel's often place the suffering in a spiritual context that provides extra significance to it. Trials are for growth in patient perseverance (ṣabr), trust in God (tawakkul), and moral refinement. Spirituality, therefore, becomes the tool for interpretation that will help make meaning of the difficult experiences and help to endure them (Al-Faruqi, 1992;

Abdullah, 2022). These images are not merely representations of pain and suffering but embed them within a larger ethical and metaphysical perspective.

1.4 Islamic Epistemology and Narrative Form: Shaping the New Canon

1.4.1 Language, Translation, and the Sacred: Islamic Concepts in English

One of the most distinctive challenges confronting the 'Muslim novel' in English concerns the question of language itself. If Islamic spirituality constitutes a central epistemological framework within these texts, how can concepts rooted in Arabic, Islamic theology, and Qur'anic discourse be represented through a language historically associated with colonial power and secular modernity? The issue extends far beyond vocabulary or translation. It involves a deeper negotiation between different systems of meaning, different conceptions of reality, and different traditions of knowledge. Consequently, language in the 'Muslim novel' becomes a crucial site where questions of selfhood, faith, representation, and epistemology converge (Talib, 2002; Hassan, 2011).

Postcolonial scholars have long emphasized that language is never a neutral medium. The colonial language carries historical associations, cultural assumptions, and structures of meaning shaped by particular intellectual traditions (Ashcroft et al., 2002). For Muslim writers working in English, this challenge acquires additional complexity because many of the concepts central to Islamic thought emerge from Arabic linguistic and theological traditions. Writing Islam in English therefore requires a process of cultural and spiritual translation that inevitably raises questions about equivalence, loss, and representation (Talib, 2002).

Ismail S. Talib (2002) argues that postcolonial literature frequently involves forms of linguistic negotiation through which writers adapt and transform inherited colonial languages. Muslim fiction extends this process by introducing Islamic notions. Terms such as Tawḥīd, Taqwā, Ṣabr, Duʿāʾ, Ḥijāb,

and Ummah carry layers of theological, ethical, and cultural significance that cannot be fully captured through direct translation.

This linguistic practice differs in important ways from conventional understandings of translation. Translation is often imagined as the movement of meaning from one language to another through the search for equivalent expressions. Yet many Muslim novelists deliberately resist complete translation. Arabic terms are frequently preserved within English narratives, compelling readers to engage with concepts on their own terms rather than through potentially misleading approximations. This strategy reflects not linguistic deficiency but epistemological intention. It signals the existence of concepts whose meanings are embedded within distinct intellectual and spiritual traditions (Talib, 2002; Hassan, 2011).

The retention of Islamic terminology also functions as a challenge to Orientalist patterns of representation. Orientalist discourse often sought to explain, categorize, and domesticate non-Western cultures according to Western conceptual frameworks (Said, 1978). By preserving Arabic concepts within English texts, Muslim writers resist this tendency toward assimilation. Readers encounter Islamic categories as meaningful frameworks in their own right rather than as objects requiring translation into familiar Western terms. Language thus becomes a site of epistemological resistance as well as cultural representation (Said, 1978; Ashcroft et al., 2002).

Within Islamic traditions, the Qur'an occupies a unique linguistic status because it is understood as divine revelation in Arabic. Consequently, Qur'anic language carries forms of authority, beauty, and meaning that cannot be entirely separated from its original linguistic context. 'Muslim novel'ists writing in English therefore confront the challenge of representing concepts derived from revelation while acknowledging the limitations of translation (Wadud, 1999; Talib, 2002).

Significantly, this challenge often produces what may be described as a sacred multilingualism. English remains the primary language of narration, yet Arabic persists as a source of spiritual authority

and semantic depth. The coexistence of these languages creates textual spaces in which different epistemological traditions interact . Such interactions contribute to the distinctive hybridity of the 'Muslim novel', a hybridity grounded not merely in cultural mixture but in the encounter between different systems of knowledge and meaning (Steiner, 2008; Hassan, 2011).

Ultimately, language in the 'Muslim novel' functions as more than a vehicle for communication. It becomes a site where competing epistemologies encounter one another, where sacred meanings are negotiated across cultural boundaries, and where the possibilities of literary expression are expanded. Through strategies of translation, retention, adaptation, and linguistic hybridity, Muslim writers demonstrate that English can serve not only as a language of colonial history but also as a medium for articulating Islamic spirituality. In doing so, they contribute to the formation of a literary tradition that is simultaneously Anglophone, postcolonial, and profoundly shaped by Islamic epistemological resources.

1.4.2 Spiritual and Quranic Concepts as Narrative Tools

One of the most salient features of the 'Muslim novel' in English is the use of Islamic ideas as the structural elements of the novel, as principles that actively influence the construction of the novel. These ideas are used as organizing principles for the narrative structure, and as forces that drive the character motivation, influencing the structure of the story and the inner life of the protagonist. Of these, four have a special constitutive role: Tawḥīd (divine unity), Taqwā (God-consciousness), Ṣabr (patient perseverance), and Duʿāʾ (supplication). Together, they provide a coherent metaphysical and aesthetic framework through which reality, selfhood, moral action, and human agency are interpreted (Al-Faruqi, 1992; Abdullah, 2022).

- Tawḥīd (Divine Unity): constitutes the overarching structural principle of the Islamic worldview. In this context, human life is not divided into separate secular and religious worlds, but personal decisions, social interactions and moral behavior are united in one unified spiritual and moral world

(Al-Faruqi, 1992; Nasr, 2006).Islamic literature concerns the continuous effort to restore harmony between different aspects of the self and its relationship to God (Morey, 2017).

- **Taqwā (God-Consciousness):** shifts the narrative focus Taqwā is a continuous process of ethical attentiveness and spiritual mindfulness, and it can be used as a structural principle of characterisation. Character development is measured not through external worldly achievement or material success, but through the interior cultivation of spiritual awareness. where the moments of prayer, moral crisis, repentance, and quiet reflection become the primary catalysts for narrative progression, marking critical stages in the protagonist's interior journey (Hunter, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). In his analysis of Quranic ethics, Izutsu (1964) shows that taqwā is a state of moral alertness that is dynamic and has a profound impact on human consciousness and behavior. This type of characterisation is very different from the traditional secular sub-genres which focus on individual autonomy, total self-assertion, or material satisfaction.

- Ṣabr (Patient Perseverance): generates different temporal dimension in the novel's architecture. In Islamic belief, Ṣabr is not a passive acceptance of what happens, but rather an ethical reaction to hardship based on complete faith in God's wisdom. According to Rahman (1982), Ṣabr is one of the most important virtues in Islamic ethics, which helps Muslims to stay morally upright in difficult situations. Its literary significance becomes most apparent in the configuration of narrative temporality. While modern secular fiction is frequently organised around rapid action, conflict acceleration, and immediate material resolution, the 'Muslim novel' structurally emphasises gradual internal transformation and sustained spiritual endurance. Waiting, enduring, and quiet perseverance become meaningful forms of plot progression rather than narrative dead-ends. Narrative time becomes then a sacred space for ethical cultivation, in which characters find meaning by situating suffering in a spiritual power (Morey, 2017; Talafha et al., 2022).

- Duʿāʾ (Supplication): is a dynamic narrative tool that captures and externalises the protagonist's profound interiority. In contrast to the highly structured ritual prayer (Ṣalāh), Duʿāʾ is spontaneous, intimate, and directly reflective of the individual's immediate emotional, grateful, and spiritual state. As a literary practice, supplication can externalise a character's spiritual interiority and provide access to moments of vulnerability, gratitude, and moral reflection. Literarily, it plays a crucial role in providing readers with direct access to a character's spiritual struggles, vulnerabilities, and moral dilemmas (Morey, 2017).

These four ideas cover the entire story arc of the protagonist. Tawḥīd establishes the comprehensive metaphysical framework that guarantees the coherence of reality; Taqwā represents the character's conscious alignment with that framework; Ṣabr sustains that alignment in the face of narrative adversity and suffering; and Duʿāʾ provides the intimate vocal medium through which that relationship is continually renewed and articulated. Together, they generate an autonomous narrative logic where spiritual growth becomes the foundational measure of character development (Asad, 2003; Chakrabarty, 2000; Craun, 2013).

