Muslim Women's Identity in a Changing World: the Fiction of Leila Aboulela

Najla Alyabis

Supervised by:

Dr. Maggie Tonkin

Prof. Natalie Edwards

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Humanities
Department of English, Creative Writing and Film
The University of Adelaide
September 2023

Table of Contents

Abstract

Leila Aboulela's fiction is distinctive because of its unique representation of Muslim experiences. Along with several other Muslim writers, Aboulela writes about Islam and Muslim women's complex identities in the contemporary world, as a countering intervention to the Western literary tradition. This thesis examines the fictional works of Leila Aboulela, (excluding her most recent novel, *River Spirit*), in order to show how she engages with the broad theme of how Muslim women grapple with cross-cultural experience and how this resonates with their identity as Muslim women. The works that are analysed in this thesis are *The Translator*, *Minaret*, *Lyrics Alley*, *The Kindness of Enemies* and *Bird Summons*; in addition, I refer to the two collections of short stories, *Coloured Lights* and *Elsewhere, Home*. I argue that Aboulela depicts Muslim women as active agents who practise their faith from personal conviction as a deliberate strategy to counter dominant Western misconceptions of their supposed oppression under a patriarchal religion. I investigate Aboulela's fiction to explore the complexities of Muslim women's identity through cross-cultural encounter, whether at home in Sudan or after their migration to the West. This investigation explores Aboulela's conceptualisation of Islamic feminism, analyses how her Muslim female characters relate to others, and examines her representation of gender roles in the light of her perception of Islamic feminism. My critique of Aboulela's fiction recognises her positive representation of Islam as a faith and her normalisation of Islamic practices. More importantly, it demonstrates her female characters' strong sense of home and identity and how this affects their engagement with Western surroundings.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Acknowledgements

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful.

First and foremost, I offer my highest gratitude to God Almighty for blessing me with the opportunity to pursue this degree and giving me the strength to successfully complete it. Alhamdulillah, all thanks to Allah.

Writing this thesis was challenging and inspiring at the same time, and completing it was a reward by itself. This would not have been possible without the support I received from King Saud University. Special thanks should also be given to the Saudi Cultural Mission in Canberra (SACM) for their support and help.

My endless gratitude goes to my supportive supervisory team, Dr. Maggie Tonkin, and Prof. Natalie Edwards, whose valuable insights have guided me in accomplishing this project, and from whom I have learnt a lot about the field. I appreciate all the encouragement, enthusiasm and invaluable academic input you have offered me, and I am thankful for the friendly atmosphere of our meetings. Thank you for all this and thank you for believing that this work was important. My thanks are also extended to Prof. Amanda Nettelbeck, who was part of this team and whose contributing insights have helped in directing this project. Special recognition goes to Valerie Mobley whose expertise in English language has contributed to editing and proofreading this thesis.

I am deeply grateful to my father whose belief in me has boosted my self-confidence and pushed me forward to pursue my thesis, my mother whose sincere prayers and love have accompanied me throughout my journey. I dedicate this thesis to you.

A sincere thank you for my sister and brothers for their endless support. Latifah, my one and only, thank you for always being there for me and for diligently capturing all the significant – and insignificant – moments of our family gatherings and special occasions on video. Your thoughtfulness and commitment to sharing these memories mean the world to me. Thank you to Mohamad, for being part of my journey, and making my transition to Adelaide seamless and more manageable through your detailed preparations and unwavering assistance. Thank you for making my experience in Adelaide smoother and more enjoyable. Abdullah, Abdulaziz and Esam thank you for your constant love and support.

Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my family, ultimately it was the genuine and steadfast support, love, encouragement and understanding that enabled me to complete this thesis. My husband Abdullah, I cannot thank you enough. Your love and patience sustained me all through. You shared my many joys and frustrations along the way and endured a lot without complaining. Our discussions over coffee were always so helpful and comforting. I dedicate this thesis to you.

Abdurahman, Alia, Haifa, and Tamim, my children, my best friends, and my heroes. Thank you for your patience, your help with all the house chores and your uplifting words. Thank you also for being silent during my moments of inspiration. Lamia, my baby, your coming to the world by the end of this journey made it even better. I love you all beyond words, and I dedicate this thesis to you.

Chapter One: Introduction

Arab Anglophone Literature

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Arab English literature, which Nouri Gana traces to increasing Arab migration to the United States of America. According to Gana, this movement began with the publication of Ameen Rihani's novel *The Book of Khalid* in 1911 and continued with Khalil Gibran's and Mikhail Naimy's pioneering Anglophone publications in poetry and other literary genres. Other Arab anglophone fictional works followed, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960) and Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), but such works were rare and had minimal impact. However, the final decades of the twentieth century saw a flourishing second wave of Arab Anglophone literary writings. Gana states that this renewed outpouring of Anglophone literature stemmed from the decolonisation of most Arabic countries, which produced a growing interest among Arab writers to reflect on how their own complex identities were shaped by their experiences of colonisation (1–2). This encouraged a shift in the representation of Arab and Muslim cultures in literature, opening up new avenues for creative expression, cultural exploration, and circulation of ideas among different cultures and communities.

In recent years, many authors in the Arab world have undertaken the task of redrawing the long-entertained but distorted image that the West has constructed about the Orient. These writers have chosen to write in English about their culture and identity, reaching out to Western readers, with whom they have come into contact through various phases of colonisation. According to Dalal Sarnou, female Arab anglophone writers, who are either immigrants or British/American citizens of Arab descent, are more numerous than their male counterparts. Sarnou observes that these writers have garnered significant attention and acknowledgment for their literary works, which predominantly comprise novels and

short stories. They have played a pivotal role in presenting a more nuanced and genuine portrayal of Arab women's identities, which have traditionally been depicted in Western media and literature as different, peculiar, complex, and fragmented, often based on the stereotypical depictions of early orientalists (66). Thus, the new tendency among female Arab writers to write in English can be read as an attempt to assert their voices and present their perspectives directly to Western readers without any intermediary.

Some of the most notable Arab women writers in English include Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Soraya Antonius, Fadia Faqir, Laila Lalami, Naomi Shehab Nye, Layla Halabi, Susan Muaddi Darradj, Randa Jarrar, Mohja Kahf and Diana Abou Jaber. These writers are hugely diverse in their efforts to represent the wide range of Arab female experiences. However, despite their diversity, they all share a sense of what Homi Bhabha terms as "hybridity", which he defined as "the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other" (37). In other words, their works blend Western literary forms and languages with Eastern characters, themes and traditions, reflecting the complexities of many cultural influences and histories. Moreover, these writers frequently explore themes of identity, cross-cultural experiences, and migration through their works. They endow their protagonists with mixed identities that combine native traditions with elements of Western cultures, highlighting the challenges and conflicts Arab women face as they navigate the cultural, social, and political nuances of both East and West. Through their writings, these authors contribute to a growing body of literature that seeks to promote greater understanding and inclusivity across cultural boundaries.

Within the body of Anglophone Arab women's literature, Sudanese-born writer Leila Aboulela's fiction is distinctive because of its representation of the experiences of Muslim women. Along with a select group of Arab Muslim writers such as Mohja Kahf, and Randa Abdel-Fattah, Aboulela writes about Islam and Muslim women's complex identities in a

globalised world. What makes their writings different from their Arab counterparts is their portrayal of the Islamic identity of their protagonists and the place that Islam occupies in their lives. Sarnou points out that Aboulela's writing is unique:

> Because the fiction inspired by Islam is unusual and often rejected by westerners and in the English tradition that has been mystical, secular or Christian, Aboulela's works have challenged not only the English literary tradition that has been so many times Islamophobic, but also Modern Arabic literature that has been for many decades predominantly secular. (78)

As a countering intervention to the representation of Muslim women in the Western literary tradition, Aboulela writes into that tradition in order to delineate the complexity of Muslim women's experiences. She asserts that "I am writing back to that Anglocentric tradition which is also Christian: I am putting Islam in the English novel" ("Islamic Individualism" 619). Indeed, her fictional works offer a rare insight into Islamic faith and practices and the role they play in forming the identities of her female characters.

As a Muslim woman, I am drawn to Aboulela's fiction because of her choice to narrate the untold stories and perspectives of largely unrepresented ordinary Muslim women characters, who are neither extremists, nor liberals, but whose faith matters to them. While Aboulela affirms the existence of the frequently represented terrorist, oppressed or liberal Muslim female figures in Islamic societies, and admires works that portray them, she nevertheless asserts that what motivates her to write is "the thousands of men who crowd mosques, the thousands of women who go on Haj, the teenage girls who wear hijab" ("Islamic Individualism" 622). In addition, I am motivated to examine Aboulela's claim of representing Islam as a spiritual factor in the lives of her characters, rather than just a cultural element. As she describes it: "Islam isn't just part of the culture in my fiction; it's not a social norm or something like that, but has to do with the individual and their faith,

beliefs, and aspirations" ("Leila Aboulela" 111). Hence, Aboulela's unique representation and implementation of Muslim experiences in literature in English is the subject matter of this thesis.

Aboulela states that her experience of migration and her sense of dislocation are what prompts her to write. She asserts "I didn't become a writer until I had left home. That was what gave me the material and subject matter I needed" ("Cold" viii). Indeed, her writings are largely informed by her previous life in Sudan, which she misses during her exile, as well as by the complexities and anxieties of her cross-cultural experience. This study explores how Aboulela attempts to give voice to the experiences of Muslim women who live in the West or who encounter Western values and influences in their home countries. It critiques the writer's representations of ordinary Muslim women characters whose lives and attitudes are influenced by their contact with a foreign culture. In addition, it investigates Aboulela's representations of the nature of Muslim women's identity in modernity through examining her characters' navigation of their cross-cultural experiences. Because this thesis focuses on Aboulela's oeuvre, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of her biography.

Leila Aboulela

Aboulela is the author of six novels, two collections of short stories and several radio plays. *The Translator* (1999), which was listed among *The New York Times* 100 Notable Books of the Year (2006), was her first novel. Her other novels include *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2011), which was the fiction winner of the Scottish Book Awards (2011) and was short-listed for a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize (2011). All three first novels were long-listed for the Orange Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Award. In addition, she has written *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Bird Summons* (2019) and lately *River Spirit* (2023), which was published too late to be included in my analysis. Besides these novels,

she has published two collections of short stories: *Coloured Lights* (2001) and *Elsewhere, Home* (2018). Aboulela won the first Caine Prize for African Writing in Zimbabwe, Harare (2000) for her short story "The Museum", included in the collection *Coloured Lights*, which went on to be short-listed for the Macmillan/Silver PEN award (2002). Her latest story collection, *Elsewhere, Home* won the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award (2018). Aboulela's work has been translated into 15 languages. Her radio plays *The Insider, The Mystic Life* and others have been broadcast on BBC Radio and her fiction has been published in literary magazines such as *Freeman's*, *Granta* and *Harper's Magazine*.

Although she identifies as Sudanese, Aboulela was born in Cairo to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. It could be argued that her mixed origin enriches her perspective and gives her a depth that enables her to draw hybrid characters and underline the tensions that such characters might endure. In an interview with C.E. Rashid, Aboulela states that although Sudan and Egypt share some similarities, her mixed origin was a cause of constant tension, due to its different ideals. Therefore, she asserts that "Having lived through these perplexities, I was attuned, once I arrived in Britain, to pick up the intercultural dilemmas between Muslims and the West" ("Islamic Individualism" 618).

Aboulela grew up in Khartoum and moved in her mid-twenties to London to study for a Master's degree in Statistics at the London School of Economics. In 1990, she relocated to Aberdeen, in Scotland with her family, owing to her husband's work. Again, this move provided another source of richness to Aboulela's fiction, as it gave her different insights into life in the West. The diversity of the cultures that she has experienced has given her insights into their differences and contradictions as well as challenging many of the stereotypes and misconceptions that each culture has about the other. Aboulela has often attributed her inspiration to start writing to the feelings of dislocation, homesickness, and cultural awkwardness that arose from migration and from being an Arab and Muslim in

Europe, navigating the associated challenges and cultural conflicts. This sense of displacement and alienation ignited her creativity, fuelling the exploration of themes related to identity, belonging, cultural hybridity, and diaspora experiences in her works:

> Exile, by definition, is a life one has not been prepared for; it is a removal from the familiar. It is "the saddest of fates", as Edward Said described it. It is an ancient form of punishment. Looking back, this trauma seems to have been the catalyst that awoke in me a dormant ability to write. Had I continued to live in Khartoum, this creativity might have slept forever. ("Cold" viii)

Between 2000 and 2012, Aboulela lived periodically in Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha. In 2012 she returned to live in Aberdeen. Her transitory life has expanded her cross-cultural awareness and furnished her with diverse viewpoints to enrich her literary works.

Aboulela's life experiences as a devout Muslim woman navigating a Western-dominated world significantly inform her literary works. The challenges that arise from living in secular societies while adhering to Islamic beliefs and practices have given her a unique perspective, shaping her writing style and thematic concerns. Aboulela has described the move to a secular society as "the most disturbing of all, the trauma that no amount of time could cure, an eternal culture shock" ("My Fate" 180). Aboulela's writing is mainly driven by two main motivations. The first is her religious conviction: "I could put Islam in British fiction, I could write novels that reflected Muslim logic with flawed and complex characters trying to practise their faith or make sense of Allah's will in difficult circumstances" ("Cold" xi). Her writing conveys the complexities of Muslim identity and culture, incorporating Islamic beliefs and principles in a nuanced manner. The second motivation is a desire to promote national pride and present Sudan positively. In this regard, Aboulela states that: "It was enough for me to express that Sudan was a real place, its culture a valid way of life. There was more to it than the stereotypical images of famine

and war" ("Cold" xi). In her fiction, Aboulela challenges the essentialising and reductionist portrayals of Sudan and other African countries in Western media and literature, offering a more comprehensive perspective on her home country's cultural and historical complexities through her works.

