



SHATTERING THE OPPRESSED TROPE: ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND THE JOURNEY OF NAJWA IN ABOULELA'S MINARET

Urooj Ahmed 12uroojahmed@gmail.com	MS Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.
Sanniya Sara Batool sanniya.batool@riphahfsd.edu.pk	Senior lecturer, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
Mahnoor Haider noormirxa1@gmail.com	MS Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.
Kashaf Zulfiqar zulfigarmuhammad546@gmail.com	MS Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

This paper examines where post-secular female identity, diasporic displacement, and faith-based agency come together in contemporary Anglophone Arab literature. It offers a close reading of Leila Aboulela's novel, *Minaret* (2005), using the postcolonial feminist and anthropological frameworks developed by Lila Abu-Lughod. For many years, mainstream Western liberal feminism has defined liberation for non-Western and Muslim women through an exclusively secular, Eurocentric lens. This view holds that genuine emancipation requires secular modernization, bodily freedom, and the rejection of religious tradition. As a result, women who actively embrace religious devotion, modest dress, and spiritual submission are often reduced to an Orientalist stereotype: the passive, victimized Muslim woman who lacks individual agency and needs rescuing from her own culture. By tracing the shifting social, economic, and spiritual path of Aboulela's protagonist, Najwa, who moves from a Westernized, unveiled, privileged life among the political elite in Khartoum to life as a hijab-wearing domestic worker in London, this article shows that her embrace of orthodox Islamic practice is a conscious, agential choice. Rather than treating her modesty and spiritual surrender as signs of defeat, this study draws on Abu-Lughod's critique of Western "savior" politics to show how Najwa's deliberate transformation challenges colonial binaries. The analysis examines how Najwa reclaims control over her body, sense of self, and movement through the world by finding a home within the global Muslim community (Ummah) and the physical and spiritual spaces of the mosque. Ultimately, Najwa's rejection of secular compromise and consumer culture validates faith as an independent source of empowerment. This article frames *Minaret* as an important literary intervention that broadens global feminist theory by showing that human agency can flourish outside a secular framework.

Keywords: *Islamic Feminism, Minaret, Najwa, Post-Secular, Spiritual Surrender.*

Corresponding Author: Urooj Ahmed (MS Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan)

Email: 12uroojahmed@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The political climate after 9/11 saw a rise in Neo-Orientalist thinking in which Muslim women's bodies were repeatedly turned into ideological battlegrounds. In Western media, state policies, and popular culture, the hijab is routinely treated as the ultimate symbol of patriarchal control, cultural backwardness, and religious oppression. This narrow view flattens the varied lived experiences of millions of women across different countries, ethnicities, and social situations into a single victimized category. Such representation serves a clear ideological purpose: it reinforces the supposed moral superiority of Western liberal societies as the highest form of human progress, while framing Western feminist methods as universal rescue missions designed to liberate racialized others and teach them Enlightenment values. This self-appointed civilizing mission depends on a rigid opposition: the secular, free, autonomous Western woman set against the religious, oppressed, controlled Eastern other.

Within this framework, any genuine connection to religious tradition, including practices that emphasize modesty, self-restraint, and textual obedience, is quickly dismissed as false consciousness or total surrender to male authority. The idea that a woman can find real fulfillment, psychological stability, moral independence, and resistance against the emptiness of late capitalism within an orthodox religious framework is simply incomprehensible to this secular worldview. To challenge these deeply rooted Eurocentric assumptions, postcolonial feminists, anthropologists, and subaltern scholars have offered strong critiques that question the ethical and intellectual foundations of Western liberal interventions. Chief among these scholars is the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, whose fieldwork and theoretical contributions have exposed the colonial roots of contemporary "savior" politics. Abu-Lughod argues that the Western obsession with saving Muslim women often conceals material economic inequalities, military interventions, and geopolitical power struggles by turning complex historical realities into simplified cultural and religious categories. She argues forcefully that concepts like "choice," "freedom," and "liberation", the cornerstones of Western feminist thought, are historically specific, locally produced constructs that fail to capture the complex inner lives of women living outside secular-liberal frameworks. This analytical blind spot ignores the sophisticated, localized ways in which women navigate historical structures, reducing rich survival strategies and spiritual longings to a simple drama of absolute oppression or absolute rebellion.