1.4.3 The Ethical-Spiritual Quest: Protagonist's Transformation

If Tawḥīd, Taqwā, and Ṣabr provide the conceptual architecture of the 'Muslim novel', the protagonist's journey constitutes the primary narrative mechanism through which these concepts are dramatized and explored. One of the most distinctive features of contemporary Muslim fiction is its tendency to structure character development around a process of ethical-spiritual transformation rather than purely psychological growth, social mobility, or political emancipation. While protagonists often confront issues of migration, racism, gender, class, and cultural conflict, the ultimate trajectory of their journeys frequently extends beyond these concerns toward questions of faith, moral refinement, and spiritual self-realization (Hunter, 2013; Morey, 2017).

Modern literary criticism has traditionally privileged narratives of liberation, autonomy, and self-assertion. The ideal protagonist often emerges as someone who frees themselves from inherited structures, challenges authority, and constructs an independent identity. While Muslim fiction does not necessarily reject agency or self-determination, it frequently redefines them. Agency is not understood primarily as liberation from all forms of authority but as liberty to choose- with conscious ethical capacity-to align oneself with divine guidance (Mahmood, 2005; Badran, 2009).

Saba Mahmood's (2005) argues that ethical self-formation can also occur through practices of discipline, devotion, and religious commitment. This insight resonates strongly with the 'Muslim novel', where protagonists frequently achieve transformation not through rejecting religious commitments but through embracing them more fully.

The ethical-spiritual quest that structures many 'Muslim novel's therefore differs significantly from both secular and postcolonial narratives. In many postcolonial texts, the protagonist's journey culminates in political consciousness, cultural hybridity, or resistance to oppressive structures (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Bhabha, 1994). While such themes may remain present, Muslim fiction often extends beyond them. The ultimate destination is not merely social awareness but spiritual awakening. Characters seek not only to understand their place within society but also to understand their relationship with God, with moral truth, and with the purpose of human existence (Nash, 2012; Chambers, 2019).

in 'Muslim novel's. Protagonists often begin in states of confusion, estrangement, moral uncertainty, or spiritual neglect. The narrative then follows their movement toward greater ethical clarity and spiritual awareness. Importantly, this transformation is rarely instantaneous. furthermore, It unfolds gradually through prayer, reflection, repentance, religious learning, and engagement with faith communities. as a result, Spiritual growth emerges as a continuous process rather than a single revelatory moment (Hunter, 2013; Talafha et al., 2022).

in addition, suffering is particularly significant within this process. In many secular narratives, adversity functions primarily as a catalyst for psychological development or social critique. 'Muslim novel's frequently add another dimension by interpreting suffering within a spiritual framework. Difficult experiences become opportunities for self-examination, repentance, and ethical growth. Concepts such as Ṣabr and Tawakkul (trust in God) provide interpretive resources through which hardship acquires meaning (Al-Faruqi, 1992; Abdullah, 2022). in concluding, The understanding of suffering contributes to a distinctive narrative logic. Loss, disappointment, and sacrifice are not necessarily obstacles to fulfillment; they may serve as conditions through which ethical and spiritual transformation becomes possible (Morey, 2017; Ngom, 2020).

The ethical-spiritual quest also influences the representation of desire. Many modern novels organize character development around the pursuit of romantic fulfillment, social status, or individual ambition. Muslim fiction, rather, reshapes these dimensions; Desires are directed according to their relationship with moral values and spiritual objectives. For this, character formation often involves learning to control, redirect, or transform desire (Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999).

Gender occupies an especially important place within these narratives. Scholars such as Badran (2009), Wadud (1999), and Mahmood (2005) have demonstrated that Muslim women's engagement with religion cannot be adequately understood through frameworks that reduce faith to oppression or resistance. Contemporary Muslim fiction frequently reflects this complexity by portraying female protagonists whose religious commitments function as sources of agency, dignity, and self-understanding.

Another significant feature of the ethical-spiritual quest is its relationship to community. The protagonist's Spiritual development frequently occurs through participation in religious communities, relationships with mentors, engagement with sacred texts, and shared acts of worship. This emphasis

contrasts with highly individualistic models of self-realization and reflects Islamic understandings of human flourishing as simultaneously personal and communal (Mahmood, 2005; Al-Faruqi, 1992).

The ethical-spiritual quest therefore operates on multiple levels simultaneously. It is psychological because it involves changes in perception and self-understanding. It is ethical because it concerns questions of moral conduct and responsibility. It is spiritual because it seeks proximity to God and alignment with divine guidance. Yet none of these dimensions can be fully separated from the others. Together they form a coherent narrative pattern that distinguishes the 'Muslim novel' from many dominant literary traditions.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the relationship between diaspora, postcoloniality, and the Muslim subject, before tracing the emergence and development of the 'Muslim novel' in English as a distinct literary form. It first situates Muslim literary expression within the broader contexts of displacement, postcolonial identity, and the representation of Muslim subjectivities. It then explores how the 'Muslim novel' develops as a literary form that uses the colonial medium of English to articulate alternative perspectives and challenge Orientalist modes of representation. The historical development of this corpus is examined across three stages, demonstrating a gradual movement from defensive and didactic forms of representation towards a more established literary tradition in which spirituality increasingly functions as a significant narrative and epistemological framework.

The chapter also looks at how the 'Muslim novel' reconceptualises identity and belonging, emphasising what is called metaphysical belonging—a mode of attachment based on faith rather than territory. Through an engagement with postsecular criticism, the chapter demonstrates how the 'Muslim novel' systematically challenges the secular/religious binary that historically marginalises religious worldviews within literary criticism, revealing this opposition as a historical construction rather than an

ontological fact. then, The epistemological shift from spirituality as an identity marker to spirituality as a narrative force is investigated in four areas: narrative causality, characterisation, temporality, and ethical resolution.

The analysis of Islamic concepts—Tawḥīd, Taqwā, Ṣabr, and Duʿāʾ—illustrates how these operate not only as theological references but also as active principles of narrative architecture, shaping plot progression, character motivation, and moral vision. The protagonist's ethical-spiritual journey is investigated as an alternative to the secular Bildungsroman, with human flourishing measured by ethical refinement and proximity to God rather than individual autonomy or material success. Finally, the linguistic dimension of writing Islam in English reveals how Muslim writers engage in sacred multilingualism, transforming English from a colonial language to a medium capable of articulating Islamic spirituality and broadening Anglophone literature's epistemological horizons. These theoretical foundations, taken together, form the analytical framework for a close textual examination of Leila Aboulela's «*Minaret*» in the following chapter, which traces the spiritual, ethical, and epistemological dimensions identified here throughout the novel.

Chapter Two:

Re-centering of Spiritual Discourse in Leila Aboulela's Novel Minaret

Chapter Two: Re-centring of Spiritual Discourse in Leila Aboulela's Novel *Minaret*

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Introduction

This chapter examines the re-centring of spiritual discourse in Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2005) through a close textual analysis informed by the postcolonial and postsecular perspectives discussed in Chapter One. The discussion begins by situating Aboulela's contrbution to contemporary postcolonial literature and examining the ways in which her fiction challenges secular literary paradigms by placing faith and spirituality at the centre of the narrative. It then turns to the fragmentation of the postcolonial self, focusing on how displacement, cultural alienation, and changes in social position affect the construction of identity. The discussion further explores how Islamic spirituality becomes a source of resistance and renewal, shaping the reconstruction of identity and belonging. It also examines the role of religious practices in Najwa's spiritual and ethical development, particularly through prayer, Qur'anic recitation, the hijab, and participation in religious spaces. In addition, it considers Aboulela's representation of the Muslim woman and the relationship between religious commitment and female agency. Finally, the chapter examines the hybrid language of the Muslim novel and the ways in which the use of English alongside Arabic and Islamic expressions allows spiritual and cultural meanings to be articulated within the English-language narrative. Through these interconnected themes, the chapter explores how Minaret brings Islamic spirituality into dialogue with postcolonial experiences of displacement, identity, agency, and belonging.