In relation to her religious conviction, it is notable that Aboulela started wearing hijab (headscarf) while in London. Aboulela asserts that she made this decision after experiencing unwanted attention from men when she was living alone, while her husband was away on business trips. As a result, she started wearing hijab, which she explains "[…] was not at all to do with identity. I felt like it did create a distance with men and I carried on wearing it because I liked it" ("Back to Khartoum"). Hence, the theme of hijab and the complications of wearing it in the West is also predominant in Aboulela's fiction. However, she explained, in an interview, that she grew up in a westernised, secular Sudanese community, where girls did not wear hijab. It was only during her university years in Khartoum that she began to associate with religious women who wore hijab and became influenced by them, as depicted in her novel *Minaret* ("Islamic Individualism" 617). Aboulela points out the irony that wearing hijab was shunned by the wealthy social classes to which she belonged in her native Sudan, whereas in secular Britain she experienced a newfound sense of liberation and chose to wear the hijab from her own free will ("Restraint"). Aboulela's assertion that wearing hijab was a personal choice, rather than a symbol of her oppression or lack of freedom, is a poignant reflection on the misperceptions of hijab in Western societies.

In addition to her exploration of hijab, Aboulela's literary works delve into a plethora of themes related to Muslim women, including gender relations, migration, cross-cultural experiences, identity formation, and spirituality. Her depictions of Muslim women's relationships with men and women are informed by her Islamic background, highlighting

the cultural and religious factors that influence these interactions. Aboulela acknowledges the influence of romantic novels on her writing but notes that she connects more with a less feminist style of romance, one that reflects women's reliance on men, as exemplified by Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Jean Rhys's characters. Hence, she finds contemporary romance difficult to engage with, as it emphasises Western feminist perspectives and views on gender relationships ("An Interview" 98). In her fictional works, as explored in later chapters, Aboulela states that she applies an Islamic feminist model to her heroines, whereby they rely on their faith to navigate the complexities and challenges they encounter ("An Interview" 99). Aboulela's perspective of Islamic feminist principles offers a unique portrayal of Muslim women's experiences; one that emphasises the agency, resilience, and spiritual depth of these women in the face of adversity.

Along with its exploration of relationships, Aboulela's fiction is tightly focused on Islam and its diverse practices in various contexts. Repeatedly described as a Muslim writer by critics like Peter Morey, Aboulela acknowledges this description and comments that "[…] if western literature accommodated Christianity so well then perhaps it can, too, accommodate Islam" ("Islamic Individualism" 619). More specifically, Aboulela asserts that she centres her ideas on faith rather than on national identity or politics. When asked about other British Muslim writers, she said that they prefer to be identified nationally whereas she, instead of presenting faith as part of her culture, is "consciously presenting it as a faith. There are a lot of Muslim writers and they're writing different sorts of Muslim novels, but maybe in my case this religious element is heightened" ("An Interview" 94). Importantly, Aboulela's choice of characters reflects average Muslim people, who are neither perfect, nor extremists. She asserts that while extremism exists, this is not her main concern. Rather, she wants to explore the lives of ordinary Muslims and to show the importance of faith in their lives ("An Interview" 100). This exploration of ordinary Muslims is one of the main focuses of this thesis, which will primarily explore how

Aboulela's literary works elevate the experiences and challenges of ordinary Muslims, especially in the face of distorted stereotypical portrayals. The discussion will focus on how Aboulela's works convey the complexities of Muslim identity, culture, and faith, emphasising the spiritual, ethical, and cultural dimensions of Muslims' experiences. Through its analysis of Aboulela's unique perspective on the intersection of faith, culture, and identity, this thesis aims to contribute to a better understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of Muslims in contemporary societies.

In relation to Aboulela's second motive for writing, namely her fervent desire to depict Sudan in a more positive light, she states that the stereotypical images of the East in general and Sudan in particular have compelled her to create a kind of fiction that can defend and offer a more nuanced description of her homeland. However, Aboulela acknowledges that, over the course of nine years of writing, she has developed a more realistic understanding of what she can achieve as an author. Consequently, she explains that while she cannot provide compelling evidence that Khartoum is superior to London, she aims to show that it is still "a valid place for life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war, not a backward place to be written off" ("Moving" 204). Aboulela suggests that her initial realisation of potential bias against Sudan in the West emerged when she encountered a particular remark of Alan Moorehead at the age of sixteen: "It would seem that there is little enough to thank God for in these appalling deserts, and yet the poorest and most wretched of the inhabitants will be seen throughout the day to prostrate themselves upon the sand..." (Moorehead 205). Opposing Moorehead's criticism, she declares that the impoverished individuals in Sudan have much to be grateful for, such as access to River Nile water and good health ("Moving" 204). Aboulela's repudiation of pejorative representations of Sudan can be read as an expression of postcolonial resistance. This motif of resistance, evident throughout Aboulela's writings, classifies her fiction as postcolonial. Leela Gandhi explains postcolonialism "as a theoretical resistance to the

mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (4). According to Charles Bressler, this theory "is born out of the colonised people's frustrations; their direct and personal cultural clashes with the conquering culture; and their fears, hopes, and dreams about the future and their own identities" (238). Neil Lazarus argues that postcolonial literature is "valued for its difference from the [Western] canon or for its reconstruction of canonical texts and concepts" (83). Aboulela's own experience of frustration, which stems from her encounters with English literature during her teenage years and her subsequent direct exposure to Western cultures as an immigrant, is what motivates her writing. In this regard, Norah Alqahtani argues that Aboulela's mode of 'writing back' to the empire involves incorporating Islam into English literature, rather than attempting to reverse the power dynamics between the East and the West (208). While I concur with Alqahtani's argument, I add that the author's positive representations of Sudan, evoking nostalgia among her immigrant characters, demonstrate another aspect of the postcolonial nature of her writing. Through these depictions, she resists the colonial mode of representing Africa as a place from which its inhabitants seek to escape.

Furthermore, Aboulela's deep feeling of homesickness serves as an additional wellspring of inspiration for her literary works. Through her writing, she is able to articulate the daily challenges she encounters as an immigrant from a vastly distinct culture. She yearns for the familiarity and reassurance of her homeland, describing it as a place that was "safe and predictable…loved and taken for granted. The earth was steady and flat underneath me" ("Moving" 203). However, this sense of security was disrupted by her migration due to her husband's overseas employment. Throughout her fiction, Aboulela delves into themes such as "Issues such as the dilution of identity and language, integration, the rights and wrongs, the gains and losses of leaving home" ("Cold" ix). One pressing concern she highlights is the future of Sudanese immigrant children, whose "parents struggle to adapt to a new life,

strive to benefit from it while in the background their children silently became less and less Sudanese, less and less Muslim, more and more a part of Britain" ("Cold" ix). In addition, Aboulela underscores the tensions faced by first-generation immigrants who constantly navigate the delicate balance of preserving their cultural traditions, which can be adapted, while safeguarding their religious beliefs, which should not be abandoned ("Islamic Individualism" 618). In short, Aboulela's writings not only illuminate the struggle of immigrants in a new cultural setting, but also shed light on the complex interplay between identity, tradition, and adaptation that shape the lives of individuals caught between their homeland and their adopted country.

An Overview of Sudan

One of the primary challenges facing Aboulela as an Arab writer residing in a Western milieu is the inherent need for cultural translation. She explains the term thus: "Write in a western language, publish in the west and you are constantly translating back and forth—this is like this here but not there. A thing has high value here, a certain weight, move it to another place and it becomes nothing" ("Moving" 200–201).

This issue of cultural translation, along with Aboulela's homesickness that permeates her fiction, necessitates an understanding of the Sudanese context from which she emerged. Sudan, a country racked by a history of political turmoil and successive coups, perpetually infuses tensions into Aboulela's characters' lives. Because Aboulela is a Muslim writer whose themes and characterisation revolve around Islam, this overview of Sudanese history starts from the point of the arrival of Islam to Sudan in the fourteenth century. The Islamic faith reached Sudan through Egypt, specifically through migration from the north. The advent of Islam profoundly transformed Sudanese society, particularly in the northern region predominantly inhabited by Arabs. On the other hand, the southern region, predominantly inhabited by Africans, maintained its original religious and cultural beliefs.

Given that Aboulela is an Arab writer born in Khartoum, her fiction focuses on the North, whereas the culturally diverse and linguistically distinct South has a more marginal influence on her writing.

Furthermore, the influence of Egypt on Sudan is a crucial aspect of Sudan's history. During the early nineteenth century, Egypt exercised significant control over Sudan, asserting its dominion by dividing the country into provinces (Ofcansky xxvi). This Egyptian impact exerts a particular resonance in the case of Aboulela, owing to the influence of her Egyptian mother on her sense of identity and perspectives. This influence becomes particularly apparent in Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Alley*, which delves into the intricate dynamics of the Egyptian influence on Sudan.

In the early 1880s, a significant turning point of events unfolded in Sudan, as a son of a Dongola boat builder proclaimed himself to be the awaited Mahdi who was sent by God to restore Islam to its early purity in preparation for the second coming of the Christ. This man claimed to be the Mahdi that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) prophesised would come before the end of the world, when he said that "The Mahdi is of me... He will fill the world with fairness and justice as it was filled with wrongdoing and injustice, and he will rule for seven years" (bin Ash'ath 508). Attracting a considerable following, known as the Ansar, the Mahdi successfully led a revolution that expelled both the Egyptian and British forces. From 1885 until 1898, the Mahdi regime controlled a significant portion of northern and central Sudan. However, this era came to an end in 1898 with the return of the Egyptians and the British, culminating in the Battle of Omdurman where Anglo-Egyptian forces engaged in genocide against the Mahdi and his followers. This tragic incident had a profoundly negative impact on Sudanese society, characterised by radicalism, extremism, and the perpetration of mass killings and injustices. In an interview, Aboulela elaborates on the presence of radicalism within this period:

> The Mahdi, who ruled before the British–Egypt condominium, and the religious authorities in al-Azhar (the most prestigious Muslim body—the oldest university in Egypt) opposed his teachings and his claim to be the Rightly Guided One who is prophesied to come at the end of time; in the same way that the religious establishment these days are against al- Qaeda. So we seem, throughout Muslim history, to face these types of deviations as a part of the individuality and the freedom of Muslim interpretation. ("Islamic Individualism" 622)

This sentiment is reflected in Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Alley*, where she explores the revolution of the Mahdi through the perspective of the Egyptian religious teacher, Badr. In the novel, she has the character of Badr stating: "Muhammad Ahmad al Mahdi was a charismatic, powerful imposter, misguided at best and an apostate at worst. The British had done well to end his state. The Sudanese needed rescuing from superstition and deviation" (60). It could be argued that Aboulela adeptly employs this condemnation as a means to convey her own sentiments on the matter—pointing out the dangers of fanaticism and highlighting how such doctrines contradict the teachings of Islam, which promote peace and the welfare of humanity.

The commencement of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in January 1899 marked a significant milestone in Sudan's history. This arrangement established a joint authority between Britain and Egypt over Sudan. Under the Condominium, the Sudanese government was predominantly under the control of British civilian administrators, while Egyptians tended to occupy middle-tier positions and Sudanese individuals were often relegated to lower-level roles. The British administration, from the inception of the Condominium, focused on implementing modern technology and establishing modernising policies in Sudanese institutions. This modernising influence of the British colonisers is vividly depicted in Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Alley*, which portrays Sudan during the 1950s.

Following World War I, Sudanese nationalism began to take shape, primarily driven by Arab and Muslim communities in the northern provinces. Nonetheless, Sudan did not attain full independence as a republic until 1956. *Lyrics Alley* captures this significant turning point in Sudanese history, offering a portrayal of the enthusiasm and aspirations felt by Sudanese youth towards the realisation of their country's independence, with the promise of a brighter and more promising future.

However, Sudanese independence did not bring about the realisation of the nation's aspirations. Despite the peaceful conclusion of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and the end of colonial rule, Sudan was confronted with numerous political and economic challenges. The vast territory of Sudan, characterised by its diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religious affiliations was entrenched in a state of turmoil and persistent economic crises (Bechtold 51). Following independence Sudan experienced a tumultuous period marked by a recurrent oscillation between civilian and military rule, and a series of coups. The people of the South resisted the Northern administrators' assumption of power in their region and advocated for greater autonomy, ultimately culminating in their declaration of independence from the rest of Sudan in 2011 after engaging in two rebellions that incurred significant loss of lives (Ofcansky xxvi–xxvii). This history of political instability and ensuing economic hardship permeates Aboulela's novels, in which her characters are compelled to migrate or live in exile due to dissatisfaction with their living conditions or fear of political upheaval. For instance, in *Minaret*, the protagonist, following her exile to London, expresses a yearning for "A country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams. A country we could leave at any time, return to at any time and it would be there for us, solid, waiting" (165). It should be noted that Aboulela was born in 1964 during the post-independence era; consequently she experienced the effects of colonialism on her country and was personally affected by Sudan's enduring political instability. However, despite her portrayal of the painful

experiences of Sudan, Aboulela's works are infused with an unwavering love for her homeland.