At the same time, contemporary Anglophone Muslim literature has become an important creative space for challenging these dominant narratives. A pioneering figure in this literary movement is the Sudanese-Scottish author Leila Aboulela. Writing against both the secular assumptions of traditional postcolonial literature and the exoticizing expectations of Western publishing markets, Aboulela has developed a narrative mode often called "faith-centered fiction" or "Halal fiction." In her work, Islam is not depicted as an oppressive cultural relic that must be abandoned to achieve self-actualization in the West; rather, it is presented as an active, healing, and deeply empowering sanctuary. Her protagonists navigate the pain of

geographical displacement, economic hardship, and class change by deepening their relationship with God and using religious rituals as tools for psychological stability, emotional healing, and moral direction. By creating a narrative aesthetic where divine presence is rendered as a tangible, therapeutic reality rather than an outdated superstition, Aboulela expands the epistemological boundaries of the English novel, speaking directly to a world where displacement forces a rebuilding of the soul, and directly challenging the Western assimilationist expectation that migration must end in secularization.

Minaret traces the major social, economic, and spiritual transformation of its protagonist, Najwa. Born into a wealthy, highly Westernized political elite family in Khartoum during the late twentieth century, Najwa initially lives a life shaped by secular freedoms: she does not pray regularly, does not wear a hijab, attends a co-educational university where she socializes freely, and has a secret romantic relationship. However, when a military coup leads to her corrupt father's execution, her family is forced into political exile in London. Stripped of her material wealth, class privilege, and family support, Najwa experiences profound loneliness and a deep sense of personal fragmentation within the Western city. Crucially, her path toward self-recovery does not run through integration into British secular society or the adoption of Western models of sexual freedom. Instead, her fractured sense of self is rebuilt through her gradual involvement in the Regent's Park Mosque, her autonomous decision to wear the hijab, and her voluntary move into domestic work.

This study explores how Najwa's trajectory in *Minaret* challenges the widespread "oppressed trope" by analyzing her choices through the theoretical framework of Lila Abu-Lughod. By examining Najwa's shifts in class status, her complex relationships, her sartorial choices, and her final ethical decisions, this paper addresses a central question: How can a deliberate submission to divine authority create a genuine space for agency and self-determination that operates entirely outside Western liberal models? Through close reading, this paper deconstructs the secular-religious binary, demonstrating that Najwa's spiritual journey is an active negotiation of identity, class, and gender that challenges the universalist claims of mainstream feminist thought, and offers instead a locally grounded, faith-centered model of female independence.

2. Literature Review

When Leila Aboulela began publishing her fiction around the turn of the millennium, her work significantly disrupted the fields of postcolonial studies and diasporic literary criticism. For decades, the dominant frameworks for immigrant narratives, as seen in authors like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, and Zadie Smith, celebrated hybridity, secularization, and the gradual shedding of religious affiliations as necessary steps toward building a modern diasporic identity. In these classic texts, the Western metropolis was consistently presented as the ultimate space of freedom, offering personal liberties that stood in sharp contrast to the narrow-mindedness and patriarchal constraints of the Global South. Religion, when depicted at all, was typically treated as a source of ignorance, intergenerational conflict, or psychological

regression. Traditional postcolonial frameworks were conceptually unprepared to engage with deep religious devotion without labeling it as political fundamentalism or a primitive survival mechanism.

Aboulela's narrative style significantly reversed these literary expectations. Scholars like Geoffrey Nash (2007) coined terms such as "Muslim writing" or "faith-centered fiction" to describe this emerging literary body that treats Islamic practice not as a fixed cultural marker, but as a dynamic, internal reality that drives the narrative forward. Nash observed that Aboulela reverses the conventional logic of migration: instead of arriving in a space of enlightenment, her protagonists experience the West as a place of deep spiritual alienation, moral emptiness, and emotional isolation. Achieving psychological balance, therefore, requires turning inward toward religious practice rather than outward toward assimilation, forcing postcolonial critics to develop new interpretive frameworks capable of respecting religious longings without reducing them to mere political identity markers.