2.1 Leila Aboulela's Biography

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese novelist, short-story writer, and playwright whose work has received significant attention in contemporary African, postcolonial, and diasporic literary studies. She was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1964 to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father and grew up in Khartoum, Sudan. She attended the Khartoum American School and the Sisters' School before studying Economics at the University of Khartoum, where she graduated in 1985. She later moved to the United Kingdom for

postgraduate study and obtained an M.Sc. and an MPhil in Statistics from the London School of Economics. In 1990, she moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, where she began writing fiction in English in 1992 (Aboulela, n.d.; Chambers, 2011).

Aboulela's literary career began with the publication of her first novel, *The Translator*, in 1999. Her major subsequent works include *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2010), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Bird Summons* (2019), and *River Spirit* (2023). Her short-story collection Elsewhere, Home was published in 2018. Her literary achievements have been recognized through several significant awards. In 2000, she became the first recipient of the Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story "The Museum." Lyrics Alley received the Scottish Book Award for Fiction in 2011, while Elsewhere, Home won the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award in 2018. In 2023, she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 2025, she received the PEN Pinter Prize, further acknowledging her contribution to contemporary literature (Aboulela, n.d.; Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings, n.d.; English PEN, 2025).

Aboulela's fiction has attracted sustained critical attention for its treatment of religion, migration, displacement, belonging, and Muslim identity. Her writing frequently places Islamic faith and spiritual experience at the centre of characters' lives as they negotiate different cultural and geographical contexts. Chambers (2011) situates Aboulela within contemporary British Muslim fiction, while Hassan (2008) examines the religious and ideological dimensions of her representation of Muslim immigrant experience. Abbas (2011) similarly discusses the relationship between religion and the novel in Aboulela's fiction. Morey (2017), in his study of Minaret, examines the concept of 'halal fiction' and its relationship to postsecular literary criticism. These studies demonstrate the significance of Aboulela's fiction within scholarship concerned with the intersections of faith, migration, identity, and postcolonial experience.

2.2 Leila Aboulela: An Overview

2.2.1 Aboulela's Challenge to Secular Literary Paradigms

Aboulela's fiction offers a clear challenge to the secular perspectives that largely shape postcolonial and contemporary Anglophone literature. In many secular critical readings, religion is commonly understood either as a limiting cultural legacy or as a reaction against modernity. Aboulela, however, presents Islam as a meaningful ethical and intellectual framework through which individuals make sense of themselves and the world around them. Her novels question the assumption that personal freedom and modern life can only exist outside religious belief. Instead, spirituality appears as a source of moral guidance, emotional stability, and existential purpose (Gray, 2021, pp. 146–147).

Her critique of secularism becomes particularly visible in the way she reworks the structure of the Western novel. As Sadia Abbas notes, the modern novel has historically privileged secular interpretations of human experience through psychological realism and material understandings of reality (2011, pp. 436–437). Aboulela revises these conventions by introducing a worldview shaped by faith, divine providence, and spiritual transformation. In The Translator, for example, the relationship between the protagonist Sammar and Rae develops beyond the familiar pattern of multicultural reconciliation and instead reaches fulfillment through religious conversion and spiritual change. Rae's acceptance of Islam is therefore framed not simply as a personal decision, but as part of a providential order directed by divine will (Abbas, 2011, pp. 437–440). Through this narrative shift, Aboulela reshapes the traditional marriage plot into one where faith becomes central to emotional fulfillment and resolution.

At the same time, her fiction questions the promises of Western secular liberalism, particularly the idea that individual freedom alone can provide happiness or inner stability. Secular modern life is often portrayed in her novels as emotionally fragmented and spiritually unfulfilling. In Minaret, Najwa's sense of alienation emerges after the collapse of the moral and social structure that once gave meaning to her life. Rather than depicting religion as restrictive or oppressive, Aboulela presents Islamic devotion

as a means of restoring balance, clarity, and direction. Gray argues that her protagonists accept religious discipline willingly because they view submission to God as a conscious spiritual commitment rather than passive obedience (Gray, 2021, pp. 146–148).

Another significant aspect of Aboulela's writing is its strong engagement with Sufi spirituality. Her novels frequently present prayer, spiritual discipline, and suffering as important elements in the characters' spiritual development (Gray, 2021, pp. 150–153, 162–165). Suffering, in particular, is not treated solely as a consequence of social or material circumstances; rather, it can function as a catalyst for spiritual renewal and transformation (Gray, 2021, pp. 162–164). Gray further explains that Aboulela's fiction draws on Sufi understandings of the relationship between the outward and the inward, linking material experience to deeper spiritual meaning (Gray, 2021, pp. 150–153). Consequently, the material world in her novels is not presented as entirely separate from transcendence or divine meaning. Through this spiritual dimension, Aboulela reintroduces metaphysical concerns into contemporary fiction and challenges secular literary assumptions that tend to separate religious belief from intellectual and literary inquiry.

2.2.2 Contribution to Contemporary Postcolonial Literature

Leila Aboulela has played a distinctive role in contemporary postcolonial literature through her exploration of Muslim diasporic identity, hybridity, and spirituality. While many postcolonial writers tend to focus primarily on colonial violence or political resistance, Aboulela places Islam at the center of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Her novels depict Muslim characters as layered and emotionally complex individuals who struggle with migration, displacement, and the desire to belong within Western multicultural societies (Kersani & Hamza Reguig Mouro, 2020, p. 162). What particularly sets her fiction apart from many secular postcolonial narratives is the way spirituality becomes deeply connected to everyday experiences and personal self-awareness.

In novels such as Minaret, Aboulela focuses on the emotional and psychological experiences of Muslim immigrants, particularly women living in diaspora. Najwa, the novel's protagonist, moves through feelings of alienation and instability before eventually finding comfort through religion and self-recognition, which suggests that identity is continually reshaped by migration, loss, and spiritual rediscovery (Rouabhia & Melaikia, 2020, pp. 2–3). Aboulela also reinterprets Islamic practices such as veiling by presenting them as sources of dignity, protection, and belonging rather than simple markers of oppression, an especially meaningful perspective in the post-9/11 climate (Rouabhia & Melaikia, 2020, p. 4). Her fiction can therefore be read as a form of postsecular postcolonial writing that reconnects faith with secular life in transnational contexts. Critics argue that her work expands postcolonial discussions through its engagement with religion, feminism, and migration, while Waïl Hassan observes that she encourages intercultural understanding through literary representation instead of direct ideological conflict (Hassan, 2008, p. 304). Through these themes, Aboulela offers a distinctive literary voice that redefines postcolonial literature through spirituality, hybridity, and ethical reflection.

2.2.3 The Formation of a New Literary Canon Grounded in Spirituality

Leila Aboulela's work contributes to the development of a new literary canon grounded in spirituality through her continuous incorporation of Islamic faith into contemporary English literature. While many postcolonial writers tend to approach religion as a cultural reference or a political issue, Aboulela presents it as a personal and lived spiritual experience that shapes identity, morality, and everyday human relations. What makes her fiction distinctive is the way faith occupies a central place in the narrative itself rather than remaining a secondary cultural element. In doing so, she challenges the dominance of secular literary models that have long shaped contemporary Anglophone writing. Billy Gray argues that Aboulela creates "a literary space where religion is not simply a social marker, but a viable alternative to secularis" (Gray, 2021, p. 146). Her novels therefore expand the limits of modern

English literature by introducing a form of fiction deeply connected to spirituality and Islamic consciousness.

Another important aspect in Aboulela's writing is her rejection of stereotypical representations of Muslims often found in Western literary and media discourses. Instead of reducing Muslim characters to images of extremism, oppression, or cultural backwardness, she portrays ordinary believers whose faith becomes a source of emotional balance and self-understanding. Her characters are usually shown struggling with loneliness, displacement, or identity conflicts, yet spirituality allows them to reconstruct meaning in their lives. Gray (2021) explains that Aboulela's fiction attempts to create narratives that "follow Islamic logic" (p. 147), which clearly separates her work from secular postcolonial traditions that frequently marginalize religious experience. In this sense, spirituality in her novels is not presented as an outdated tradition but as an active intellectual and emotional force capable of shaping modern subjectivities.