As outlined above, Sudan is a country characterised by its diverse population, comprising various ethnicities, religions, languages, and cultures. Notwithstanding the diversity of its people, and the development and modernisation that Sudan underwent during colonisation, Sudanese society continues to retain certain traditional values and customs, such as consanguineous marriage and polygamy. For example, Sudanese people commemorate the significant stages of life, including birth, circumcision (marking the transition from boyhood to manhood), puberty, marriage, and death. Sudan boasts a rich literary heritage encompassing both written and oral works, reflecting the cultural diversity of its populace. Arabic serves as the primary language of this literary tradition, with a particular emphasis on works associated with the Islamic faith (Spaulding et al.). As I shall demonstrate in this thesis, the diversity and political instability, as well as the ongoing tensions between tradition and modernity, that indelibly mark modern Sudan, suffuse Aboulela's fiction in significant ways.

Critical Reception of Aboulela's works

In order to situate this thesis within the critical field of Aboulela studies, I will provide a brief overview of the three main strands of Aboulela criticism to date. To date, three prominent strands of Aboulela criticism have emerged within scholarly discourse. The first strand entails an evaluation of Aboulela's work through a feminist lens, exploring its intersection with both secular and Islamic feminism. The second strand focuses on interpreting her fiction in relation to Islamic practices, particularly Sufism. Lastly, there exists a body of scholarship that investigates Aboulela's writings in the context of Deleuze's concept of "minor fiction".

The strand of criticism that reads Aboulela's fiction in relation to feminism is particularly pertinent to my thesis, because of my focus on how Aboulela depicts the experiences of Muslim women. Scholars in this area of inquiry situate Aboulela's writing within the frameworks of both secular and Islamic feminism. Notably, Alqahtani's analysis situates Aboulela's works, such as *The Translator* and *Minaret*, in the context of the emergence of the feminist movement in the Arab world and the subsequent rise of Islamic feminism, which came as a result of the failure of secular feminism in achieving the gender equality and democracy that it called for. Alqahtani considers El Saadawi and Aboulela as case studies of the two models of feminism, classifying Al Saadawi's works as secular feminist, and Aboulela's works as Islamic feminist. She suggests that Aboulela does not reject feminism entirely, but rather adapts it to Islamic teachings, presenting a synthesis that reconciles "Islam, secular modernity, freedom and women's empowerment on a spiritual level" (210). Additionally, Md. Mahmudul Hasan analyses Aboulela's *Minaret*, and highlights how the Regent's Park mosque community symbolises a feminised space, devoid of barriers of race, ethnicity and social and economic class. Similarly, Yusuf Awad maintains that Aboulela advocates Islamic feminism as a unifying agency because her protagonist finds solidarity through the upholding of Islamic principles, enabling her integration into a stable society that transcends barriers of race, class, and language ("Cartographies" 170). These critical perspectives illuminate the nuanced exploration of feminism within Aboulela's works and offer insight into the intersection of Islamic teachings and feminist ideologies.

Shirin Edwin also reads Aboulela's fiction through the lens of Islamic feminism, specifically analysing how Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator*, depicts the presence of Islam in the everyday life of its main character. Edwin notes how elements of Islamic feminism are employed in the novel by explaining how the protagonist follows an Islamic feminist model in her decisions and choices, and then extending this Islamic feminist way

of life in different spheres, such as work, love and marriage, education and relationships (62). Edwin's analysis is complemented by Susan Stanford Friedman's assertion that Aboulela's novel, *The Translator*, reflects her commitment to Islamic feminism. Rather than abandoning Islamic teachings and turning to secularism for freedom, Aboulela is more attuned to the views of the Islamic feminists who seek to reinterpret edicts of the Qur'an and Hadith in a contemporary and progressive manner (112–113).

A second strand of criticism reads Aboulela's fiction as containing elements of Sufism. Sufism is a mystical form of Islam that focuses on the purification of the soul. It can be defined as "a form of Islamic knowledge and piety that focuses on exceeding the obligations of Islamic worship, into the realm of the supererogatory", and it is characterised by "intensified spiritual practices, emphasis on student–teacher relationships, saint veneration, tomb visitation, focus on love and union, organised communities called *tariqas* (lit. "paths," but here meaning spiritual orders), esoteric interpretations of the Qur'an, and interest in mysticism" (Juergensmeyer and Roof). For instance, Sadia Zulfiqar Chaudhry explores Aboulela's works as embodiments of Islam being a "plurality of cultures" against the typical conception of it as a monolithic culture (166–167). In particular, she analyses Aboulela's understanding of Islam as "Sufi" in which gender equality is mostly clear. Her analysis is focused on the importance of Islam in the spiritual realm of the characters and the significance of the mosque in their spiritual growth (175–177). Sufism is further investigated by Mona Almaeen, who explores Aboulela's works *Days Rotate,* and *The Kindness of Enemies* as exemplifying Sufi Islam and providing an image of an alternative spiritual Utopia, asserting that "Aboulela's Sufism is not only a literary aspect but a system of belief" (62). She notes the importance of *The Kindness of Enemies* in understanding her conception of Sufism and she describes the short story "Days Rotate" as a decolonising literary tool that she applies on the modern materialistic world, explaining that spiritual unification between people and their land is essential in

accomplishing decolonisation. Thus, these two stories illustrate the spiritual estrangement of Sufis in the modern secular world.

A third thread of criticism reads Aboulela's work more broadly as a deliberate reversal of Western representations of Islam. For example, Katayoun Zarei Toossi investigates how Aboulela's fiction problematises the representations of Islam. He shows how she represents the experiences of practising Muslim women in their cross-cultural encounters and argues that Aboulela's narratives de-familiarise the usual West–East encounter. Nonetheless, he claims that her reversal is not idealised, as she shows the faults as well as the merits of her communities through her representations of her characters and homeland. Toossi points out that Aboulela makes her narrative logic clear through communicating common human experiences. It is her moving away from the coloniser/colonised relationship to "a re-thinking of the issues of representation in favour of models that are more congruent with complicated realities of transcultural connections in the global landscape of today" that distinguishes her work (134). Ghadir Zannoun also discusses how contemporary Arab women's fiction, with its reconstructed and unfixed characterisations is able to undermine essentialist representations of Arabs and Muslims (2). Additionally, Ahmed Abdel Wahab sheds light on Aboulela's works as models of retranslation that retranslate or reveal different images of Arabs not previously portrayed. He defines retranslation as "a literary subgenre that pieces together the dialogic potential of translation and postcolonial writing" (220), thus identifying the diverse conditions of such a retranslation, and contending that although many researchers have examined the misrepresentation of Arabs in orientalist writings, only a few have examined writings by Arabs that depict varied and lively characters that oppose the prevailing generalised picture of Arabs. Hence, Abdel Wahab holds that immigrant literature becomes an important tool, as it enables counter-orientalist authors to set aside hackneyed representations in previous orientalist writings and replace them with a multiplicity of character portrayals (220).

A related strand of scholarship focuses on Aboulela's representation of Islam as a privileged way of life. For instance, Christina Philips argues that Aboulela not only represents ordinary Muslim characters, who are neither extremists nor oppressed, but she also draws her fictional characters in a way that privileges Islamic principles over a secular lifestyle (66). Similarly, Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan contrasts Aboulela's novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, with Khadija Mumthas' *Barsa*, highlighting the different perceptions of the veil held by the respective authors. Kuzhiyan concludes that Aboulela's novels challenge common misconceptions about Muslim women, particularly regarding the veil, by portraying it as empowering rather than oppressive (11–12). Furthermore, Firouzeh Ameri showcases Aboulela as part of a new wave of female Muslim writers who aim to rewrite distinctive Muslim identities in response to the stereotypical portrayal prevalent in Western literature. She describes Aboulela's novels as more nuanced in their representation of Islam and focuses her discussion on the novels' exceptional way of representing Islam as a natural way of life—something conveyed by all the small details of the characters as well as by giving their natural speech and thoughts. Thus she affirms the novel's depiction of the protagonists' upholding of religion as a cause of happiness and solace (97). Altogether they note that Aboulela's nuanced portrayal of Islam as a privileged way of life counters stereotypes, empowers individuals, and highlights the multifaceted nature of Muslim identity in contemporary literature.

Finally, Aboulela's fiction has been identified as exemplifying Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "minor literature", which refers to literature that is written by an ethnic minority in a major language that is not their original language. Wail Hassan asserts that Aboulela's fiction can be described as "a minor literature within a minor literature" firstly because of its being the work of an anglophone Arab woman, and secondly because of its embrace of an Islamic worldview that is rare in Western literature, as well as in most secular Arab fiction (192). Hassan links Aboulela's fiction to that of her compatriot Tayeb

Salih's famous novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). He concludes by asserting the validity of Muslim immigrant fiction and explaining that this new wave of Islamism in literature breaks away from the secular approach that mostly dominates Arabic, Arab-American and Arab-British fiction (W. Hassan 183). Similarly, Sarnou argues that the literary production of Anglophone Arab writers can be classified as "a minor literature". She includes Aboulela and Mohja Kahf in her analysis, claiming that their fiction can be described as "a minor literature within a minor literature" because of its focus on the representation of the Islamic, rather than Arabic, identity of its characters (Sarnou 78).

Despite its broadly positive critical reception in the West, Aboulela's works have received minimal attention in the Arab world. The scant readership of her fiction in her homeland, despite the availability of Arabic translations, confirms my argument of her intended addressees. As will be explained in Chapter Six, Aboulela's fiction has a dual audience: Western readers and English-speaking Muslim readers. Hence, it does not generate the same interest for Arabic readers who have not encountered cross-cultural experiences in their homelands. Certainly, it is quite shocking that the Arabic translation of Aboulela's first novel came relatively late, in 2003, after the publication of its French, Spanish, Portuguese and German translations (Ibrahim). Yet, this late translation has been celebrated by those who have read it. Generally, Arab critics have commented on Aboulela's distinguished way of writing and her departure from the mainstream of Arab anglophone writing that mostly represents Muslim women as victims in their societies, waiting for the slightest chance to run away and live in the West where they can reclaim their denied rights. Subsequently, all of Aboulela's works have been translated into Arabic except her two latest novels *Bird Summons* and *River Spirit*. The translation of *The Translator* was followed by *Coloured Lights* (2005), *Minaret* (2012), *Lyrics Alley* (2014), *Kindness of Enemies* (2017) and *Summer Maze* (2017).

A positive reception can be traced in some critical comments about the translated editions of Aboulela's works. For instance, Ferial Ghazoul regards Aboulela as an excellent writer. She thinks that her Islamic vision does not preclude her from depicting nonreligious characters. She argues that what makes her an Islamic writer is her narrative logic, rather than her preaching, which gives faith and rituals the power to liven up its characters' lives (qtd. In Dr. Ateeq 201). In addition, Jamal Mohammed Ibrahim describes Aboulela as a "cultural embassy", full of pillars and landmarks, who offers her country part of her spirit and soul. He comments that her works carry a deep and powerful message. However, he criticises the laziness of Arab translators in conveying her creativity into Arabic, because her works can give Arabic readers the chance to rediscover its plurality. He concludes his article by requesting his readers to read her works and to show their appreciation of her creativity because she is the first Sudanese literary voice to reside abroad, penetrate into literary societies strongly and, in solid English, tell the world that Sudan has a bright cultural side rather than the distorted one presented by Western media (Ibrahim). Furthermore, Ahmad Gamal concludes that Leila Aboulela succeeds in rewriting identity and gender according to a hybrid concept that blends tradition with modernity (148).

As this overview demonstrates, to date there has been no comprehensive analysis of Aboulela's fiction. This thesis is the first critical study that addresses Aboulela's oeuvre (with the exclusion of her recent novel, *River Spirit*). The thesis is focused tightly on how Aboulela represents the experiences of Muslim women through her representation of the complexities of the Muslim woman's identity in her encounter with cross-cultural experience. This is subtended by an analysis of Aboulela's use of Islamic logic to drive her plots and to underpin the decisions made by her characters. I explore gender roles and their cultural coding through an analysis of her female characters' relationships with family members and friends, both male and female. I also analyse Aboulela's representation of the centrality of marriage to Sudanese society and the role that it plays in shaping the

relationships between individuals. This study highlights the religious aspect of Aboulela's fiction by analysing the author's representation of the spiritual nature of Islam, and her employment of Islamic logic throughout her narratives. Finally, this thesis examines Aboulela's portrayal of the diversity of Muslim women and the impact that cross-cultural encounters have on the formation of their identities.

As well, this thesis will demonstrate how Aboulela's characterisation deconstructs the dominant image of the Muslim woman that Western readers recognise and then redraws it in a way that contradicts dominant Western perceptions. Miriam Cooke's neologism of the "Muslimwoman" identification, in which she point out to the "new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity" will be central to my analysis (Cooke "Deploying" 91). I draw on Cooke's neologism of the "Muslimwoman" in my analysis of Aboulela's female protagonists, in order to show the variety and complexity of Muslim women's experiences in their home countries and in diaspora, pointing to the various impacts that cross-cultural experiences have on their identity formations. The importance of this thesis lies in its attempt to bridge the perceived dichotomy between East and West in literary interpretation. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of Aboulela's representation of Muslim religious practices and of Muslim women, this thesis aims to build up a better understanding and to reduce the misconceptions and stereotypes of Muslim religious practice and specifically of Muslim women that pervades the West.

As my analysis focuses on the representation of Muslim women and their relationships in various cultural settings, my discussion is tightly focused on character and plot to the exclusion of other literary techniques. It is important to acknowledge that the nature and scope of this investigation necessitates a narrower lens. Consequently, other significant literary elements such as narrative voice, diction, tone, and settings are not the focus of this

study. While these elements undoubtedly contribute to the overall richness of Aboulela's narratives, their omission from this analysis is primarily attributed to the need for a more concentrated exploration of the complexities of character development as this relates to the representation of Muslim women in her fiction. The limitation of my research scope is essential for delving deeper into a specific aspect of Aboulela's work and offering a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of Muslim women's identity, as portrayed in her work.