In a similar vein, Wail S. Hassan (2011), in his comprehensive study of Arab-British and Arab-American immigrant literature, argued that Aboulela performs a vital act of "cultural translation." Hassan pointed out that while traditional postcolonial theory draws heavily upon the secular critiques of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, Aboulela's narratives assert the epistemological validity of Islamic ways of knowing. Her protagonists do not articulate their identities through the language of Western psychoanalysis or Marxist materialist critique; instead, they draw on the vocabulary of the Quran, the Hadith, and Islamic theology. Hassan highlighted how *Minaret* specifically shows that Islamic practices such as ritual prayer, fasting, and modesty give displaced individuals a strong ontological anchor to preserve their dignity and psychological integrity when facing racism, poverty, and social exclusion. Hassan (2008) later expanded upon this by examining how gender, faith, and agency intersect in Aboulela's writing, demonstrating that spiritual submission can serve as a powerful tool of social resistance.

This focus on religious identity has generated intense debate among feminist literary critics. Early scholarly responses to *Minaret* from secular feminist perspectives often reflected explicit discomfort with Najwa's choices. Early reviewers regularly read her narrative arc, moving from an elite, autonomous student to a veiled, humble domestic worker, as a conservative fable of surrender to patriarchy. Critics like Sadia Abbas (2014) argued that Aboulela's work presents "visions of Muslim women who desire their own subordination," viewing Najwa's religiosity as a regressive retreat tied to conservative movements that demand female self-erasure. These readings suggested that Najwa simply traded dependence on her father or boyfriend for total surrender to a male-coded deity, losing her autonomy in the process.

However, this secular monopoly on textual interpretation has been strongly challenged by a growing body of Islamic and postcolonial feminist scholarship. Thinkers like Margot Badran (2009) and Amina Wadud (1999) have shown that Islamic feminism works within the

religious framework to challenge patriarchal misreadings of sacred texts while preserving the core spiritual authority of the faith. Applying these ideas to *Minaret*, scholars like Anna Stanecka (2018) argue that Najwa's transformation is actually a sophisticated reconfiguration of female power. Stanecka notes that Najwa's prior secular life in Khartoum was fundamentally unfree, entirely dependent on state corruption, class hierarchies, and vulnerability to the whims of men. Her turn to religion is therefore reread as an agential, deliberate decision to disengage from those exploitative structures and build an autonomous moral core, demonstrating genuine resilience through self-chosen devotion.

The role of the hijab in the novel has also attracted considerable scholarly attention. Rather than treating the veil as a simple tool of female erasure, postcolonial critics have used the historical insights of Leila Ahmed (2011) to analyze its varied meanings within a diasporic context. Scholars demonstrate that for Najwa, the hijab functions as a way to manage physical space, a portable boundary that allows her to move through the public spaces of a racist, Islamophobic city while maintaining sovereignty over her body. The veil protects her from both the sexualized male gaze of the metropolis and the bodily pressures of Western capitalism, transforming what appears to be a symbol of concealment into a practical tool for freedom of movement. This reading is supported by Zidan (2017), who examines how veiling enables characters to reclaim their identity from dominant Eurocentric constructs.

Yet, despite this rich body of research, a significant gap remains regarding the synthesis of the novel's thematic architecture with the specific anthropological arguments articulated by Lila Abu-Lughod. While many scholars engage with postcolonial or Islamic feminism broadly, very few have mapped Abu-Lughod's specific formulations, such as her critique of the concept of "choice," her framing of localized subjectivities, and her deconstruction of "rescue missions," onto the exact narrative structures and character dynamics of *Minaret*. Secular viewpoints frequently misread the diverse subjectivities of Muslim women, labeling religious practices as a lack of progress. This article aims to bridge that gap by using Abu-Lughod's work as the primary analytical lens, demonstrating how the novel itself highlights the epistemological limitations and patronizing assumptions of the Western secular rescue industry.