Moreover, critics associate Aboulela's fiction with the growing postsecular literary movement that seeks to reconnect the sacred with the secular in contemporary literature. Kaoutar El Felly and Brahim Barhoun point out that religion has become increasingly central in immigrant and diasporic writing because it plays a major role in the formation of identity and cultural belonging. In their discussion of Bird Summons, they show how Aboulela links spirituality to female agency, migration, and self-discovery within transnational spaces. Rather than portraying Muslim women as passive figures, Aboulela depicts them as intellectually and spiritually conscious individuals who negotiate modern life through faith. As a result, her fiction contributes to the emergence of a postsecular feminist discourse that broadens traditional literary representation and gives greater visibility to religious female experiences.

In addition, Aboulela's novels can be situated within a wider Anglophone Arab literary tradition characterized by cultural hybridity and transnational experience. Dalal Sarnou draws attention to the growing body of English-language writing produced by Arab women and argues for greater recognition

of these writers within Anglophone literary studies. She notes that writers such as Chinua Achebe, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, and Anita Desai have come to form what she describes as a "parallel canon," and argues that comparable recognition should be extended to significant Anglophone Arab writers, many of whom are women (Sarnou, 2014, p. 51). Sarnou explicitly includes Leila Aboulela among these Arab Anglophone women writers, whose works contribute to an increasingly visible body of literature shaped by migration, cultural hybridity, and multiple identities (Sarnou, 2014, pp. 51–54). Aboulela's contribution is particularly significant within this context because her fiction brings together transnational experiences and Islamic spirituality, producing narratives that are culturally hybrid while remaining firmly grounded in religious faith.

Similarly, Wail S. Hassan situates Aboulela's fiction within what he terms "Muslim immigrant fiction," a literary trend that articulates" an alternative episteme derived from Islam but shaped specifically by immigrant perspectives" (Hassan, 2008, p. 299). From this perspective, Aboulela's fiction does not simply represent the experience of migration but also offers an epistemological framework grounded in Islamic belief. Her literary project therefore creates space for narratives in which religious faith functions not merely as a cultural marker but as a legitimate source of knowledge, meaning, and interpretation.

2.2.4 The Reintroduction of Faith into Postcolonial Literary Studies

The return of faith to postcolonial literary discourse becomes particularly visible in contemporary Anglophone literature, especially in the fiction of Leila Aboulela. Rather than treating Islam primarily as a cultural or political marker, Aboulela presents religious faith as a lived framework that shapes her characters' identities, moral choices, and sense of belonging. Her fiction therefore moves beyond representations of Islam as merely a cultural inheritance and foregrounds its ethical and spiritual dimensions. As Billy Gray observes, Aboulela's religious framework is deliberately presented as faith

rather than merely as a reference to cultural and social norms, and is positioned as "a viable alternative to secularism" and specific elements of Western modernity (Gray, 2021, p. 146). In this sense, faith becomes central to the construction and understanding of the self rather than remaining a secondary cultural or symbolic element. Aboulela's fiction consequently opens a literary space in which religious belief can function as a source of moral orientation, identity, and meaning within contemporary Anglophone literature.

In addition, Aboulela's fiction reflects what many scholars describe as a postsecular turn in literature. Her novels reconnect spirituality with postcolonial identity and diasporic experience in a way that feels natural and deeply human. In Minaret, Najwa's migration journey is closely connected to her spiritual transformation. Instead of portraying Islam as a source of restriction, the novel shows faith as something that gives stability, dignity, and emotional comfort. According to Mashhoor Al-Moghales, Najwa's religious journey proves that faith can become "a conscious, chosen, and transformative form of empowerment within a diasporic space" (Al-Moghales, 2026, p. 399). This representation challenges the stereotypical Western image of Muslim women as silent or oppressed figures. Aboulela tries to show that religious commitment can also be empowering, even if many western discourses usually ignore this aspect.

Moreover, recent scholarship connects Aboulela's work with the growing interest in spirituality within postcolonial studies. Her novels create a literary space where Islam and modern life are not necessarily presented as being in conflict. Their study explains that religion has become increasingly important in immigrant literature because questions of faith are closely connected with identity, exile, and hybridity in transnational societies (El Felly & Barhoun, 2025). Likewise, Susanna Zinato associates Aboulela's fiction with the concept of "transcultural humanism," arguing that literature can reconnect ethical and spiritual concerns with postcolonial experiences beyond strictly Western secular frameworks (2025, pp. 323–324). Together, these studies illustrate how Aboulela's fiction contributes to the

reintroduction of faith into postcolonial literary discourse, presenting spirituality not as an escape from reality, but as another way of understanding identity, belonging, and human relations.

Another important point is that Aboulela reintroduces Muslim religious consciousness into English literary fiction during a period where Islamic identities are frequently misunderstood or negatively represented. Her novels move away from common stereotypes that associate Muslims only with extremism or backwardness. Instead, she humanizes everyday religious practice and presents Muslim characters in a more realistic and nuanced manner. Wail S. Hassan notes that Aboulela's writing belongs to a new trend of "Muslim immigrant literature" that attempts to produce alternative representations of Islam in Western literary discourse (Hassan, 2008, p. 299). Because of this, the return of faith in postcolonial literature through Aboulela's fiction can be seen as an important shift in literary criticism itself. Religion is no longer viewed as something marginal, but became an essential element in discussing diaspora, identity, and resistance in the contemporary postcolonial world.

2.3 Fragmentation of the Postcolonial Self in Minaret

In Minaret, Leila Aboulela uses the character of Najwa, a lady who suffers from exile, political upheaval, and the loss of social privilege, to explore the postcolonial experience. From a postcolonial perspective, Najwa's forcibly displaced status creates a significant identity problem and psychological instability. But if exile begins with trauma and estrangement, it eventually becomes a journey of emotional and spiritual rebirth.

Najwa's identity in Khartoum is defined by her privileged socio-economic status, Westernized lifestyle and patriarchal upbringing. She is the daughter of a powerful government official and a university student. Her identity is associated with richness and social standing. But the coup d'état destroys this stability. Her exile from Khartoum to London results in a serious identity crisis and social and economic downfall. Najwa, deprived of her father, family wealth, and political protection, has to give up her previous life and work as a domestic maid. This highlights the destabilisation of her identity and

social status in the opening lines of Minaret: "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low, and there isn't much room to move"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 1). Najwa has no concept of herself that is connected to her past. The stability she had found in being an elite "aristocrat" from a land-owning family leads to the performative, submissive identity of a domestic helper. She talks about the extreme cognitive dissonance that it takes to live in this new role, and how easily she falls into the body language of the servants she used to ignore in Khartoum:"It still takes me by surprise how natural I am in this servant role... All the ingratiating manners, the downcast eyes, the sideways movements of the servants I grew up with" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 83).

This class inversion generates a dual awareness. Najwa is internally struggling between who she was – a liberated, rich student driving her own Mercedes or Toyota – and who she must be to survive in the West: an unseen, obedient maid. This instability also appears in her worry over visual recognition and historical exposure. Najwa's visceral panic reaction when her employer's mother learns that her daughter was born in Khartoum is a reaction of terror that her genuine background, despite her attempt to hide her low social status: "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?" (Aboulela, 2006, p.71).Najwa exemplifies how relocation unravels the postcolonial self through the use of counterfeit identities (Eritrean/Somali) that transform the original national and cultural signifiers into liabilities to be repressed or overwritten. Najwa's experience of displacement affects not only her social position but also the way she understands herself. After losing the life she had in Sudan, she finds it difficult to connect her past identity with her present one. This uncertainty becomes clear when she says: "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 by walking into the Central Mosque one afternoon" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 111).

The passage presents Najwa as divided between two different versions of herself. The contrast between her former identity in Khartoum and her present position as a maid in London is particularly significant because the two descriptions reflect very different positions in her life. The first refers to the woman she was in Khartoum, while the second identifies her through her present role as a maid in London. The reference to her past self also suggests a certain distance between her present self and the person she remembers from Khartoum. This becomes clearer through her uncertainty about her identity, which directly expresses her difficulty in bringing these two identities together. Her problem, therefore, is not simply that her circumstances have changed; the change has also affected her sense of self. The contrast between her former and present identities shows how displacement has created an internal division that makes it difficult for her to see herself as one coherent person.