Turning to the structure of this thesis, in Chapter Two, I discuss the representation of Muslim women in Aboulela's work. First, I outline the historical representation of Muslim women in Western literature and how this has evolved with the changes in political situations in different eras. I then provide a brief overview of contemporary Western representations of Muslim women in literature, film and media. Finally, Cooke's neologism of the "Muslimwoman" identification is introduced as the fundamental theoretical underpinning of my analysis.

The third chapter explores female-to-female relationships in Aboulela's fiction against the background of Western representations of Muslim women. It situates Aboulela's characterisation as part of Muslim women's own attempts to represent themselves against the notion of the "Muslimwoman" outlined in Chapter One. Drawing on Aboulela's understanding of Islamic feminism, this chapter illustrates how Aboulela is primarily interested in relationships between women, thereby displacing the dominant narrative of female subjection to men under Islam with one of female-to-female relations that are complex, often conflicted and structured by cultural and class expectations, but also often supportive.

In Chapter Four I examine the representation of marriage in Aboulela's work, emphasising the centrality of marriage to Muslim societies in general and Sudanese culture, in

particular. This chapter investigates Aboulela's portrayal of marital, as well as non-marital relationships and reveals the extent to which these relations are governed by religious and cultural complexities. This investigation entails an analysis of Aboulela's exploration of the concept of the Islamic woman's blind obedience to her husband and her belief that this principle can be challenged.

Relationships are further explored in Chapter Five, which examines Aboulela's representation of other male-to-female relationships, including those between female characters and their sons, fathers and brothers. As in Chapter Three, those relationships are explored against dominant assumptions of the "Muslimwoman", as well as the cultural mores in which they are situated. This chapter examines the patriarchal nature of Arab societies and how it often contradicts the teachings of Islam, highlighting how Aboulela critiques the double standards evident in male and female relationships.

Religious observance in Aboulela's fiction is discussed in the sixth chapter, which demonstrates how it functions as an inseparable spiritual aspect in the lives of Muslims. The notion of the "Muslim ordinary" is introduced and illustrated in relation to Aboulela's representation of the texture of everyday religious experiences and how they structure people's lives. In addition, this chapter explains the concept of Islamic logic through which the writer constructs her plots and indicates how it is significant in her fiction.

Chapter Seven analyses the cultural complexities through which Muslim women identities are constructed. It shows how Aboulela's representation of her female Muslim characters and the different ways in which they react to their cross-cultural encounters explodes the notion of the "Muslimwoman" and deconstructs the monolithic frame in which they have traditionally been situated.

Chapter Two: The Representation of Muslim Women

From *A Thousand and One Nights* to contemporary novels and films, the Orient has frequently been depicted in a predetermined way within Western literature and media. Often portrayed as an exotic and inferior "other", the East is set in sharp contrast to a powerful and hegemonic West. Unfortunately, these depictions are characterised by recurring stereotypes and clichés, perpetuating a simplified and inaccurate view of the East in general and of Muslims in particular. Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, offers a profound critique of how Western depictions of the East are shaped by a complex web of pre-existing biases, prejudices, and historical, cultural and political contexts. According to Said, orientalism is "[…] a manner of regularised (or orientalised) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient" (202). This ground-breaking study has generated an entire interdisciplinary approach and remains the subject of ongoing debates. It is not my intention to rehearse the continuing debate about Said's claims here; rather, I wish to join Ziad Elmarsafy and Anna Bernard in affirming that Said's most convincing claim is that there is a causal relationship between the orientalist discourse of intellectuals, experts and imperial powers and the devastating outcomes in the Middle East during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Elmarsafy and Bernard 8). Crucially, Said's argument remains relevant to this day. Donna Landry has commented that "Despite its sensational exposure of Western errors of perception, representation and policy concerning the Middle East, the discourse of Orientalism, the discursive machine for constructing an Orient, making statements about it, and ruling over it, continues apace" (55). Said's concept of "imaginative geography" is worth noting as it serves to illustrate that the East or the Orient is a fictional construct—a hypothesised "East", which has historically stood as a unified entity in the Western imagination, but which in actuality encompasses a wide range of cultures and nations spread across a vast geographical region (71). Only by examining and

questioning these depictions can we aspire to develop a more precise and nuanced understanding of the Middle East and its people.

The representation of women within orientalist discourse is particularly problematic, as the positioning of women is predetermined and inherently sexist. Despite Malika Mehdid pointing out the absence of a comprehensive examination of the conventional construction of Arab women in Said's critique of orientalist thought (Mehdid 19), Said does highlight that the concept of orientalism itself has been an exclusively male endeavour that views its subject matter through a narrow and biased lens. This is especially evident in the writings of European travellers and novelists, in which women are often portrayed as mere creatures of male power fantasies, expressing unlimited sensuality and reduced to shallow stereotypes (Said 207). This distorted image can be seen as a part of a broader tradition of colonial representations whereby Muslim women are portrayed as ignorant, seductive, meek, submissive, and oppressed members of a patriarchal society. Gayatri Spivak notes that "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" and goes on to claim that the voices of oriental women in particular have been silenced not only by Western stereotypes but also by their Eastern male counterparts (287). As such, it is essential to develop a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gendered experiences within non-Western cultures—one that challenges stereotypes and embraces the diverse perspectives of all members of society.

The writings of Aboulela, which are the subject of this thesis, challenge many Orientalist assumptions about Muslim women. For the purposes of contextualising the readings that follow, it is pertinent to examine the historical and contemporary depictions of Muslim women in Western literature, film, and media. This chapter also seeks to shed light on the present-day concerns of Muslim women, thereby providing additional context for assessing

Aboulela's position within this framework. The concepts of intersectionality and Islamic feminism are also explored in this chapter, as they have proven to be pivotal in challenging conventional perceptions of Muslim women and thus reaching a deeper understanding of Aboulela's fiction. This discussion underscores the necessity of a universal feminist movement that recognises the diverse experiences of women across all cultural and geographical boundaries.

Historical Representations in Western Literature

Despite the ubiquity in Western literature of the image of the Muslim woman, Mohja Kahf's book *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman*, published in 1999, is the only detailed historical overview to date. Hence, I will draw on it extensively to sketch a brief history of the evolution of Western representations of Muslim women. Kahf argues that the fixed image of the Muslim woman as ignorant and oppressed is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, throughout history, Western representations of Muslim women have evolved and fluctuated in response to a complex set of social and political factors at various historical moments (3).

Kahf's analysis of medieval English literature reveals little representation of Muslim women, due to the West's limited interaction with the Islamic world. It was not until the eleventh century, when political tensions between Muslim countries and the West began to increase, that a negative image of Islam began to emerge in Western discourse. However, this negative attitude had not yet attained an imperialistic tone. Because of Muslim supremacy at that time, and due to the lower social, political, economic and cultural status of Western women in that era, Muslim women were not then portrayed as downtrodden figures who needed to be rescued. On the contrary, they were depicted as powerful figures who regularly transgressed female social boundaries. Hence, the Western impetus then was to subdue Muslim women rather than save them. One of the most prominent examples of

Muslim women in medieval literature is the character of Bramimonde in *La Chanson de Roland*, who is represented as a tough, assertive, and brusque woman, lacking in femininity. It is worth noting that this pioneer Muslim character is not given any erotic attributes. Yet, she surrenders to the Christian army and converts to Christianity, after which she assumes the passivity and femininity associated with the European woman. Subsequently, this model of the noble Muslim woman, who deserts her religion and country, converts to Christianity, and lives in a European city continues to appear in other medieval literary texts (33). However, during the Renaissance, power relations between Europe and the Islamic world shifted, leading to some changes in the portrayal of Muslim women. Kahf observes that although Renaissance literature featured a diversity of representations, it still presented Muslim women as equal to European women while also planting seeds of the contemporary image of the helpless Muslim woman. Some works continued to depict strong queens, while others portrayed Muslim women as helpless maidens (58–59). Hence, Kahf reveals the gradual evolution of the portrayal of Muslim women in European literature, which reflects the changing power relations between Europe and the Islamic world.

During the eighteenth century, the imperialistic colonisation of the Islamic world as a consequence of the rise of European political, economic, and epistemological power led to a significant transformation in the representation of Muslim women. With the Enlightenment, the depiction of Muslim women shifted from being self-assured and assertive to passive, subdued, and oppressed, while the *seraglio* (which refers to the secluded living quarters of a Muslim ruler or a wealthy person that was typically inhabited by the ruler's wives, concubines, female relatives, and female servants) became a symbol of subjugation and injustice (Kahf 112). Hence, we began to see the scenario of the Western man saving Muslim women from oppression in their societies, or in Spivak's terms, the trope of "white men saving brown women from brown men" became a pervasive

theme in Western literature (Spivak 931). This change in representation was perhaps driven by the West's need to justify its colonial and political interventions in Islamic countries. Concomitantly, the perception of Muslim women's sexuality also shifted from being vigorously seducing to being passively seductive, as noted by Kahf (113). This transformation was part of a wider process of feminisation and eroticisation of the East, as Billie Melman argues, citing the odalisque, the domestic despot, and the harem as the most repeated and enduring *topoi* of the Eastern Mediterranean in the European imaginary (Melman 4). More importantly, Said notes that this period saw the emergence of the term "orientalism", which reflected Europe's growing propensity to overgeneralise perceptions of the Orient (65). As a result, the dominant and essentialised images and stereotypes of Muslim women in Western culture and literature since the eighteenth century have remained unchanged until the early twenty-first century.

According to Rachel Jones, this image of the veiled oriental woman as an eroticised and exotic "other" was caused by the inability of Western artists and writers to see the faces and bodies of Muslim women due to their veiling. This then prompted them to eroticise their depictions further, leading to sensual fantasies that found realisation in orientalist art works (Jones 145). Meyda Yegenoglu also describes the figure of the veiled woman in several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European texts as exotic and dangerous, symbolising a kind of feminised mystery (11). Similarly, Thisaranie Herath notes that because European men were not allowed access to the Ottoman harems, it created the impression that they were there solely for sexual purposes, which in turn contributed to imperialist rhetoric that further promoted negative stereotypes (31). Travel accounts, too, played a significant role in shaping Western perceptions of the Orient and Muslim women in particular. Jones cites Claude-Etienne Savary's description of Egyptian women as powerless slaves confined to their separate places to exemplify this (145). Even more influential is Gustave Flaubert's depiction of Kuchuk Hanim in his account of his travels to

Egypt in *Oeuvres* (published in 1952), which reinforced negative stereotypes and was regarded as a metaphor for the hierarchical power dynamic between the West and the East (Melman 5). Presenting such stereotypes in travel accounts, which are not works of fiction but purportedly "true accounts", bestows them with authenticity and makes them even more believable to Western readers.

Yet another (often overlooked) source of representations of Muslim women can be found in the works of female orientalists. Melman undertook a meticulous examination of the recounted experiences of female orientalists who had exclusive access to the harem (but were not mentioned by Said in *Orientalism*). She convincingly argues that the perspectives of these women provide a distinct counter-narrative that significantly diverges from Said's view of an orientalist fixed narrative, thus arguing that Europe's depiction and perception of the Orient were not monolithic, but rather multifaceted (Melman 3). Reina Lewis supports Melman's view, thus opposing Said's view of a unified Western discourse, by claiming that women perceived the Orient less pejoratively and had a more nuanced view of its differences (4). Furthermore, Ali Behdad also argues that this discourse is not monolithic, but heterogeneous and complex: "Orientalist discourse depends on a principle of discontinuity that makes possible the production of a whole series of representations in different historical periods" (187). Hence, these writers argue convincingly that the western portrayal of oriental Muslim women is not monolithic, but rather is complex and multifaceted.

Melman also cites Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters as supporting her argument that women orientalists often challenged the myth of the sexually charged oriental living in a sensual oriental environment (Melman 2). The significance of women's harem literature is that although it evolved alongside patriarchal traditions, it offered a different perspective in literary representations of the East (Melman 17). Nevertheless, despite their privileged

access to the harem, Melman acknowledges that these women were not exempt from the influence of imperialism. She states: “The women’s vision of the Middle East undoubtedly reflects their prejudices, as well as hegemonic notions on the exotic and ‘oriental’” (Melman 307). Her analysis reveals the women’s participation in a broader orientalist discourse that was deeply influenced by colonial power dynamics. By challenging such prejudices and bringing in diverse perspectives of all members of society, Melman’s analysis confirms the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gendered experiences within non-Western cultures, as also argued by Spivak.

In contemporary times there has been a shift in the representation of Muslim women following the 9/11 attack in New York. Muslim women are now often represented as active agents playing significant roles in terrorist attacks. In his afterword to *Orientalism* 1995 edition, Said remarks: “Both the electronic and print media have been awash with demeaning stereotypes that lump together Islam and terrorism, or Arabs and violence, or the Orient and tyranny” (347). Generalised post 9/11 portrayals make it seem like every Muslim must be held accountable for acts of terror, and so they are judged collectively. Morey points out the shift in Western representations in which Muslim people are not only homogenised but are required to repudiate acts of terror (273). According to both Shakira Hussein and Constantine Gidaris, two competing and contradictory images of Muslim women now circulate. On the one hand, they are represented as passive and helpless victims who need saving. On the other, they are regarded as dangerous agents of a threatening ideology that must be challenged (Hussein 144; Gidaris 2). As a result, Muslim women are generally categorised as dangerous whenever they refuse to conform to Western customs in order to adhere to religious norms, even if they have no involvement in any extremist association. Hussein argues that Muslim women’s “resistance to adopting hegemonic norms of liberation in their own lives is assumed to represent a commitment to imposing their religious and social values on other women, both Muslim and non-Muslim”

(147). Hence, they are portrayed as a danger against which the Western world should be on its guard.