3. Theoretical Framework

To properly understand Najwa's identity and agency, it is necessary to move beyond the traditional limits of mainstream Western liberal feminist theory. Standard liberal feminist models, rooted in the European Enlightenment, define freedom as the expansion of personal independence, the continuous assertion of individual will, the rejection of religious authority, and full ownership of one's body, typically expressed through freedom of dress or sexual experimentation. Within this specific theoretical framework, an action is only recognized as a genuine expression of agency if it takes the form of overt resistance, rebellion, or the subversion of traditional norms. Consequently, when a woman willingly structures her life around religious traditions, embraces modesty, or practices self-restraint, her choices are frequently

dismissed as a lack of awareness or a passive surrender to male power. This secular gaze treats religious devotion as false consciousness, creating a hierarchy where the secular subject is automatically seen as more enlightened and superior.

To address this analytical blind spot, this study uses the postcolonial feminist and anthropological frameworks developed by Lila Abu-Lughod, particularly in her important monograph, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) and her article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others" (2002). Abu-Lughod's scholarship offers a deep critique of Western feminist epistemology, questioning its claims to universal truth and showing how its core concepts are entangled with historical and geopolitical agendas. She demonstrates that the global obsession with "saving" Muslim women operates as a form of "colonial feminism," a continuation of imperial habits in which Western powers use the language of women's rights to justify military interventions, occupations, and the disruption of local cultures. This framework rests on several central ideas that can be effectively applied to literary analysis.

First, Abu-Lughod calls for the abandonment of universal, context-free concepts of "freedom" and "liberation." She argues that these terms are not neutral human desires; they are specific products of Western consumer culture and individualist ideologies. Therefore, rather than evaluating a woman's life by how closely it conforms to Western ideals of emancipation, critics must examine the material history, social spaces, and moral frameworks in which women actually build their own sense of dignity, safety, and purpose. This perspective aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1988) classic essay, which critiques how Western feminism homogenizes Third World women into a single, powerless category under a colonial gaze.

Second, Abu-Lughod deconstructs the rigid opposition between "choice" and "force" that dominates liberal discourse. She points out that all human desires and choices are inevitably shaped by the cultural and ideological systems they inhabit. A Western woman's desire to follow fashion trends, pursue career advancement, or navigate the dating market is just as socially constructed as a Muslim woman's desire to maintain piety, observe fasting, or adopt the hijab. Neither operates in a vacuum of pure, unmediated "choice." Therefore, dismissing a religious woman's actions as forced while celebrating a secular woman's actions as pure free will is a double standard that ignores how deeply all subjects are conditioned by their environments.

Third, Abu-Lughod conceptualizes veiling as a flexible, dynamic social practice rather than a static symbol of oppression. Drawing on empirical observations, she frames the veil as a form of "mobile modesty" and a sophisticated mechanism for managing space. Rather than trapping women within the domestic sphere, the headscarf functions as a portable boundary that enables women to enter public or male-dominated spaces while preserving their reputation and safety. It allows women to control their own visibility, shifting the power of the gaze back to the woman herself. This reading connects with the sociological work of Gökarıksel and

Secor (2009), who examine the relationships between veiling, modern fashion markets, and emerging Islamic identities.

Fourth, Abu-Lughod advocates for an "ethics of respecting difference" to replace the patronizing pity of the rescue industry. This ethic requires Western critics to accept that some women may explicitly choose to organize their lives around religious law, family bonds, and spiritual devotion that look completely different from secular liberal goals. These choices do not indicate a lack of agency; they represent distinct, coherent ways of experiencing life that can generate deep meaning and dignity. This approach requires scholars to listen to how women themselves define their well-being, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all Western definition of freedom. This anthropological view is expanded by Saba Mahmood's formulations in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005). Mahmood deconstructs how agency operates within traditional religious movements, arguing that volition should not be limited to loud acts of rebellion or rule-breaking. Instead, she introduces "pious agency," the capacity to intentionally live out and perfect traditional norms through daily ethical choices. When a woman trains herself to pray, fast, maintain modesty, and practice patience, she is not blindly obeying; she is actively engaged in a demanding, conscious process of self-transformation. By pairing Abu-Lughod's critique of rescue narratives with Mahmood's concept of pious agency, this study establishes a culturally sensitive analytical framework that allows us to see Najwa's spiritual path as an authentic, sophisticated expression of self-determination.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1. The Myth of Secular Liberation: Najwa's Life in Khartoum