This internal division is closely connected to Najwa's growing feeling that she does not belong in the society around her. Her sense of difference becomes especially clear when she compares herself with the English: "For the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused. For the first time, I was conscious of my shitty-coloured skin next to their placid paleness" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 174).

The contrast between "grounded" and "displaced" is central to the passage. Najwa presents the English as people who appear secure and connected to their surroundings, while she sees herself as someone who has lost this sense of stability. The words "never displaced, never confused"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 174), also echo the uncertainty expressed in the first quotation, where Najwa is unsure of who she is. Her feeling of being displaced is therefore both external and internal: she is physically living in London, but she does not experience the same sense of security and connection that she associates with the people around her. Her awareness of her skin colour further emphasizes this distance, making her conscious of a difference between herself and the English. London consequently becomes a space in

which she becomes more aware of her position as an outsider rather than a place where she can easily feel at home.

Taken together, the two passages show that Najwa's psychological fragmentation and her feelings of unbelonging are closely connected. Her displacement separates her from the life and identity she once knew, while her experience in London makes her increasingly aware of her difference from the society around her. As a result, the question of where she belongs is also connected to the question of who she has become. Aboulela therefore presents displacement as an experience that affects both Najwa's relationship with her surroundings and her understanding of herself.

2.4 Islamic Spirituality as Resistance and Reconstruction

In Minaret, Najwa's return to Islam develops alongside the collapse of the social world that had previously defined her. Her displacement from Khartoum to London unsettles not only her social position but also the assumptions through which she had understood identity, class, and belonging. Her growing attachment to Islam becomes part of her response to this disruption, allowing her to reinterpret her circumstances through a spiritual framework.

This tension is already present in Najwa's childhood understanding of religion in Minart. Looking back at her family home, she recalls, "our house was a house where only the servants prayed" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 95). The statement reflects the class hierarchy within which she was raised, where religious practice was associated with servants rather than with her privileged identity. From a postcolonial perspective, this reveals how class divisions shape the social meaning attached to religious practice and influence Najwa's early perception of Islam. Yet the novel later reverses this relationship. Once displacement removes the privileges that had separated her from those servants, Islam becomes increasingly important to her own sense of self. Her spiritual development therefore involves a reconsideration of the values attached to both class and religion.

This change begins with her encounter with the Azan in *Minaret*:

> "The sound of the Azan, the words, and the way the words sounded went inside me; it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco, and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me... The servants stirred... They were getting ready to pray. They had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake and I didn't." (Aboulela, 2006, pp. 31–32)

The significance of this moment lies in the way the Azan exposes an emptiness that Najwa had not previously recognized within her lifestyle. The contrast between the disco and the call to prayer is not simply a contrast between secular and religious activities. The scene suggests that the Azan opens access to a dimension of Najwa's self that her former lifestyle had left unexplored. At the same time, the servants who respond to the call to prayer are the same people she had previously associated with religious practice because of their lower social position. The scene consequently unsettles both her class assumptions and her understanding of what constitutes a meaningful life. From a post-secular perspective, religion emerges here as a form of knowledge through which Najwa begins to understand herself rather than merely as a remnant of her past.

The importance of this spiritual awakening becomes clearer in the development of events in Minaret as Najwa begins to find stability in religious teaching:

> "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 and all of this, all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end." (Aboulela, 2006, p. 98)

The word "solid" is particularly significant in the context of displacement. Najwa has lost the social and material structures that once gave her security, yet faith provides another basis for understanding her situation. Her belief does not undo the conditions of exile or restore her former status. Instead, it changes her relationship to them. Trust in Allah gives her a way to endure uncertainty and to see meaning in experiences that might otherwise be understood only as loss. This is where the postcolonial and post-

secular dimensions of the novel meet. Displacement places Najwa in a position of social and cultural uncertainty, but spirituality gives her a framework through which that uncertainty can be confronted. Her patience can therefore be understood not simply as passive endurance, but as a form of inner resistance to the idea that the loss of wealth, family, and status has also meant a loss of personal worth. By grounding her identity increasingly in faith rather than privilege, Najwa begins to reconstruct herself from a different position. The movement from associating religious practice with the servants to finding herself "solid" through religious belief thus captures Najwa's transformation: Islam moves from being associated with a lower social class to becoming an important basis of her own identity after displacement.

Islamic spirituality in Minaret thus operates simultaneously within the postcolonial experience of displacement and the post-secular recovery of religious meaning. Najwa does not simply return to the identity she had before exile. Her faith develops in response to the loss and instability produced by displacement, allowing her to construct a different sense of self. Spirituality becomes, in this sense, both a way of resisting the values that once defined her and a means of rebuilding her life around faith, patience, and trust in Allah.

2.5 Spirituality and the Reconstruction of Identity

In Minaret, displacement not only deprives Najwa of her former home and social position; it also unsettles the identity she had built around them. Her privileged life in Khartoum had connected her sense of self to family status, wealth, and social recognition. When these foundations collapse, she is forced to reconsider who she is beyond the world that once defined her. Her growing spirituality consequently becomes a means through which she reconstructs her identity rather than simply recover the life she has lost.

The depth of this rupture is expressed through the image of falling after her father's execution:

> When Baba was hanged, the earth we were standing on split open and we tumbled down and that tumbling had no end, it seemed to have no end, as if we would fall and fall for eternity without ever landing (Aboulela, 2006, p. 61).

The image of the earth splitting open conveys more than personal grief. It represents the collapse of the social and political world in which Najwa's earlier identity had been formed. The 'endless' fall suggests the loss of the structures that once gave her a stable position and sense of belonging. Her displacement therefore becomes an identity crisis as much as a geographical one. Yet this rupture also creates the possibility of constructing a different sense of self, no longer dependent on the privileges of her past.

This change becomes particularly clear when Najwa reflects on her encounter with people from her former social world:

> 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. (Aboulela, 2006, p. 188)

The contrast between the social importance of her past and the simplicity of "my name and what I did" reveals a significant shift in what Najwa considers meaningful. Her father's connections to diplomats and the president once represented the status through which she understood her place in society, but she now finds no need to reproduce that identity. The statement "we had come together to worship and it was enough"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 188) is particularly significant because it places spiritual connection above former social distinctions. In this sense, spirituality provides Najwa with an alternative basis for belonging, allowing her to move beyond the class structures that once defined her. The religious space therefore becomes not an escape from her postcolonial condition, but a place in which she can renegotiate her identity within it.

Her reconstructed sense of self is made explicit when she states: "I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 110). The repetition of 'changed' emphasizes that Najwa's identity has been transformed through displacement and experience. She does not completely reject being Sudanese; instead, she recognizes that migration has altered the way she understands herself. Most significantly, Najwa regards being muslim as a fundamental aspect of her identity shows that Islam has become a primary framework for self-definition. This challenges a purely secular understanding of migrant identity in which movement to the West would necessarily weaken religious attachment. In Minaret, displacement instead creates a context in which spirituality becomes increasingly central to Najwa's understanding of herself.

The process reaches its clearest expression in her anticipation of Hajj: "If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 209). The phrase "start my life again"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 209) is important because Najwa does not imagine renewal as a return to her former privileged existence. She imagines a new beginning shaped by the spiritual transformation she has undergone. Hajj thus represents more than a religious obligation; it symbolizes the possibility of becoming someone different from the woman whose identity was once grounded in wealth, status, and social position. Spirituality consequently provides a framework through which Najwa can reinterpret her past and imagine her future.

Therefore, the reconstruction of Najwa's identity in Minaret is neither a return to her former self nor a complete rejection of her past. Displacement breaks down the social and material foundations of her earlier identity, while spirituality gradually offers another basis for self-definition and belonging. Her movement from the collapse of her former world, through the revaluation of social status, to her identification as Muslim and her desire for spiritual renewal shows how faith can become a source of agency after displacement. In bringing the postcolonial experience of exile into dialogue with a post-

secular understanding of spirituality, Aboulela presents religious faith as an active means through which a displaced subject can reconstruct the self.