Just as Muslim women are currently perceived as either oppressed or threatening, the complete veiling of some Muslim women, in which the whole body is covered, is often portrayed in a similar binary fashion. On one hand, for some writers, veiling may be seen as a sign of oppression and subjugation that Muslim women must endure. On the other hand, other writers perceive veiling as a catalyst for terror, as it enables the concealment of weapons or the disguising of gender. Contemporary media representations perpetuate this misconception. The regular portrayal of Islam and Muslim women as inherently associated with terrorism in films and TV series reinforces these erroneous beliefs. An interesting example is the popular British TV series, *The Bodyguard* (dir. Vincent and Strickland), which starts with a scene of a brainwashed Muslim woman, Nadia, covered completely in black, about to blow up an explosive device. The surprising finale of the series reveals to its audience that, rather than being oppressed, Nadia is in fact the mastermind and the active agent of those terrorist attacks. Thus, instead of refuting stereotypical images of Muslim women, the writer of *The Bodyguard* moves from one association—that of oppression—to another, even worse, of terrorism. This misrepresentation has distorted Western perceptions of veiling, leading many to believe that any veiled Muslim woman is either a victim of oppression by a controlling father or husband or is an active participant in terrorist activities, who might be carrying an explosive belt ready to unleash a bomb at any time. Mahmut Mutman asserts that "Perceiving gender oppression in the veil allows the Islamophobic gaze to "other" not just Muslim women but also Muslim men, family, life and culture as oppressive and violent" (262). These binary perceptions of Muslim women in general, and veiling in particular, are problematic as they perpetuate a superficial understanding and image of Muslim women that confines them to stereotypical roles and reinforces Islamophobic attitudes.

The "Muslimwoman"

In response to the perpetuation of orientalist stereotypes about Muslim women, Miriam Cooke has introduced the term "Muslimwoman" to refer to the single identity that is being used to essentialise vast and diverse cultures:

> The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity. A recent phenomenon tied to growing Islamophobia, this identification is created for Muslim women by outside forces, whether non-Muslims or Islamist men. Muslimwoman locates a boundary between "us" and "them". (Cooke "Deploying" 91)

Hence, this terminology denotes the fixed repeated images that limit the identities of Muslim women without considering all the diverse components that define their identities, among which is their religious affiliation. To illustrate this, Cooke goes on to explain:

> A religious and gendered exemplar confirms and highlights the morality of a God-fearing patriarchy where men protect and women are protected. In such a moral economy, women define the border between pure and polluted. The logic of the argument is that women are the potential *outside* whom insiders must keep pure or purify in order to save the purity of the *inside*. To uphold this moral regime, insiders must cooperate in maintaining and monitoring the Muslimwoman's appearance and behavior. ("Deploying" 92)

By illustrating that Muslim women have frequently been positioned on the "border between pure and polluted", an immense burden is placed on them to maintain their

perceived purity and virtue, often at the expense of their autonomy and freedom, thus perpetuating a patriarchal system that relies on the strict regulation and enforcement of gender roles. For example, as an Arab Muslim woman living in Australia, I often hear comments about my being different from the usual Muslim female model because of my career choice and my dedication to my studies, although I have always felt normal in my home country where it is common that women pursue higher degrees and work in prestigious jobs. Hence, any Muslim woman who lives outside the parameters of the rigid Muslimwoman image is always regarded as an exception to the rule, even though those exceptions can be more numerous than those who conform to the rule. In her comment on Cooke's neologism, Jasmine Zine adds that "The narrow discursive boundaries that frame the articulation of our identities limit the agency of Muslim women to locate our sense of subjectivity and identity outside the parameters that have been determined for us" (110). Thus, many active Muslim women have rejected this essentialisation because of its effect in limiting their agency and reducing their chances of success, either by breaking its boundaries publicly, or by representing an opposing model of Muslim women who do not conform to its regulations. For instance, Cooke states that in response to this essentialising notion, some "Middle Eastern and North African women have published fiction and poetry about strong women who shake readers' expectations", among which is "Sudanese-British Leila Aboulela's narrative of religious awakening in exile" (Cooke "Deploying" 93–94). Thus,

> Muslim women authors are articulating new ways of being strong religious and gendered persons. They want their readers, like the men in their stories, to come to terms with newly empowered women who live their sexuality, their sex, and their religion in sometimes unexpected ways. (Cooke "Deploying" 93–94)

It is this new articulation of Muslim women's identities in Aboulela's fiction that this thesis will explore.

Contemporary Muslim Women Living in the West

As a consequence of the dominant narrative surrounding Muslim women, many contemporary Muslim women residing in the West face discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes. They inhabit a world that is heavily influenced by misconceptions that label Muslim women as either oppressed or terrorists. The discourse around Muslim women is often controlled by either Muslim men or Western media, perpetuating further misrepresentations. To counter this, many Muslim women have taken it upon themselves to challenge these narratives and present a multifaceted image of themselves as independent, active, and successful individuals. Through various forms of media, they are reclaiming their narratives, sharing their experiences and amplifying their voices, reshaping perceptions and challenging stereotypes.

In *Fighting Hislam*, Australian Muslim academic Suzan Carland challenges prevalent stereotypes about Muslim women perpetuated by Western media and literature. In this book, Carland conducts a study of Muslim women's rights activists who challenge sexism, as well as negative stereotypes and anti-Muslim biases. The book recounts the experiences of Muslim women in Australia and North America who strive to fight misogyny and promote tolerance and inclusivity in an atmosphere of increasing Islamophobia. Carland explains the Western perception of Muslim women as victims living in patriarchal and misogynist societies and notes westerners' disbelief in the existence of Muslim women who resist sexism (3–4). In addition, Carland notes the negative attitudes towards the idea of feminism among Muslims due to its colonialist connotations (4). According to Carland,

feminism is generally associated with secularism in much of the Muslim world—something that suggests to them an abandonment of religion. She also argues that Western feminism's presumed devaluing of marriage and motherhood turns away some Muslim activists seeking gender equality (27–28). More importantly, Carland adds that the Western notion of saving Muslim women is perceived as condescending by many Muslim activists, who assert that sexism is universal and each culture should address it in their own way without external interference (26). Hence Carland contends that Western misconceptions about Muslim women need to be corrected to appreciate the reality of activism among Muslim women. Overall, the book provides an insightful perspective on the ongoing dialogue about Muslims and their place in contemporary society.

Carland also considers the historical struggle for women's rights in Islam and argues that Muslim women have been fighting against sexism since the advent of Islam, even if they only recently used the term "Islamic feminism" (21). She argues that some Western feminists link women's oppression to Islam and hence conclude that it is their responsibility to rescue Muslim women from their religion (14). However, Carland disagrees and believes that Islamic teachings can be used to fight against sexism. Her view aligns with Aboulela's statement: "Muslim societies acknowledge that their unjust traditions are rooted in a culture that can evolve, rather than in timeless religious values" ("Restraint"). Crucially, Carland notes that the participants in her study, who were Muslim women's rights activists living in the West, did not choose to abandon their religion despite facing negative experiences. Instead, these women used their difficult experiences to develop a stronger connection to Islam. For example, their struggles motivated them to explore the foundational texts of their faith, leading them to discover that the teachings of Islam have never been misogynistic (79). Hence, Carland's study makes an important finding that the negative experiences of some women in Islam need not lead to a complete rejection of the faith, but can actually serve as an impetus to promote a more profound

understanding and appreciation of its teachings. Her interviewees expressed that mistreating women not only conflicts with Islamic teachings but also insults and degrades their faith, which upholds the rights of all humans. They argued that their brand of activism is not influenced by Western feminism, but stems naturally from their faith and they must assume responsibility for spreading their beliefs and correcting the misconceptions that have prevailed in the Muslim, as well as the Western worlds (81). Carland concludes that her participants practise a unique feminism that combines faith with challenging the misogyny attributed to Islam, occupying a middle ground between secular feminism and patriarchal Islam (143). Her book illuminates contemporary Muslim women's fight to reclaim their Islamic rights and the role that fight plays in their identity formation.

While Carland's study is limited to Australia and North America, Muslim women activists in Britain have also played a pivotal role in representing Muslim women in the Western media. In response to former British Prime Minister David Cameron's comment on the "traditional submissiveness of Muslim women" (Hughes), Mariam Khan compiled a collection of essays entitled *It's Not About the Burqa*, which bring together the disparate voices of Muslim women. In this book Khan amplifies diverse Muslim women's voices, highlighting that they are not all confined by certain religious attire or cultural practices. The voices gathered here reveal that Muslim women are ordinary human beings capable of huge accomplishments and displaying great individuality.

The essays in *It's Not About the Burqa* shed light on the shared goals of Muslim female activists in combatting the oppressive societal structures that limit their freedoms. These goals include challenging patriarchal systems, scrutinising Western portrayals of Muslim women, and advancing intersectional feminism. Mona Eltahawy argues that misogyny is a global problem, not limited to Muslim societies (Eltahawy 5). She aligns with Carland's participants in rejecting both racist Islamophobia and cultural patriarchy, thus echoing

Carland's participants' fight to reclaim rights that have been taken away by patriarchal systems without abandoning their religion (Eltahawy 8).

Amna Saleem, in another essay, examines how discriminatory parenting strategies favouring boys over girls hinder boys' ability to empathise with and respect women, while also arguing that Islam and feminism are not incompatible notions (Saleem 146–150). Moreover, many Muslim women face discrimination from the governments of the countries they live in, as argued by Malia Bouattia and Afia Ahmed, who further emphasise that the lack of representation of migrant Muslims leads to their impoverished lives (Bouattia 212; Ahmed 75). Nafisa Bakkar writes about the need for positive media stories—ones that recognise the importance of maintaining one's Islamic identity and at the same time challenge monolithic portrayals that perpetuate stereotypes (Bakkar 47, 61–62). The lack of Muslim women's voices in mainstream media led Salma Haidrani to write about Muslim women's experiences, even though she knew writing on controversial topics might expose her and others to backlash (Haidrani 129–130). Hence, the editor of the book, Khan, urges for an intersectional feminism that includes Muslim women and recognises the significance of Islamic doctrine and identity (Khan 113). She explains that her call results from her being excluded from what she terms as "white feminism", which she criticises for overlooking or dismissing Islamic doctrine, cultural traditions, and identity (Khan 105–106).

These activists advocate for intersectionality and inclusivity while challenging patriarchy and bigotry, bringing valuable perspectives to academic and activist spheres. Their calls for intersectionality highlight the interconnected nature of discrimination across gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, recognising that these different forms of oppression cannot be examined in isolation from one another. By challenging the patriarchal systems that perpetuate disadvantage and marginalisation, these activists offer new perspectives from

which to think about gender equality and representation in the broader context of social justice. This raises important questions about the relationship between Muslim women's fight for their rights and intersectionality.

Intersectionality and Islamic Feminism

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that recognises the interconnectedness of various social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, and how they interact to shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege. Introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", intersectionality examines the marginalisation of black women within antidiscrimination laws, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics. Crenshaw contends:

> The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged […] When feminist theory attempts to describe women's experiences through analyzing patriarchy, sexuality, or separate spheres ideology, it often overlooks the role of race. Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. Consequently, feminist theory remains white, and its potential to broaden and deepen its analysis by addressing nonprivileged women remains unrealized. (46)

Therefore, Crenshaw argues that feminism must include an analysis of race and gender in order for non-white women's perspectives to be accurately represented (48). Anna Carastathis also emphasises that intersectionality recognises the de-centred, co-constitutive interaction of multiple axes of oppression (308). She elaborates that intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, can provide a solution to the drawbacks of conventional power

structures and mainstream feminist theory that are often characterised by white-centric thinking, heteronormativity, elitism, and ableism, and by bringing to light experiences and social positions that are normally overlooked in narrow and essentialist interpretations of the term "women" (Carastathis 309). Thus, according to Crenshaw and Carastathis, feminism must take into account intersectionality to validate the experiences and social locations of non-privileged women.

Furthermore, Devon Carbado and colleagues argue that intersectionality has an almost limitless potential for application, as there is always another set of concerns, places, and structures of power to examine using this framework. They note that the intersectionality movement has extended beyond the United States and has found traction globally, allowing this concept to be adapted by individuals with varying gender identities, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, making it applicable to a wide range of experiences and structures of power (Carbado et al. 304–305). Cooke points to the similarities between "black American women's experience of marginalisation, as they fall through the cracks of race and gender, and the condition of postcolonial Arab Muslim women" ("Multiple Critique" 101). Therefore, an intersectional framework can be a useful tool with which to conceptualise the experiences of Muslim women, which often conflict with Western feminism, which portrays Islam as an inherently oppressive and sexist religion.

According to Zaid Eyadat, twentieth-century Western feminist theory inadvertently gave rise to a backlash in the Islamic world, which rejected the movement of Western feminism, because it was seen as a continuation of Western dominance. This backlash in turn has generated a specifically Islamic feminism. He claims that Muslim women were forced to reject Western standards that were imposed on them, such as Western feminist opposition to the re-emergence of Islamic dress (Eyadat 361). Cooke also concurs that Islamic feminists are wary of Western feminist activism, which they perceive as a reflection of

Western cultural imperialism. Due to a history of men warning that fighting for women's rights meant betraying their culture and aligning with Western imperialism, Islamic feminists are cautious in their interactions with women from Europe and the United States. Colonial legacies further complicate these relations, as some women with memories of subjugation may distrust the motives of those from former empires and doubt the possibility of finding shared projects (Cooke "Multiple Critique" 104–105). Against this complex background of suspicion about the underpinnings and motivations of Western feminism, the notion of intersectionality, which was generated by an African-American woman's challenge to white feminism, offers a more inclusive and therefore powerful tool to examining the unique experiences and struggles of individuals who represent multiple oppressed identities. It can thus be harnessed effectively to address the concerns of Muslim women in a way that promotes empowerment and self-determination while respecting and valuing religious and cultural identities.