To understand the transformative nature of Najwa's later faith, it is first essential to examine the false sense of freedom that shaped her early life in Khartoum. In the opening chapters of *Minaret*, Aboulela depicts a world of immense wealth, political influence, and surface-level Westernization. Najwa's father is a senior government official within a system built on corruption. Within this affluent social circle, secularization functions as a status symbol, a sign of modernity and sophistication. Najwa lives a life largely free from religious regulations: she does not wear a hijab, her family rarely prays, and her worldview is shaped by Western popular music, European fashion, and consumer choices. From a conventional Western perspective, this phase of Najwa's life would be considered her most "liberated." She attends university, moves freely in public spaces, and has the financial resources to satisfy her desires. However, Aboulela's narrative reveals that this secular freedom is profoundly fragile and entirely dependent on patriarchal structures and class exploitation. Najwa's independence rests entirely on her father's political protection and corrupt wealth. She is merely a token within a larger matrix of elite privilege that is deeply patriarchal at its core, leaving her with no inner strength or moral grounding when it all collapses.

This vulnerability is clearly visible in her relationship with Anwar, a radical Marxist student activist she meets on campus. Anwar presents himself as a progressive intellectual who

champions the working class and dismisses religion as an ideological illusion. Yet in his private relationship with Najwa, he replicates exploitative male behavior. He coaxes her into a secret affair, capitalizing on her emotional vulnerability and his transgressive persona. Anwar's progressive ideals do not translate into genuine respect for Najwa as a person. Instead, he judges her for her wealthy background while happily enjoying the intimacy she provides. He expects her to abandon traditional moral boundaries in the name of modern love but offers no real commitment or equality. As Aboulela writes, Najwa reflects: "With Anwar I gave up too much of myself, became only what he wanted me to be" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 85). This passage reveals how secular arrangements can conceal and reproduce the very power imbalances they claim to oppose.

When a military coup overthrows the regime, Najwa's secular world instantly collapses. Her father is arrested, tried, and publicly executed. The family wealth is confiscated, and she is forced to flee to London with her mother and twin brother, Omar. This sudden displacement proves that her secular freedom was a mirage, providing no inner resilience, no moral compass, and no authentic sense of self that could survive without financial support. Viewed through Abu-Lughod's framework, this narrative development critiques the assumption that a secular lifestyle automatically guarantees security or empowerment, showing how rapidly external "freedom" dissolves when its material foundations are removed.

4.2. Exile, Dislocation, and the Failure of Western Individualism

When Najwa arrives in London as an exile, she faces a deep identity crisis that is both economic and existential. Moving from the warm, expansive spaces of upper-class Khartoum to the cold, isolating reality of London functions as a form of structural violence. Her mother rapidly dies of leukemia, while her twin brother Omar, unable to cope with the loss of status, falls into drug addiction and is imprisoned after assaulting a police officer. Left completely alone, Najwa must navigate the hostile environment of the Western city.

Within this new space, Najwa faces a double layer of marginalization. She is no longer the wealthy daughter of a government official; she is an impoverished, brown Muslim immigrant woman in a society marked by institutional racism and sharp class divisions. To survive, she enters the low-wage labor market as a domestic worker, cleaning houses and babysitting for wealthy, Westernized Arab families like her employer, Mai. In this role, she becomes invisible and commodified, experiencing the ruthless individualism of Western capitalism that values people purely for their economic output and class status.