2.6 Religious Practices

In Minaret, religious practices function as more than visible expressions of Muslim identity; they become embodied means through which Najwa develops a renewed sense of self. This representation is particularly relevant to Saba Mahmood's (2005) conception of pious agency, which challenges the assumption that agency is necessarily expressed through resistance to religious norms. For Mahmood, bodily practices can themselves become formative processes through which ethical capacities are cultivated. Aboulela's representation of Najwa similarly shifts attention from belief as an abstract state to religious practice as a process of becoming. Through modest dress, Qur'anic recitation, and disciplined engagement with the Qur'an, Najwa gradually inhabits a religious identity rather than merely adopting it as an external marker.

Najwa's early perception of religious dress reveals that her understanding of Islamic practice is initially conditioned by class and geographical distinction. Recalling the girls at the University of Khartoum, she states:"They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends... I was conscious of their modest grace, of the Tobes that covered their slimness - pure white cotton covering their arms and hair" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 14).The contrast between "provincial girls" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 14) and "a girl from the capital" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 14) positions the '*Tobe'* within a social hierarchy through which the young Najwa distances herself from religiously modest femininity. The description of the girls as possessing "modest grace" is significant because Najwa recognizes a quality that she has not yet incorporated into her own identity. The '*Tobe'* therefore functions less as a religious object in this early stage than as a visible sign of a social identity from which Najwa feels separated. Read retrospectively through Mahmood's (2005) framework, this distance is important because it establishes the difference between observing a religious practice and forming oneself through

it. Najwa's later transformation does not simply replace one style of clothing with another; it involves a gradual reorientation of the relationship between the body, religious practice, and the self.

This reorientation becomes visible in the opening of the novel, where Najwa encounters her own reflection in London: "There's a mirror in the lobby. It shows a woman in a white head-scarf and beige, shapeless coat. Eyes too bright and lashes too long, but still I look homely and reliable, the right age" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 2–3). The significance of the passage lies in the tension between the external appearance of the "white head-scarf"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 2–3) and Najwa's recognition of herself as "homely and reliable"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 2–3) The religious garment is no longer positioned from the outside as something belonging to a socially distant group; it has become part of the bodily image through which Najwa understands herself. The mirror consequently becomes a site of self-recognition in which religious identity is embodied rather than simply represented. From Mahmood's (2005) perspective, this is important because the body is not merely a passive surface upon which identity is displayed. It participates in the formation of the subject itself. Najwa's changed appearance therefore signals a deeper process of self-fashioning in which religious practice contributes to the reconstruction of the self under conditions of displacement.

The relationship between bodily practices and agency becomes more complex when Najwa's religious identity is confronted with hostility in the public sphere. During the bus incident, she repeatedly recites the opening of Surah Al-Falaq:

> I start to recite Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak. I recite it again and again... He says, 'You Muslim scum', then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face... The wind hits against my wet scarf, it makes my scalp feel cold. I use the dry edge of the scarf to wipe my face. (Aboulela, 2006, pp. 80–81)

The repetition of "I recite it again and again" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 80) is central to the passage because it presents religious practice as an active bodily response rather than a statement of belief. Under conditions

in which Najwa's Muslim identity is violently marked by another person, Qur'anic recitation enables her to orient herself through a religious practice that she has cultivated. Its significance therefore lies not in passive endurance, but in the way repetition provides a disciplined form of response to humiliation. The passage also brings religious practice into direct contact with the body: the "wet scarf," (Aboulela, 2006, pp. 80–81) the coldness against her scalp, and the physical discomfort of the encounter make her religious identity materially present. In this sense, the scene illustrates Mahmood's (2005, p. 15) argument that agency can operate through embodied practices that cultivate particular capacities within the subject. Here, the physical sensations of the assault are counterbalanced by the somatic discipline of recitation; Najwa's agency does not take the form of physical retaliation; instead, it is realized through her capacity to sustain an ethical and devotional practice under conditions that attempt to reduce her to a stigmatized religious identity.

The novel further unsettles the assumption that Muslim religious practice is incompatible with social belonging in Britain. Najwa's observation of a young British Muslim woman is particularly significant:

I like the way she wears her hijab, confident that she has the kind of allure worth covering. Usually the young Muslims girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me though I admire them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London. (Aboulela, 2006, p. 77)

The juxtaposition of "hijab," "confident," and "very British" disrupts the binary through which religious visibility is often interpreted as evidence of alienation from British society. The woman's confidence does not emerge despite her religious dress; rather, the passage places confidence and religious observance within the same representation of Muslim femininity. Her genuine comfort and familiarity with London are equally important because they separate religious belonging from geographical or national exclusion. The passage therefore challenges the assumption that integration requires the abandonment of visible

religious identity. Within the post-secular perspective of the novel, Muslim practice can consequently operate as a form of belonging rather than as an obstacle to it.

This possibility is challenged by Randa's explicitly secular-modernist response to the image of a veiled woman:

> Totally retarded, she said looking at the picture and handing me a spoon. 'We're supposed to go forward, not go back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything?' (Aboulela, 2006, p. 29)

Randa's language constructs religious dress through a linear opposition between 'forward' and 'back', making modernity dependent upon movement away from visible religious practice. Her questions about working in a laboratory and playing tennis further associate female agency with participation in secular public life, implicitly positioning religious dress as incompatible with such capacities. The passage therefore exposes the ideological assumption underlying the secular-modernist model: that liberation can only be achieved when religious practices are abandoned.

Minaret complicates this model by presenting Najwa's religious practices not as the negation of agency but as practices through which another form of agency becomes possible. This is precisely where Mahmood's (2005) intervention becomes useful: if agency is not restricted to resistance against norms, then the adoption and repeated enactment of religious practices cannot automatically be interpreted as submission. Instead, the novel invites a reading of religious observance as a possible mode of ethical self-formation.

This process is most clearly articulated through Najwa's experience in the Tajweed class:

> The Tajweed class is my favourite. I learn how to pronounce the letters correctly, when to blur two letters together, when to pronounce the n in a nasal way, for how many beats to prolong a certain letter. This concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around

me... Here in the Tajweed class, all is calm and peaceful. We practise and practise until we can get the words right. I want to read the Qur'an in a beautiful way. (Aboulela, 2006, pp. 78–79)

Building on Mahmood's (2005) theorization of ethical self-formation introduced in the first chapter, this scene in Minaret illustrates what can be understood as "embodied piety": the cultivation of religious subjectivity through disciplined and repeated bodily practices (p. 15). Through Najwa's experience, religious development unfolds not only through the acquisition of religious knowledge but also through the disciplined training of the body and voice. The detailed attention to pronunciation, nasalization, and the duration of sounds demonstrates how religious knowledge is acquired and embodied through repeated practice. The repetition in "we practise and practice" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 79) further emphasizes that the desired religious capacity is developed through sustained practice rather than through intellectual recognition alone.

Crucially, this discipline is not represented as merely restrictive. Najwa explicitly associates the concentration required by Tajweed with being soothed and experiencing "calm and peaceful"(Aboulela, 2006, p. 79). surroundings. The practice therefore transforms her relation to herself by cultivating concentration and devotional attentiveness. Through the repeated coordination of voice, pronunciation, and attention, Qur'anic recitation becomes a mode of ethical self-formation. Mahmood's framework consequently allows the passage to be read beyond the opposition between submission and resistance: Najwa's agency emerges through the very practices that discipline her.

To sum up, these representations demonstrate that religious practices in Minaret are constructed as a process of embodied self-formation. The movement from Najwa's early social distancing from the '*Tobe'*, through her embodied adoption of the headscarf, to her repeated Qur'anic recitation and disciplined '*Tajweed'* practice reveals a gradual transformation in her relationship with religious identity. Rather than functioning simply as symbols of tradition, these practices shape how Najwa inhabits her body, regulates her responses, and develops ethical capacities. In this sense, Aboulela's representation of

Muslim practice challenges the secular-modernist assumption that agency necessarily requires distance from religious norms. Through the post-secular framework, religious practice can instead be understood as a site where agency, identity, and ethical self-formation intersect.

2.7 Rewriting the Muslim Woman

In *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela presents a complex representation of the Muslim woman that challenges reductive Orientalist assumptions about veiling, submission, and female agency. Through Najwa's transformation, the novel refuses the binary that associates Westernization with liberation and religious commitment with oppression. Instead, spirituality becomes a significant source of autonomy, moral reflection, and self-definition.