How should we conceptualise a feminism grounded in Islam? Margot Badran defines Islamic feminism as a form of feminist discourse that operates within an Islamic framework, using Islamic concepts and ideals as a driving force for activism and behaviour. Yet, she emphasises that it cannot be simply categorised as purely religious, as it often transcends binary distinctions between the secular and the religious, or the East and the West. Instead, Islamic feminism's main goal is to reclaim gender equality and social justice by interpreting Islamic texts, primarily the Qur'an and Sunnah, using feminist hermeneutics that highlight the egalitarian message of the texts, free from patriarchal interpretations (Badran "Islamic Feminism"). Due to the radicality of the concept of gender equality introduced by the Qur'anic revelation in patriarchal Arabia of the 7th century AD, Badran argues that "Patriarchal thought, institutions, and behaviours largely remained resistant over time to the revolutionary Qur'anic notion of gender equality to the extent that the equation of 'patriarchy and Islam' became axiomatic" ("Islamic Feminism Revisited").

Hence, Islamic feminists contend that classical interpretations of Islamic texts were based on male-centred questions in the context of patriarchal societies. Islamic feminists and scholars now seek to use feminist hermeneutics to view and reinterpret these texts through a contemporary Islamic theoretical lens and reclaim the egalitarian message of those texts, free from patriarchal influence.

In their respective works, Badran, Hassan and Eyadat all contribute to understanding the roles and challenges faced by Muslim women within an Islamic framework. Badran contends that Islamic feminism is a movement created by individuals who value religion and seek to combat inequalities and injustices perpetrated against women in the name of religion ("Islamic Feminism Revisited"). Riffat Hassan adds that Islam is not an additional factor influencing the lives of Muslims, but rather is the matrix in which all other factors are grounded (65). Meanwhile, Eyadat notes that Islamic feminism addresses the shortcomings of other feminist movements as it combines the authenticity of an Islamic framework with the concept of egalitarian human rights to reformulate the story of Islam's relationship with women and reject patriarchal and misogynistic influences. Therefore, the assertion that human rights and Islam are incompatible is unfounded (Eyadat 363). In sum, Islamic feminism provides a useful framework for addressing the inequalities and injustices faced by Muslim women, while simultaneously challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and promoting gender equality within an Islamic context.

In addition, Cooke notes that Islamic feminists reject the notion that Islam is inherently more traditional, patriarchal or violent than other religions. Instead, they assert their right to practise Islam and feminism simultaneously, without fear of being labelled as Western or imitative. Islamic feminists focus on the roles and status of women within their religious communities and align themselves with Muslim women who share their goals, irrespective of where they are located (Cooke "Multiple Critique" 94). This highlights the importance

of acknowledging and valuing the diverse experiences and identities of Muslim women, and the need to support and amplify their voices in their efforts to gain gender equality and social justice. In contrast, Riffat Hassan asserts that "Islam seems to be represented globally by two extreme groups, one presenting Islam in extremely narrow and conservative terms, and the other as being in absolute opposition to human rights as they are defined in Western secular discourse" (63). In response, Cooke contends that Islamic feminists challenge accusations of cultural betrayal by rejecting silence and actively participating in the political process. By positioning themselves as subjects of their own histories, Islamic feminists subvert dominant narratives, thereby highlighting gaps in historical accounts ("Multiple Critique" 108). This illustrates the significance of empowering Muslim women to reclaim their narratives and challenge oppressive systems, particularly in the context of Islamophobia, cultural imperialism, and patriarchal oppression. Hence, Cooke concludes that Islamic culture can foster a transnational sense of belonging and serve as a basis for both contestation against neoliberal values and a strategy of resistance, engagement, and steadfastness ("Multiple Critique" 109). In other words, Islamic feminists can use their religious identification as a means to combat oppressive systems, rejecting the notion that Islamic feminism conflicts with Islamic traditions and values.

The critical frames of intersectionality and Islamic feminism are particularly pertinent to a reading of Aboulela's fiction, which explores the diverse experiences of Muslim women, delving into the complex intersectional issues they face due to cultural and religious traditions, race, class, and gender. Islamic feminism and the complex experiences of Muslim women in a variety of cultural settings are prominent themes in Aboulela's works, reflecting the need for Muslim women to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their agency from an Islamic point of view. In Aboulela's words:

> When I was writing *Minaret*, I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel. The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life...At the end, she relies on God and on her faith. That's how my logic went. And I thought that if this were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. ("An Interview" 99)

Aboulela regards education as a means of empowerment and self-actualisation for Muslim women who must also grapple with the challenge of reconciling their religious identity with their feminist beliefs. Overall, Aboulela's fiction offers a nuanced and complex portrayal of Islamic feminism that recognises the multiple dimensions of Muslim women's experiences, paying special attention to their cross-cultural encounters.

In the following chapters, I will show how Aboulela's fiction portrays Muslim women in a refreshing and unconventional manner that defies the typical stereotypical portrayal of them in Western contexts. Through the depiction of characters whose identities and actions contradict the conventional perception of Muslim women, Aboulela effectively challenges the myths and misconceptions that have long characterised the representation of these women. As the thesis progresses, I will use the concepts of intersectionality and Islamic feminism as theoretical frameworks to further expound upon the ways in which Aboulela's work transcends the limitations of Western feminism, thus providing an inclusive framework for better understanding of Muslim women's experiences. Thus, this thesis will provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Aboulela's work and will contribute to the ongoing debate about Muslim women's representation in Western societies.

Chapter Three: Female-to-Female Relationships

Aboulela's work is often discussed in relation to Islamic practices and feminism, but little attention has been paid to the nuances of female-to-female relationships apparent in her work. Although some critics, notably Andrew Armstrong and Illeana Dimitriu, have examined the theme of sisterhood in her work, the complexity of these relationships is yet to be fully explored. In this chapter, I will address this critical gap by exploring Aboulela's representation of female characters' relationships with other females, and how they negotiate the dynamics of cultural and religious expectations within those relationships. My analysis substitutes the prevailing narrative of Muslim female subjection to men, with one of female-to-female relationships, which are complex, frequently conflicted and shaped by cultural and class expectations, but also often supportive. This analysis positions Aboulela's representation of women's inter-relationships as part of the broader move by female Muslim writers towards self-representation, and as a counter to the prevailing notion of the "Muslimwoman", described in Chapter Two. To achieve this, the analysis looks at various relationships, such as that of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, co-wives, female friendships, also referred to as sisterhood, as well as relationships with non-Muslim women, reading those relationships in the light of Aboulela's understanding of Islamic feminism.

Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Relationships

Aboulela appears to resonate with the stereotypical perception of problematic relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law. Indeed, the complexity of mother- and daughter-in-law relationships is a recurring theme in Aboulela's fiction, reflecting the importance of family ties and intra-familial relationships in Muslim culture. These relationships are often portrayed as complex and dynamic, characterised by a mixture of love and conflict. Contemporary sociological and psychological research on this topic supports Aboulela's

literary depiction of the complexities of this relationship. Christine Rittenour refers to contemporary scholarly interest in this area. She states that cross-cultural studies of attitudes confirm the prevalent depictions in media and daily conversations of problematic relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law (94). Among relationships between in-laws, this dyad's relationships have primarily been portrayed as the most challenging. A generalised image of difficult mothers-in-law, in particular, seems to be common in African and Arab settings, where couples tend to reside with the husband's family, resulting in continual tensions and friction between these women.

In a psychological study that explores family system influences on mother- and daughter-in-law relationships in a South African setting, Tebogo Nganase and Wilna Basson found that the African black community's expectations of the daughter-in-law to reside with her husband's family and adopt their way of life can cause many clashes with the mother-in-law if she fails to meet her expectations (537). Those authors found that, in contrast to the independence that Western couples can enjoy away from their respective families, African couples need to meet societal expectations of the husband's extended family and to comply with being a part of that household (Nganase and Basson 537). In Arab societies, the situation is no better. A study conducted by Laila Abed Rabho, confirmed the validity of the domineering image of the mother-in-law in Palestinian society. Abed Rabho stresses the effect of shared residence, among other factors, such as the mother-in-law's tendency to exert authority over the whole house, as a cause of long-endured tensions (469). She points out that, ironically, the hardships daughters-in-law endure in this relationship often leads them to learn about their right to separate housing under Islamic law (455). In an answer to a question raised by an inquirer about his wife's request for a separate house, Mohammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, a Muslim scholar, answered: "Separate accommodation is the wife's right, even if she did not stipulate it in the marriage contract" (Al-Munajjid). Even in polygamous marriages, a husband is required to provide separate accommodation

for each wife to reduce the conflicts that might arise due to their sensitive relationship (Al-Munajjid). In fact, separate accommodation is one of several overlooked rights that Islam has granted to women. Thus, the prevalent cultural arrangement of sharing residence among the whole extended family causes many tensions among its inhabitants, especially between the mother- and daughter-in-law.

When Aboulela portrays her own Sudanese community in her fiction, she duplicates the prevailing image of the controlling mother-in-law. I contend that Aboulela uses this familial conflict as a way to normalise the Muslim woman for Western readers. Through presenting the complexities of their relationships, she can reveal the fallacy of the simplistic notion of the "Muslimwoman" who takes submissive, inferior roles and is dominated by men. In her works, Aboulela challenges this stereotype by showing her readers a range of Muslim women with nuanced and multifaceted identities navigating relationships with agency and strength. Yet at the same time, her portrayal of relationship tensions reminds her readers that these tensions are the result of cultural factors and idiosyncratic temperamental differences, rather than Islamic teachings. In the case of mother- and daughter-in-law, shared residency combined with certain social expectations from the daughter-in-law can cause continual tensions with her mother-in-law. Aboulela tends to depict small, interesting moments that reveal much about this problematic relationship. In fact, her depictions critique such tensions by drawing her readers' attention to their absurdity.

For example, in *The Translator*, the protagonist Sammar is married to Tarig, who is her aunt Mahasen's son. Sammar, as is the custom, lives at her husband's parents' home after getting married. Mahasen is represented as a patriarchal female figure who tends to control the other females under her authority, among whom is her daughter-in-law. Sammar is represented as a weak figure in front of her aunt. At the beginning of the novel, she reflects

on how she was: “a child to be moulded […] An obedient niece, letting Mahasen decide how you should dress, how you should fix your hair” (7). She accepts anything that Mahasen tells her as a matter of fact. Sammar’s life with her in-laws deprives her of the privacy she longs to have with her husband. However, after moving to Aberdeen, the narrator explains how the couple experience, for the first time, being alone together: “Culture-shocked they were alone together for the first time. No, Mahasen, no Hanan. No one in this new city but them. They had dreamed of this, talked of this” (24). Hence, the couple’s relocation to Scotland provides them with the chance of separate housing that would not have been possible for them had they remained in Sudan. It is ironic that Sammar can only acquire her Islamic right of separate accommodation in a secular country, whereas her Muslim society denies her this right because of societal expectations that are embedded deeply in its culture.

After the death of her husband, Sammar immediately packs everything and returns to her home country to be reunited with her mother-in-law. Even though she is no longer her mother-in-law, Mahasen’s control over Sammar does not waver. She goes on displaying an entitlement to such an authority, even after the death of her son. This can be seen when she forbids Sammar from remarrying a polygamous man (13). Notwithstanding the unsuitability of this marriage for Sammar, the way in which Mahasen interferes reflects her strong authority over her daughter-in-law. So, Sammar’s reunion with her mother-in-law rekindles the tensions between the two women and causes her to escape back to Aberdeen to avoid any further encounters with Mahasen.

Another depiction of this kind of tension occurs in *Minaret.* Shahinaz, Najwa’s friend, lives in an apartment with her husband, four children and mother-in-law. Her crowded residence causes much pressure on her and makes her long for a space of her own in which she could feel free from the interference of her mother-in-law. For instance, she recounts to

Najwa how her mother-in-law has prevented them from eating out just because she thinks that this is an extravagance (104). Again, in *Lyrics Alley*, Aboulela continues to draw similar scenes that reveal recurring tensions. For example, the lazy son, Nasir, who lives in Medani, does not come immediately to visit his father Mahmoud Abuzeid when he is sick. Later, when this visit takes place, Nasir's mother, Waheeba, instantly puts the blame on her daughter-in-law Fatma, even though it was her husband's fault: "Did you and your man come from Medani on foot?" (11). She does not even miss the chance to criticise her future daughter-in-law, Soraya, for showing her arms in public a few days after the accident that happens to her son Nur (105). Again, despite Fatma's residence in another city, the moment that joins these two women in one place carries seeds of tension as the mother-in-law, who favours her spoilt son, would naturally place high expectations on her daughter-in-law and would blame her for her son's faults.

In contrast to the prevalence of interfering mothers-in-law, who are presented in the previous novels set in the Sudanese community, *Bird Summons* portrays a harmonious relationship between Salma and her Scottish mother-in-law, Norma. This can be understood as a critique of the problematic associations of mothers-in law in the Arab and Muslim world. The independence that Salma entertains with her Scottish husband, their separate housing and space that her mother-in-law allows them help to reduce tensions and build a healthy relationship. During a conversation about the nature of British society, Salma explains to Moni about her mother-in-law's tendency not to interfere in their lives: "My mother-in-law loves a good gossip. She doesn't interfere though. She wouldn't say why are you wearing this or that, not even to her own son, there is a distance. But she does notice things" (*Bird Summons* 196). Norma's self-control and respect for the private space of her son and his wife help to build a harmonious relationship between them.