During this deeply lonely period, Najwa attempts to find comfort by reconnecting with Anwar, who has also fled to London as a political refugee. However, their life together in exile shows that Western individualism completely fails to heal a displaced subject. Anwar, stripped of his charismatic student activist status, becomes bitter, stagnant, and deeply sexist. He lives off the meager wages Najwa earns while mocking her quiet desire for spiritual meaning. He insists they live together without marriage, a choice that aligns with Western ideas of sexual freedom but leaves Najwa bearing all the emotional and moral weight. When Najwa expresses

interest in prayer and longs for moral structure, Anwar reacts with contempt, labeling religion a symptom of weakness. "You're going backwards," he tells her, "why do you want to join them, those women with their headscarves?" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 148). This reaction perfectly illustrates Abu-Lughod's point that Western concepts of freedom often fail to address the specific forms of isolation and suffering experienced by non-Western women, particularly when those concepts are detached from collective moral responsibility. For Najwa, the secular arrangement with Anwar fragments her identity, severs her from her roots, and traps her in low self-esteem. Her experience in London demonstrates that a secular lifestyle, far from saving her, has become a primary source of her existential suffering.

4.3. Veil as 'Mobile Modesty' and Spatial Reclamation

A major turning point in Najwa's journey comes when she independently decides to wear the hijab. In mainstream Western feminist discourse, this choice is almost always read as a step toward self-erasure and submission to patriarchal control. However, within the specific narrative context of *Minaret*, and through Abu-Lughod's anthropological lens, donning the veil is a deeply independent act of self-defense, spatial reclamation, and personal empowerment.

Najwa's decision to wear the hijab is not coerced by any male figure. Her father is dead, her brother is in prison, and her secular boyfriend strongly opposes the idea. It is a completely autonomous, deliberate choice she makes after she begins attending women's study circles (halaqas) at the Regent's Park Mosque. Her first experience with the veil is described in powerfully sensory, liberating terms: "I changed my clothes, I put on a hijab. It was like a door closing, a click. I felt safe, I felt a strange kind of peace. I was no longer visible in the way I used to be, and that invisibility was a form of power" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 242).

This moment perfectly illustrates Abu-Lughod's concept of mobile modesty. For Najwa, the hijab is not a wall confining her to the domestic sphere; it functions instead as a protective, portable shield that enables her to navigate London on her own terms. As an unveiled, low-status immigrant woman, she was constantly subjected to the predatory, racialized, and class-inflected gaze of passers-by and employers. The veil fundamentally changes this dynamic. It marks her as part of a sacred moral community, demanding respectful space from those around her and neutralizing the hyper-sexualized gaze of the secular world. Furthermore, the hijab operates as a tool for ethical self-fashioning, an idea explored by Mahmood (2005). It is an external bodily practice that transforms her internal state. By veiling, Najwa actively steps away from the consumerist demands of Western femininity, which requires women to continuously display and commodify their bodies to achieve social acceptance. She exchanges superficial fashion trends for an aesthetic of dignity and spiritual calm. The headscarf becomes a visible marker of her choice to walk away from the corrupt class habits of her past and the unstable secular arrangements of her present, a declaration of independence from both Westernized Arab elites and secular British society.

4.4. The Ummah and the Mosque as Sites of Counter-Hegemonic Belonging

In *Minaret*, the Regent's Park Mosque and the wider Ummah, or global Muslim community, function as important spaces that challenge dominant power structures. When Najwa loses her family and material resources, she experiences a deep alienation that secular institutions in London fail to address. She finds no support within the atomized, capital-driven structures of the metropolis. It is only when she steps inside the mosque that she experiences a genuine sense of home and community.

The mosque functions as a powerful leveler that dissolves deep divisions of class, race, and nationality. Back in Sudan, Najwa's social world was strictly limited to her wealthy, ruling-class peers. In London, as a domestic worker, she is treated as a second-class citizen by her affluent employers. Yet within the women's section of the mosque, those economic hierarchies dissolve. Najwa sits side-by-side on the carpet with women from all backgrounds: working-class British converts, Somali refugees, Pakistani grandmothers, and Arab international students. Through her friendships with individuals like the gentle and devout Shahinaz, Najwa is drawn into a supportive network of sisterhood. This community provides her with emotional solidarity, spiritual guidance, and a safe space to heal without judgment. The Ummah offers an alternative social framework that values her based on her spiritual commitment and devotion rather than her material wealth or job status. This collective space resists both the assimilationist pressures of the British state and the class-based biases of the Westernized Arab diaspora. By anchoring her identity within the global, timeless space of the Ummah, Najwa acquires the resilience to navigate the daily challenges of domestic work, transforming her painful exile into a purposeful spiritual journey. This echoes Eva Hunter's (2013) work on post-secular agency, in which communal religious frameworks offer alternative paths to survival and self-reclamation.