The novel first challenges the tendency to represent Muslim women as a homogeneous and oppressed group. This is particularly evident when Najwa observes the women gathered for Eid:

> This one is all peaches and cream, this one is like a model, this one is mumsy with or without her hijab, this one in her smart jacket looks like she wants to chair a board meeting. This one with the glasses and unruly hair looks like a student and she is one, but this one looks like a belly dancer and she is definitely not. (Aboulela, 2006, pp. 185–186)

The variety of appearances, personalities, and social roles in this scene disrupts the idea of a single, fixed Muslim female identity. The women are not presented through one stereotypical image of the veiled and oppressed woman; instead, they display different forms of femininity, education, personality, and social participation. Aboulela therefore replaces the homogenizing Orientalist gaze with a more diverse representation of Muslim women as socially and individually differentiated subjects.

At the same time, Aboulela avoids constructing Najwa herself as an idealized or flawless religious woman. Her spiritual development remains marked by hesitation, guilt, desire, and human weakness. When she begins to pray, she reflects:

> I start to pray, the words tumble in my head. Allah, please get me out of this mess. Stop this from happening. I know You are punishing me because I tried this necklace on in the morning, in front of the mirror. I put it round my neck and I will never do that again, ever. (Aboulela, 2006, p. 113)

Her thoughts reveal a moment when a woman is still negotiating her faith rather than possessing complete spiritual certainty. Her prayer combines dependence on God with anxiety and guilt, making her religious identity psychologically complex. This complexity is also visible in her admission: "I felt a stab of guilt at my laziness but I pushed it away" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 161), which shows that her return to religious practice is gradual and imperfect. Najwa is therefore not reduced to the stereotype of the perfectly pious Muslim woman; instead, she is represented as a human subject whose spirituality develops through struggle and self-reflection.

Minaret also distinguishes Najwa's inner spiritual development from the external perception of Muslim identity. When Farida sees her without her hijab, Najwa observes:

> It is the first time for her to see me without my hijab. Her eyes flickered over me when I opened the door and she saw my transformation. But she did not say anything or hid her surprise well. Perhaps it was something she was expecting. (Aboulela, 2006, p. 258)

The moment draws attention to the gap between religious appearance and the person perceived through it. Najwa's spiritual identity cannot simply be reduced to an external marker such as the hijab, since her religious transformation is also an interior process. The word 'transformation' carries an ironic weight: while Farida registers a visible alteration through the absence of the hijab, Najwa's transformation cannot be fully reduced to outward appearance, as it also involves an internal and spiritual process. By foregrounding this distinction, Aboulela challenges the tendency to judge Muslim women primarily through visible signs of religiosity and instead draws attention to the subjective experiences and motivations behind them.

Furthermore, Minaret presents religious commitment as compatible with female agency. Najwa does not merely follow the expectations of others; she develops her own moral understanding and acts according to it. This becomes particularly clear when she reflects on Doctora Zeinab's influence over Tamer:

> I see this clearly now. She is an obstacle to his spiritual growth or, more precisely, her disapproval is. She is a test for him and he will have to pass. I will not let him fail. I will not let her curse him, not like my mother cursed Omar. (Aboulela, 2006, p. 264)

Here, Najwa actively interprets the situation through her own understanding of faith and decides to intervene. The assertive repetition of "I will not let him fail" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 264) and "I will not let her curse him" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 264) reveals a decisive shift in Najwa's voice. Rather than remaining a passive observer, she takes a morally active position, drawing on her painful memory of her mother's curse of Omar to resist what she perceives as another harmful form of influence. Her spirituality therefore does not silence her judgment or make her passive; rather, it provides a moral framework through which she exercises responsibility and makes decisions. In this sense, religious commitment becomes a source of agency rather than submission.

This relationship between spirituality and agency is further illustrated by Najwa's decision to undertake Hajj: " I will go on Hajj, insha'Allah. I am planning for it.' The excitement slips through. I have not told anyone else and I am glad that he is the first to know" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 272).

The phrase "I am planning for it" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 272) emphasizes intention and personal initiative. Her excitement suggests that religious commitment is experienced as a meaningful personal choice rather than an externally imposed obligation. Her decision consequently reinforces the novel's challenge to the assumption that Islamic devotion necessarily diminishes women's autonomy.

Finally, Aboulela presents Islamic spirituality as a space through which Muslim women can articulate themselves and participate actively in their community. This is evident when Najwa takes part in a mosque programme:

> My voice sounds strange in the microphone. Still, the children run around, a baby is wailing. I only agreed to do this because Um Waleed nagged me. She said it was only right that different sisters should get a chance to participate. 'It's only a short prayer,' she insisted. ‘ You're so well liked, everyone will enjoy seeing you as part of the programme'. I remind myself that I must not mumble. It gets easier as I go along.
>
> (Aboulela, 2006, p. 183)

Najwa's participation transforms the religious space into one in which women can speak, contribute, and become visible as active members of their community. The transition from a voice that "sounds strange" to one where speaking "gets easier" traces the literal recovery of female self-articulation. Far from silencing her, the communal space of the mosque provides both the microphone and the supportive audience necessary to transform hesitant speech into public presence. Her initially unfamiliar voice gradually becomes easier to use, suggesting that religious belonging can facilitate rather than suppress self-expression. The scene therefore provides a counter-image to representations of Muslim women as silent or socially restricted, showing instead how Islamic spirituality can create opportunities for feminine participation and self-articulation.

Overall, Aboulela rewrites the Muslim woman by refusing the opposition between religiosity and agency. Najwa is neither an idealized religious figure nor a passive victim of tradition. She is a psychologically complex woman whose spiritual commitment enables her to make moral choices, develop inner autonomy, and recover her voice. In this sense, Minaret presents Islamic spirituality not as a limitation on feminine freedom, but as one of the frameworks through which female subjectivity, agency, and self-definition can be constructed.

2.8 The Hybrid Language of the Muslim Novel

In Leila Aboulela's Minaret, language becomes another space through which cultural and religious identity is negotiated. As the previous sections have shown, displacement unsettles Najwa's sense of identity and belonging, while her engagement with Islam contributes to the reconstruction of her sense of self. This process is also reflected in the language of the novel. Aboulela appropriates English and reshapes it through Arabic and Islamic expressions, allowing different cultural and religious meanings to coexist within the same narrative. Linguistic hybridity therefore functions as a postcolonial strategy through which English is adapted to represent a distinctly Muslim experience rather than simply reproducing the linguistic norms of its dominant cultural context.

The novel establishes this hybridity from its opening. It begins with the Arabic expression, "Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 1) which is left untranslated. By placing an Islamic expression at the beginning of an English-language novel, Aboulela gives Arabic an immediate narrative and cultural presence. The phrase is neither explained nor replaced by an English equivalent, allowing its religious meaning to remain within the text without being mediated for the reader. This choice is significant because it positions Islamic language within the narrative on its own terms and signals from the outset that the English text will accommodate meanings originating outside the dominant British cultural context. Arabic thus becomes part of the novel's linguistic structure rather than remaining external to it.

This integration of Islamic vocabulary continues throughout Najwa's everyday interactions. When she arrives at a London flat, she greets the person inside with "Salaamu alleikum"(Aboulela, 2006, pp. 1–2), while elsewhere she uses expressions such as "alhamdullilah" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 2) and "insha' Allah" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 74). These expressions are embedded naturally within otherwise English sentences rather than being presented as foreign terms requiring explanation. Their meanings also extend beyond simple vocabulary*:* 'Salaamu alleikum' functions as a culturally and religiously meaningful form

of greeting, 'alhamdullilah' frames an ordinary event through gratitude to God, and 'insha' Allah' places a future possibility within an Islamic understanding of divine will. Through such choices, Aboulela does not merely insert Arabic vocabulary into English; she allows Islamic expressions to shape the representation of everyday experience, creating a form of English capable of carrying the religious dimension of Muslim life.

Arabic expressions also contribute to the cultural specificity of the Muslim community represented in the novel. On page 76, Najwa observes that "Everyone is ‘ ya habibi' or ‘ ya habibti' to her," (Aboulela, 2006, p. 76). while the Prophet is referred to *as* "ya habibi ya Rasoul Allah" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 76).