In addition, Norma's uncomplicated expectations from Salma and her appreciation of her small favours strengthen the ties between them. By the end of the novel, it is Norma who comes, unexpectedly, to the rescue of Salma by emphasising that Salma has helped her and been kind to her, although Salma has never felt proud of that (245). This special relationship that Aboulela depicts in *Bird Summons* draws the readers' attention to how a positive relationship between a mother and her daughter-in-law can be maintained by having mutual respect and appreciation of each other's actions. In fact, the ironic contrast between the cross-cultural experiences and the local ones emerges again within a different context. Whereas Muslims are encouraged to maintain positive and respectful relationships with other fellow Muslims, with special emphasis on relatives, mothers- and daughters-in-law often seem to fail this ideal. However, in *Bird Summons*, this ideal is achieved within a cross-cultural frame in which the mother-in-law comes from a secular culture. Thus, Aboulela's criticism of some cultural practices that conflict with Islamic ideals reoccurs as she contrasts those practices with the more liberal conventions of a secular system. In addition, her portrayal of conflicted relations between her Muslim female characters as universal serves to normalise them and present them in a fresh light.

Co-wives

A more problematic relationship that Aboulela depicts in her fiction is the relationship between co-wives. I argue that Aboulela's portrayal of polygamous marriages is a way to introduce this type of relationship to Western readers and to correct many misconceptions about it. Polygamous marriages are largely illegal in Western societies, and many people view polygamy as oppressive and patriarchal. However, by depicting polygamy through the perspectives of her female characters, Aboulela presents a more nuanced view of this custom. Furthermore, she challenges the notion that Muslim women in polygamous marriages are necessarily oppressed or forced into these relationships, as her female

characters often make the decision to engage in such marriages voluntarily. The active role that co-wives play in the novels, and how Aboulela represents their agency, once again breaks down the "Muslimwoman" stereotype and negates the prevalent understanding of female passivity in such marriages. By presenting this different perspective, Aboulela opens up a space for dialogue between Western and Muslim societies on the topic of polygamy, encouraging a deeper understanding and appreciation of the diverse experiences and values of Muslim women. As such, her portrayal of polygamous marriages is an important contribution to the larger conversation on gender, religion and cultural diversity.

The prevalent representation of co-wife relationships in polygamous marriages is one of hostility, jealousy, and conflict, which Essien D. Essien argues results from the unequal distribution of resources and sexual privilege in such a marriage (1558). A Western reader may think that the practice of polygamy is inherently problematic for women, and that conflict and jealousy between wives is inevitable, given the gendered power imbalance that relies on the husband's sense of fairness. However, Aboulela's works challenge this conception in an attempt to normalise this Islamic practice. Her portrayals of different co-wife relationships illustrate that positive relationships can exist, and a husband's role is crucial in creating an environment of equality. Thus, she seeks to portray equality as a key concept in polygamous marriages, without which a positive relationship between co-wives can hardly occur. If a man adheres to this principle, his wives are more likely to be content and less likely to quarrel. According to Haifaa Jawad, Islam teaches that polygamy is allowed under the condition of ensuring justice between co-wives, which requires a husband to provide equal shares of food, clothing, material comforts, and treatment without favouring one over the other ("Polygamy" 185). Additionally, Essien states that in an African context, it is the husband's duty to preserve a peaceful and harmonious relationship within the family, ensuring that everything that needs to be provided for the wives is shared equally among them (1559). Aboulela's characters exemplify how tensions

can be avoided and peace can be achieved through a husband's impartiality towards his wives. Ultimately, her works provide an alternative portrayal of co-wife relationships, normalising Islamic practices, and challenging Western misconceptions about the role of gender and power dynamics in polygamous marriages.

Aboulela's portrayal of the relationship between Mahmoud Abuzeid's co-wives in *Lyrics Alley* illustrates the role that a husband's partiality can play in creating a tense and conflicted environment. The rich businessman, Mahmoud Abuzeid, is married to two wives, the traditional Sudanese Waheebah and the modern Egyptian Nabilah. This relationship does not contain any of the elements required for establishing a positive relationship between co-wives. First of all, Mahmoud does not treat his wives equally; he favours the second, young wife, Nabilah, over his elder, first wife, Waheeba. In fact, Mahmoud's marriage to Waheeba was arranged by his father, and "he hated Waheeba at first sight, hated her because of her dullness and lack of beauty and, most of all, because she was forced on him" (46). Even before his second marriage, Mahmoud stopped living with Waheeba as husband and wife and he gave himself a separate room in the *saraya* (which means palace or mansion) (29). On the other hand, he is emotionally attached to Nabilah, "True, he had given her a lot, and he didn't want much from her in return […] She was loved and cherished" (29). This imbalance in Mahmoud's relationship with his co-wives plants the seed of hostility between them. Waheeba's sense of humiliation and inferiority makes her spare no opportunity to undermine and belittle Nabilah. At the same time, Mahmoud's partiality to Nabilah boosts her pride and causes her to despise and mock Waheeba. For example, Waheebah is delighted to have a chance to undermine Nabilah, who is superior in terms of education, fashion, and look (32). On the other hand, Nabilah does not miss the opportunity to ridicule Waheebah's ignorance and remind her of her inability to read (36). As the plot unfolds, these tensions continue to grow on every occasion the co-wives happen to meet.

Moreover, the gap between Waheeba and Nabilah is further increased by their strong attachment to their respective cultural backgrounds, which creates a substantial divide between them, hindering their ability to empathise or comprehend each other. From the beginning of the novel, Nabilah is characterised by a sense of superiority that makes her look down on her husband's Sudanese surroundings, and especially her illiterate, traditional co-wife. She limits her social circles to the women of the Egyptian community in Sudan and refrains from making any Sudanese acquaintances. She even isolates her children from their extended family. Her quarters in the *saraya* contrast with those of Waheeba because "She had with her husband's full approval and generous finances, designed her wing in the *saraya* like a modern, Egyptian home, not a Sudanese one" (24). This arrogance builds a barrier between Nabilah and her husband's family and blocks any possibility of conciliation between her and her co-wife.

Waheeba, in contrast, is an old-fashioned and superstitious Sudanese woman who is immersed in her tribal customs. Her determination to perform her traditional practices gets her into trouble and estranges her further from Nabilah. This is compounded by her illiteracy, which creates a chasm between them and prevents her from grasping her co-wife's reasoning. The most shocking example of the cultural gap between the two women is when Waheeba circumcises Nabilah's daughter against her husband's and Nabilah's will and behind their backs. Waheeba's belief of the value of female circumcision and the shame attributed to uncircumcised girls in her tribal consciousness leads her to ignore her husband's refusal and proceed with this act. Waheeba's lack of consideration for the cultural beliefs of her co-wife, and her disrespect for her husband result in Nabilah's moving to Egypt and almost ending her marriage.

A radically different relationship between co-wives is represented in *The Kindness of Enemies*, set in the Caucasus in 1854. In this novel, the household of Shamil Imam

includes three co-wives, with vastly different backgrounds. Zaidat is the first wife, whom Shamil Imam married to please his teacher, as she was struggling to find a husband (151). Chuanat, the second wife, is an Armenian Christian girl who was captured in a raid and decided to stay, despite her family's attempts at saving her, because she fell in love with Shamil Imam. The third wife, Ameena, is originally from Bavaria, but was raised in Shamil Imam's household. These wives are first introduced in the novel when Anna, the protagonist, is brought to their home as a captive. The way that each of the three wives welcomes her reveals their personalities and relationships with each other. What is particularly noteworthy about their interaction is their mutual respect and support rather than the usual conflict and hostility depicted in co-wife relationships. This portrayal of the co-wife relationships highlights each woman's individual story and how they came to be in the household, reflecting a diversity of cultural backgrounds and experiences. It also emphasises the importance of understanding and acceptance in co-wife relationships, especially under challenging circumstances.

Unlike the typical portrayals of co-wives in such relationships as hostile and competitive, this novel explores the dynamics of a household where the husband, Shamil Imam, treats his wives with equal respect and kindness. Despite Shamil's initial reluctance to marry Zaidat, who is ill-tempered, unlike Mahmoud, he consistently demonstrates a balance in his treatment of his wives, ensuring that they are all treated equally. Chuanat even acknowledges this (117). Shamil's impartiality toward his wives helps them bear the difficulties of living in an *aoul* (a rural settlement in the Caucasus), where the women share both a home and a husband. In this novel, Aboulela depicts a household where a husband's equal treatment of his wives, combined with his respectful manners, nurtures a familial bond that transcends their cultural and ethnic differences.

Nonetheless, Aboulela stresses that co-wives' attitudes and different personalities play an important role in determining how well they will relate with each other. For example, Zeidat's bad temper results in many tensions between her and her co-wives. From her first appearance in the novel, she is portrayed as harsh and disrespectful towards others. In contrast, Chuanat is kind, friendly, and even defends Zeidat, acknowledging that despite her harshness, there is no evil in her (117). Similarly, Ameena is characterised as a kind and friendly person, but also childish and daring. Her attitude towards Zeidat differs from Chuanat's, as she describes her as a shrew (117). Due to Zeidat's negative attitude and lack of consideration towards others, she is unable to maintain positive relationships with her co-wives or other members of the household, which sets her apart from others. Conversely, Chuanat and Ameena are best friends who confide in each other. Aboulela's characterisations of the co-wives and the complexity of their relationships shift the male/female narrative of oppression, which dominates the "Muslimwoman" discourse, to that of a female circle in which women display their agency and decide the shape of their own relationships. Her depiction of the compassion and kindness of Chuanat and Ameena illustrates the possibility of fostering harmonious coexistence among co-wives and overcoming the obstacles that might hinder their friendship. It is noteworthy that Aboulela portrays a favorable relationship between co-wives in the context of the novel's nineteenth-century setting. This portrayal suggests the author's belief that historically, when polygamous marriages were conducted in accordance with Islamic laws, they yielded positive relationships, which stands in contrast to contemporary polygamous marriages that deviate from these Islamic principles. This viewpoint aligns with Aboulela's positive depiction of Jihad in the nineteenth century, a topic that will be further explored in Chapter Six. Overall, Aboulela's representation of the three co-wives in *The Kindness of Enemies* offers a unique perspective on polygamous relationships that defies the traditional image of conflict and envy between wives that is often associated with polygamy.

Sisterhood

The possibility of positive relationships between women, which Aboulela explores in *The Kindness of Enemies*, is a major element in her work, and is most commonly depicted between women living in diaspora. This leads me to one of the major themes in her fiction, that of a Muslim sisterhood that develops after migration. There is now a body of research that examines the specific effects of migration on the religious lives of Muslims, which is pertinent to how we might read Aboulela's explorations of Muslim women in diaspora. For example, Samuel Behloul explores the role of religion in the lives of migrant Albanian and Bosnian Muslims in Switzerland. In this section, I build my argument on Behloul's notion of the role of religion in transnational relations, in which he argues that "Transnational relations means that religious belonging—under the specific conditions of migration—can cross the boundaries of ethno-national adherence, generating supranational relationship dynamics and activities among people of the same religious but different ethno-cultural backgrounds" (Behloul 68–69). According to Behloul, shared religious identity attracts diasporic Muslim women to each other to fill the gaps caused by migration, loneliness, strangeness, and loss of belonging, regardless of any respective ethnic association. For example, Behloul points out that "Albanian mosque leaders (in Switzerland) distinguish themselves by their transnational activities—their close contacts with other Muslim migrants from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds—in addition to their usual contacts with their country of origin" (82). Thus, common religious beliefs become a source of connection that unites diasporic societies to give them a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, mosques play a significant role in connecting Muslim immigrants in the West. It is worth noting here that the status that the mosque acquires in diasporic societies for women, in particular, contrasts with its status in Muslim countries, where the mosque is mainly occupied by men. Due to the Islamic preference for women to pray at home, in

contrast to men who are obliged to perform the five daily prayers at mosques, Muslim women find no need to go to the mosque in their home countries. However, in diasporic spaces, many Muslim women experience a sense of loneliness and strangeness within the secular societies to which they migrate. Their distinctive attire, the restrictions that their religion imposes on mixing with men, and their different social expectations and ideals, can sometimes build a barrier between them and the host societies. Hence, they develop a need to connect with other Muslim women. Therefore, the mosque becomes the ideal space for fulfilling this need. In her study of Muslim women in Canada, Roxanne Marcotte observes that:

> In the diasporic contexts, the mosque is more than a mere place of worship. For Canadian Muslim women, the mosque is where they can develop and strengthen their ties with their religious and ethnic communities. The mosque often serves as a social and cultural center. [...] In many cases, mosque activities provide occasions for Muslim women of diverse ethnic and social class backgrounds to interact and strengthen their sense of belonging to a worldwide Muslim community. (359–360)

Marcotte's exploration of the role of the mosque for Muslim women in Canada is echoed by Kirsten Wesselhoeft in her examination of Muslim women's choices in France. Wesselhoeft contends that, contrary to the criticism directed to the Islamic principle of sex segregation, Muslim women in France stress the empowering effect that this female space of the mosque offers them because of its provision of a sense of freedom that they would not find elsewhere. Those women "imagined the mosque not only as a source of religious education and space of worship, but as an anchor for the whole community: a place for childcare, mental health care, exercise, socialisation, and beauty" (240). In fact, the mosque for diasporic Muslim women can be regarded as a refuge where they can release their burdens and relax, away from racist and sexist gazes. In this feminine atmosphere,

Muslim women discover agency and start to realise a sense of Muslim feminism. Wesselhoeft describes the situation of Muslim women in France thus: "Acutely cognizant of gendered Islamophobia, these women expected the mosque to preserve a space of freedom—not only freedom from harassment, but freedom to enjoy the respite and security of sisterhood—the *sœrénité* of non-mixed community" (241). She adds: "Far from being purely a retreat, this space of freedom is designed to be generative, to re-energize women psychically, spiritually and morally, for their engagements at home and in the world" (241). Therefore, the mosque plays a significant role in diasporic places in the lives and wellbeing of Muslim women, as it constitutes a source of empowerment.