4.5. Love, Piety, and the Negotiation of Autonomy: The Tamer Dilemma

The final and most challenging test of Najwa's faith-based agency comes in her complicated relationship with Tamer, the younger brother of her employer, Lamya. Tamer is a deeply religious, idealistic university student who, unlike his superficial and highly secular family, rejects luxury and searches for an authentic way to live out his faith. He is drawn to Najwa's quiet dignity, maturity, and deep spiritual grounding. Despite their significant age difference, Najwa is in her late thirties while Tamer is nineteen, and their completely different class backgrounds, they build a deep emotional and intellectual bond rooted in shared religious values.

This connection is completely different from Najwa's earlier affair with Anwar. Anwar sought to exploit her vulnerability and dissolve her moral boundaries for a secular freedom that served only his own desires. Tamer, by contrast, respects her choices and values her spiritual subjectivity. Their conversations focus on theology, faith, and the everyday challenges of maintaining piety in a secular world. Tamer does not see Najwa as a submissive employee; he views her as his spiritual equal and eventually proposes marriage.

However, this potential marriage quickly triggers a harsh confrontation with Tamer's mother, Doctor Zeinah, who embodies all the class snobbery of the Westernized Arab elite. Doctor Zeinah is appalled by the prospect of her college-educated son marrying a much older woman who cleans her daughter's home. She confronts Najwa, offering her a large sum of money to leave her position, end her relationship with Tamer, and disappear from his life. This moment is the dramatic climax of the novel, and Najwa's response is a clear example of agency operating within a religious framework. A conventional Western liberal narrative would expect Najwa to challenge this class snobbery by maintaining her relationship, defying the mother, and insisting on her right to marry Tamer as an assertion of her personal rights and emotional freedom. Instead, Najwa makes a conscious, deliberate decision to accept the financial compensation, walk away from Tamer, and use those funds to finance her pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj).

This decision might easily be misread by secular critics as a weak capitulation to class power and family pressure. However, when analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Abu-Lughod and Mahmood, her choice emerges as a highly sophisticated act of agency. Najwa recognizes that marrying Tamer, while emotionally appealing, would pull her back into a toxic web of family conflict, class warfare, and constant social judgment, making her dependent once again on a man and his family's wealth for her self-worth. By choosing the Hajj over Tamer, Najwa deliberately places her relationship with God above human romance. She chooses long-term spiritual liberation over short-term emotional attachment. "I want to go to Mecca," she tells herself, "I want to be there. That's what I want most" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 277). The money she receives from Doctor Zeinah is transformed from a token of class insult into a means of spiritual ascension. Najwa's choice shows that her deepest loyalty is to a divine moral framework, a stance that gives her the strength to walk away from both secular exploitation and romantic dependence, demonstrating a self-direction that operates entirely outside Western liberal models.

5. Discussion

Reading Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* through Lila Abu-Lughod's anthropological perspective carries important implications for feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and diasporic literary criticism. By tracing Najwa's trajectory from secular elite privilege to pious working-class faith, the novel systematically challenges the foundational Eurocentric assumption that secularism is the only path to female liberation. It demands a major expansion of the vocabulary used to identify and evaluate female agency, proving that emancipation cannot be universally linked to secular resistance or Western individualism.