Terms such as 'Tobe,' 'ta'miyah' and 'nadwa' are similarly retained in Arabic. Rather than being replaced by generalized English equivalents, these expressions preserve particular forms of affection, social interaction, and cultural reference. Their presence gives the community represented in the novel a distinctive social texture and keeps its everyday practices connected to the cultural context from which they emerge. The retention of Arabic therefore helps Aboulela preserve cultural specificity while representing a Muslim community living within a transnational setting.

In *Minaret*, language consequently becomes a medium through which cultural and religious affiliations are negotiated. Tamer's reflection that "My English is stronger than my Arabic" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 110) illustrates the complexity of this negotiation. His stronger command of English, however, does not resolve the question of cultural belonging. Although his Western education has influenced his linguistic and cultural outlook, he identifies Islam as an important basis of his identity: "I guess being a Muslim is my identity" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 110). His statement shows that linguistic, national, and religious affiliations may overlap without being identical. English represents an important part of his experience, while Muslim identity provides another basis of belonging that is not limited to language or nationality. In Minaret, language therefore reflects the complexity of identities formed across different

cultural spaces, where English and Arabic do not simply represent opposing identities but participate in an ongoing process of negotiation.

Through this hybrid use of language, Minaret demonstrates that writing in English does not require the abandonment of Arabic cultural and Islamic religious meanings. Instead, Aboulela reshapes English so that it can accommodate Muslim expressions, cultural references, and religious experiences while preserving their specificity. Linguistic hybridity thus becomes an important part of the novel's postcolonial significance: it enables Muslim experience to be articulated through English without being fully absorbed into the cultural assumptions associated with its dominant context. In this way, Minaret contributes to an emerging Muslim English literary formation in which English becomes not simply a language of representation, but a flexible medium through which Muslim culture and spirituality can speak from within the language itself.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the representation of Islamic spirituality in *Minaret* through the themes of displacement, identity, religious practices, female agency, and language. Najwa's displacement from Sudan to Britain produces a profound fragmentation of her identity. But it also becomes the beginning of a gradual spiritual reorientation. Her return to Islam gives her a different way of understanding loss, alienation, and uncertainty, and gradually helps her develop a more stable sense of self.

Spirituality in *Minaret* is expressed through everyday religious practices rather than through abstract belief alone. Prayer, Quranic recitation (*Tajweed*), the *hijab*, and participation in the mosque community become part of Najwa's changing understanding of herself and her relationship with others. These practices also shape her sense of responsibility, dignity, and belonging. Religious commitment is therefore presented as an active part of self-definition rather than simply as a cultural inheritance. The novel consequently challenges the assumption that Islamic religious practice necessarily limits female agency.

Najwa's experience also shows how displacement and spiritual change can develop alongside one another. Her loss of family, social position, and familiarity with Sudan leaves her in a state of uncertainty, yet her growing attachment to religious practice gives her a different basis for understanding her circumstances. The postcolonial perspective makes visible the effects of exile, marginalization, class transformation, and identity fragmentation, while the postsecular perspective draws attention to the role of faith in Najwa's ethical development and resilience. The two perspectives are particularly useful in reading a journey in which displacement does not remain only an experience of loss but becomes connected to personal and spiritual reconstruction.

The discussion of language further shows that this spiritual dimension is present in the form of the novel itself. Aboulela combines English with Arabic and Islamic expressions, allowing religious meanings to remain part of the narrative without being reduced to cultural explanation. English thus becomes a space in which an Islamic worldview can be expressed from within the experience of the characters. Islamic spirituality thus emerges as central to Najwa's reconstruction of identity, agency, and belonging, while Minaret brings postcolonial displacement into dialogue with spiritual and ethical experience.

General Conclusion

This dissertation examines the intersection of Islamic spirituality, displacement, and agency in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. It seeks to show how the novel contributes to a new understanding of postcolonial spirituality within contemporary Muslim fiction in English. By bringing postcolonial theory into dialogue with post-secular critique, the study argues that Muslim fiction cannot be fully understood through conventional ideas of cultural estrangement and migrant integration alone. Using a qualitative textual approach based on close reading and thematic analysis, the study examines how faith develops from an inherited aspect of Najwa's life into an epistemological and narrative framework through which she understands her displacement and changing circumstances.

Najwa's movement from Khartoum's secular elite to the position of an isolated domestic worker in London turns dislocation into an unexpected catalyst for inner renewal. Through regular prayer, Qur'anic immersion, and her involvement in the community at Regent's Park Mosque, she gradually reconstructs a sense of self amid loss and uncertainty. Her commitment to faith also offers a different understanding of female autonomy. Her adoption of the *hijab* and her decision to refuse marriage with Tamer in favour of performing the *Hajj* demonstrate that religious commitment does not necessarily eliminate agency. Rather, these choices reflect a conscious form of agency shaped by her values and faith, challenging the assumption that female empowerment necessarily requires a break from religious commitment.

The novel also reconsiders the meaning of belonging by separating it from geographical boundaries. Although displacement deprives Najwa of the security associated with home, her integration into a trans-ethnic Islamic community, informed by the deterritorialized concept of the Ummah, provides another form of solidarity rooted in metaphysical belonging. Aboulela's use of English further reinforces

this perspective. By writing from within an Islamic worldview and incorporating Islamic rituals and interior monologue without relying on explanatory cultural framing, she allows faith to participate directly in the production of meaning. Religion therefore functions in the novel as more than a marker of cultural identity; it becomes part of the way the narrative itself is constructed and understood.

The analysis further shows that Minaret offers a different understanding of the postcolonial subject and the Bildungsroman. Najwa's transformation is not defined by material recovery, social mobility, or romantic fulfilment, but by ethical refinement, spiritual discipline, and a renewed sense of purpose. Suffering and displacement, consequently, become more than experiences of loss. They contribute to a process of spiritual transformation shaped by Ṣabr (patient perseverance) and Taqwā (God-consciousness). Within this framework, agency is understood not simply as freedom from religious authority, but as the conscious capacity to cultivate a life shaped by faith and religious commitment.

Although this study focuses on *Minaret*, its findings open up possibilities for further research on other works by Aboulela and contemporary Anglophone Muslim authors. Future studies could investigate how other Muslim novels in English represent Islamic spirituality not merely as a sociocultural identity, but as an epistemological and narrative framework. Comparative research in this area could contribute to a broader understanding of the emerging literary canon of postcolonial spirituality.

Ultimately, Minaret reframes displacement as more than geographic fragmentation. It presents religious praxis as a living framework through which knowledge, ethical self-determination, and belonging can be understood. Through Najwa's journey, Aboulela places Islamic spirituality at the centre of the postcolonial subject's search for meaning, suggesting that faith is not peripheral to the experience of displacement but integral to its interpretation and transformation.

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الملخص

تتناول هذه المذكرة الرواية المسلمة المكتوبة بالإنجليزية من خلال رواية المئذنة (2005) لليلى أبو العلا، مركزةً على العلاقة بين أدب ما بعد الاستعمار والمنظور ما بعد العلماني، وعلى دور الروحانية الإسلامية في تشكيل الرواية المسلمة. يتتبع البحث تجربة نجوى في الاغتراب وما يرافقها من تفتت للذات، ثم يدرس مسار استعادة هويتها من خلال علاقتها بالإسلام والتزامها الديني، خاصة الصلاة والحجاب وتلاوة القرآن. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج التحليلي والقراءة النصية للرواية بالاستناد إلى المراجع النظرية والنقدية ذات الصلة. وتبين الدراسة أن *المئذنة* تقدم تمثيلاً مختلفاً للهوية و الرواية المسلمة، حيث تظهر الروحانية بوصفها وسيلة لإعادة بناء الذات ومصدراً للفاعلية والمقاومة، بما يفتح المجال أمام قراءة الرواية المسلمة المكتوبة بالإنجليزية بوصفها فضاءً للروحانية ما بعد الاستعمارية.

.**الكلمات المفتاحية:** ما بعد العلمانية، الروحانية، الهوية، الاغتراب، ليلى أبو العلا