For decades, mainstream liberal feminism has operated on a simple binary logic: secularism equals freedom, religion equals oppression. This framework is rooted in the specific historical experience of Western women challenging the patriarchal authority of the Christian Church, and it has been problematically applied to the rest of the world as a universal truth. Abu-Lughod's work demonstrates how this projection operates as a form of colonial feminism,

erasing the distinct historical identities of non-Western women. *Minaret* functions as a powerful literary expression of this critique. In the novel, Najwa's secular life in Khartoum leaves her without an internal moral compass, making her an easy target for her father's corrupt political world and Anwar's emotional exploitation. Her "freedom" to wear Western clothing and have a secret romance fails to protect her from financial collapse or psychological breakdown. Conversely, her embrace of Islamic tradition in London gives her the psychological resilience, moral clarity, and communal support she needs to rebuild her life from scratch. This shift demonstrates that for many women, submitting to divine principles can be a deeply empowering choice that offers stability and self-worth completely absent from secular arrangements.

The analysis of Najwa's relationship with the mosque and the Ummah also complicates our understanding of diaspora in postcolonial literature. Traditional immigrant narratives frequently depict the Western metropolis as a site of liberation where the newcomer can shed traditional cultural burdens and finally achieve self-actualization. Aboulela reverses this pattern. In *Minaret*, London is experienced as a place of acute alienation, economic devaluation, and psychological collapse. It is the mosque situated in the heart of the Western city that becomes the genuine space for rebuilding the self. The novel demonstrates that the Ummah can create transnational spaces of belonging that provide marginalized immigrants with dignity and equality that the secular state fails to offer. Najwa's journey thus enacts what Choudhury (2025) identifies as the central challenge of modern Muslim womanhood, the negotiation of spiritual identity in an environment that simultaneously demands and devalues it.

By willingly stepping into the rhythms of Islamic practice, praying, maintaining modesty, and practicing patience (*sabr*), Najwa finds a stable mechanism to measure her own worth, entirely independent of capitalism, class status, or the male gaze. Her agency is expressed not through loud acts of rebellion, but through the quiet, daily work of ethical self-fashioning. This form of pious agency, as Mahmood (2005) theorizes it, is no less real or powerful than the forms of agency celebrated in Western feminist discourse. It is simply organized around different values and different ends.

Ultimately, reading *Minaret* through Abu-Lughod's framework calls for a more humble, open-minded, and locally sensitive feminist criticism. It asks Western scholars to abandon the patronizing question of how to "save" Muslim women and instead begin listening to how these women define and negotiate their own well-being. As Ferial Ghazouli (2001) suggests in her analysis of Halal literacy, Aboulela's fiction creates a reading experience that demands engagement with Islamic epistemic frameworks on their own terms. Najwa's final journey to Mecca is not a retreat into passive submission; it is a bold step toward a sacred self. It stands as a powerful literary proof that women can achieve freedom, voice, and true agency within the deep traditions of their faith, shattering the reductionist stereotypes that continue to dominate global discourse.

6. Conclusion

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* functions as an important postcolonial response to the Neo-Orientalist stereotypes that continue to dominate global discussions about Muslim women. By employing Lila Abu-Lughod's anthropological and feminist frameworks, this article has demonstrated how the life trajectory of the protagonist, Najwa, dismantles the flat stereotype of the "oppressed Muslim woman" who requires rescuing by Western liberal saviors. Najwa's deliberate transition from a secular, elite existence in Khartoum to a devout, hijab-wearing domestic worker in London proves that agency cannot be universally tied to secular rebellion or Western individualist parameters. Through her adoption of the hijab as a form of mobile modesty, her active participation in the egalitarian community of the mosque, and her ultimate decision to prioritize her spiritual journey over romantic compromise, Najwa builds a dignified, independent identity. Her narrative demonstrates that aligning with a divine moral framework can function as a deliberate source of empowerment, shielding a displaced subject from the violences of both traditional class structures and secular individualist exploitation.

In the end, *Minaret* challenges feminist theory to broaden its horizons. It proves that freedom is not a one-size-fits-all Western export, but a deeply contextual, negotiated reality. By separating agency from secularism, Aboulela's work validates a locally grounded, faith-driven model of female identity, proving that true independence, peace, and self-reclamation can be fully achieved within the sanctuary of religious devotion.

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