In a similar manner, Anabel Inge has conducted a comprehensive study of a group of Salafi Muslim women in London. In her elaboration of their Islamic study groups, in which a teacher gives lessons about the details of Islam, she notes: "Whenever a newcomer attended a lesson, others would usually warmly introduce themselves and explain the content of the lesson and the book(s) being studied" (35). Inge writes that many participating women are keen to encourage others to join their gatherings and she reminds us that one of the important lessons that teachers can offer their students is the concept of unity and equality among fellow Muslims (35). For instance, she reports on advice that one teacher gives: "You must put aside your differences and love your sister purely for the sake of Allah, the women were told, rather than for other reasons, such as a shared race, tribe, or nationality" (36). This emphasis on the unity of Muslims is also evident in Aboulela's treatment of women's relationships within the setting of the mosque, which are characterised by a transnational atmosphere that encompasses women from different ethnic and national backgrounds. Aboulela's emphasis on the empowerment that her female characters derive from these transnational relationships is a direct challenge to the "Muslimwoman" trope, which often defines women solely in terms of their subjugation to men.

In her first novel, *The Translator*, Aboulela presents that transnational feeling through the support and assistance that the women of the mosque offer to their fellow Muslims. It is these women, whom Sammar barely knows, who come and stand by her side to console her after the shock of losing her beloved husband:

> Strangers, women whom she kept calling by the wrong names, filled the flat, cooked for her and each other, watched the ever-wandering child so she could cry. They prayed, recited the Qura'n, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They didn't leave her alone, abandoned. (8–9)

Such strength and generosity embarrass Sammar because "she thought of herself as more educated, better dressed" (9). This hint of class difference indicates that despite these women belonging to different social classes, they regard religion as a uniting and over-riding element that connects them with their fellow Muslims. Hence, these women's generous feelings and enthusiasm for helping others humble Sammar as she learns that their kind deeds stem from their desire to do the right thing rather than to please others. In fact, the power that these women display, and their solidarity contrast with the passivity that has always been attached to the "Muslimwoman" trope.

Moreover, Aboulela elaborates on the transnational nature of relationships of women at the mosque in *Minaret* through her depiction of the women of London's Regent's Park mosque who display a similar attitude towards Najwa, the protagonist, when her mother dies. Najwa has been born into a rich and political family in Sudan, but an opposing coup takes place, and her father is executed by the new government. Their family seeks refuge in London, where her brother becomes imprisoned for dealing drugs and her mother dies of cancer. At this point in the plot, Najwa renews her friendship with an old Sudanese friend, Anwar, who exploits her financially and sexually. Najwa's first acquaintance with the mosque women takes place when they come to wash her mother's body and shroud it,

refusing to take any fees for their service. Toossi points out: “It is these women’s selfless generosity in helping their stranger sister, Najwa, when she loses her mother to cancer without questioning her background or judging her that makes her venture to set foot in the mosque for the first time in her life” (Toossi 125). Nonetheless, Najwa does not decide to join them until she realises that she has literally lost everything and that her coming down in the world has ended with her “settling at the bottom” (*Minaret* 240). Najwa asserts repeatedly that: “My guides chose me; I didn’t choose them” (240). She emphasises her gratitude to those women for not only helping her, but more importantly, for seeking her out and encouraging her to be one of them at a time during which she was witnessing a gradual weakening of her past connections. Aboulela’s fictional portrayal of the attitudes of these women aligns with Inge’s observations on Muslim study groups in London, specifically regarding the significance they ascribe to guiding and influencing others. In *Minaret*, the beginning of Najwa’s regular visits to the mosque marks a transformative point in her character. The events illustrate how Najwa gains a sense of power from being close to God and praying. Moreover, she establishes sincere and empowering relationships with the women in the mosque, who support and bolster her during difficult times without judgement. Aboulela’s representation of the contrast between Najwa’s old friend, Randa’s attitude, which begins to waver after Najwa’s decline in social standing and occupation as a maid, and the unwavering support of the women in the mosque underscores their steadfast loyalty. The plot reveals how, right from her first encounter with Wafa, despite her initially uninviting demeanour, Wafa and her companions demonstrate kindness and hospitality, inviting Najwa to join them in the mosque and offering her much-needed support. Aboulela’s depiction of the women in the mosque bears striking similarities to her portrayal of the women who aid Sammar in *The Translator*. The women in both stories show kindness and compassion towards others, with no interest in material gain. Their actions stem solely from their desire to help others and do what they believe to be right.

Through these characters, Aboulela highlights the transformative power of communal support, underscoring how a simple act of kindness can spark a ripple effect of goodwill and empowerment.

Aboulela skilfully portrays the dilemmas that are caused by men in Najwa's life, starting from her father's corruption, moving to her brother's drug addiction, and ending with Anwar's exploitation of her, leading her to seek a safe feminine space. In addition, the representation of her experience of adultery, with its associated feelings of guilt, causes her to find relief in this new all-female environment. Najwa states that "I liked them. I liked the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men. The absence of the sparks they brought with them, the absence of the frisson and the ambiguity. Without them the atmosphere was cool and gentle, girly and innocent" (242). The novel shows that the relief that Najwa experiences in this womanly space comes from the sense of unity that she derives from the other women in the mosque, despite their different backgrounds. Hasan comments on this: "Regent's Park masjid is not associated with any ethnic group and is considered a religious centre of British Muslims of all ethnicities and colours. After becoming disconnected from family members and friends, Najwa becomes attached to this microcosmic global community" (100). Hence, the women of the mosque, with their continuous support and love, substitute for Najwa's lost family and provide her with an agency and strength that is far from the image of the "Muslimwoman".

In effect, Aboulela's novel highlights how Muslim women practise their agency and resist the reductive associations of the "Muslimwoman" within a man-free space. Despite the negative connotations of feminism in the Muslim world, due to its secular connotations, Aboulela illustrates how Muslim women construct a different feminism—an Islamic feminism—by creating a solidarity that encompasses all Muslim women regardless of their ethnicity. This solidarity is characterised by nurture and empowerment, providing women

with a supportive network that is accessible through gatherings at the mosque. In this regard, Awad asserts:

> Aboulela's novel presents a practical example of what an Islamic feminist movement is capable of offering its adherents to subvert capitalist forces of hegemony. In *Minaret*, Islam criss-crosses social class and ethnic boundaries and creates an environment that enables Najwa to survive through a network of sisterhood support. ("Cartographies" 152–53)

Similarly, Armstrong's exploration of the role of the mosque for Najwa underscores the strength that Muslim women derive from their gatherings at the mosque (Armstrong 233). He argues that by limiting the power of men in this space, Muslim women are granted access to unlimited agency: "This narrative of the mosque is supported by a female subjectivity that strategically limits the power of men by mapping them differently, by giving a greater presence to the women" (234), adding that "In a sense, Aboulela has wrested the mosque from exclusively patriarchal hands and made it a site, symbol, and sign of female empowerment in London" (233). Hasan concurs with Armstrong's view, emphasising how the absence of men in the female section of the mosque creates a utopia that facilitates the empowerment of Muslim women and allows them to resist patriarchal domination and monopolising religious discourse (Hasan 100). It is really the creation of a mosque-based sisterhood that undermines the notion of the patriarchally oppressed "Muslimwoman". Aboulela's novel offers a practical example of the potential of an Islamic feminist movement that transcends cultural boundaries. By presenting a network of sisterly support within the mosque, she highlights the transformative power of communal solidarity that can enable Muslim women to challenge patriarchal norms and repressive notions of femininity.

This intimate relationship is enhanced during Ramadan because of the spiritual aspects of the month, as well as the daily meetings it requires. Najwa's visits to the mosque increases her attachment to its women and deepens their transnational relationships. For instance, Najwa recalls being chauffeur-driven home every night by the wife of the Senegalese Ambassador during Ramadan, who "was kind without being condescending" (*Minaret* 188). She remembers how she used to doze in the car while listening to her speak in her language on the mobile phone. This serves to remind the reader that the bond which connects these women does not lie in any shared culture, heritage, or language—their shared religious belief is what draws them to help each other. As Ramadan comes to a close, the Eid al-Fitr celebrations offer an exciting opportunity for the women to see each other in a different light. In a feminine space, freed from the gaze of patriarchal society, the women remove their hijabs and dress up, revealing their femininity and sharing an act of feminine fellowship. Najwa describes the scene: "We are pleased to see each other without our hijabs and all dressed up for the party, delighted by the rare sight of each other's hair, the skin on our necks, the way makeup brightens a face. We look at each other and smile in surprise. It is not only the party clothes; some of us are transformed without our hijabs" (184). I argue that Aboulela's portrayal of her female characters' dressing up and removing their veils in a feminine space conjures up a playful image that displaces the exotic sexist narrative attached to the "Muslimwoman". Armstrong comments: "Here, Najwa and the reader not only get a look at the women behind the hijab but also participate in an act of feminine fellowship within a decidedly womanist sacred space" (233). He goes on to explain:

> This uncovering of the Muslim women, which takes place in a sacred space, does not carry the shame, nakedness, and disgrace usually associated with it in a dangerous and feudal patriarchy. Instead, it is invoked in a language of admiration and reverence for the woman and the female body. And it must

> be remembered that this is linked to that group of caring, sharing, yet powerful women of the mosque. (233)

Again, it is in this sacred place that Muslim women find the freedom to dress up and reveal their femininity without being exposed to sexualised gazes that could offend their chastity. In conclusion, the Ramadan daily meetings and the Eid scene in *Minaret* demonstrate the strength of the bonds between Muslim women and the power of their shared faith. Aboulela's vivid portrayal of their communal activities, from praying to sharing meals and engaging in feminine fellowship, showcases the beauty and power of community support and sisterhood in overcoming the challenges of living a transnational and diasporic life.

In order to illustrate how religion, rather than language, plays an essential part in forming friendships, the character of Najwa reflects on her Arab friend, Um Waleed: "Strange that she is not my friend, I can't confide in her and when we are alone the conversation hardly flows" (185). On the other hand, Najwa entertains a close relationship with Shahinaz, an Asian British housewife, although they "have little in common" (105). Shahinaz is very considerate of her friend, Najwa. For instance, she offers to drive her home in their fully packed car (79). The plot tracks how Shahinaz stands by her friend's side and how she provides her with the sympathy that she has been longing for since the loss of her parents. When Najwa breaks up with Tamer, Shahinaz comes to the rescue and sleeps in her flat to console her on her loss. As Dimitriu comments:

> The ending suggests that the protagonist has finally found roots, not in a particular place (neither Britain, nor Sudan), but in a woman-centered community of believers. This is not a sisterhood of opposition to male dominance (again, Aboulela carefully avoids the discourse of binaries). Indeed, hers is a language of symbolic expansion. (124)

The sisterhood that unites the women of the mosque does in fact represent a Muslim feminist system that is based on the empowerment and nurture of female community members, free from condescension or disregard by patriarchal figures.

Aboulela's portrayal of Najwa's friendships with Shahinaz and the other mosque women differs greatly from that of Randa, her wealthy Sudanese friend. Whereas the mosque women's friendships with Najwa are built on an attachment to Islam and a desire to help each other in improving their performance of religious duties, Randa's friendship with Najwa is marked by superficiality and materialism. Randa represents a different world of privilege and luxury that Najwa cannot access anymore. While Najwa initially relishes Randa's company and the world she represents, she soon realises the shallowness and emptiness of this relationship. Such a relationship is easily shaken by Najwa's fall. Najwa reflects that Randa "[…] had never talked down to me back in Khartoum but now she was in a prestigious university and I had a disgraced father" (134). In fact, Randa's elite status causes her to look down on those beneath her, and to feel contempt for religious people, who are generally associated with inferior levels of society. She tells Najwa about the hijabi-clad students at the university and how "The sight of them wearing hijab on campus irritates [her]" (134). Similarly, Najwa remembers her former self and how she used to distance herself from the rural girls in the university (14). However, class distinctions and the social barriers associated with them become irrelevant in London among the mosque women, who regard Islam as the ultimate religion that connects people.

Aboulela strategically uses the analogue of Najwa's relationships with Randa and Lamya to highlight the issue of class. Through the character of Lamya, Najwa's employer, Aboulela shows the arrogance and disdain that parallels Randa's behaviour. Despite Najwa's longing to befriend her, she realises that Lamya "[…] will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin colour, which is a shade darker than

hers" (116). In contrast, the solidarity that Najwa finds in her relationships with the women at the mosque stands in stark contrast to the disrespect she experiences from Lamya's friends, who mock religious women at a party she throws. The insensitive behaviour of Lamya's friends is on display as they laugh at a guest who arrives wearing a hijab, mocking her by imitating striptease movements (222–223). In another example, Lamya's baseless accusation of Najwa stealing her necklace, followed by her refusal to apologise after realising Najwa's innocence, further emphasises the class and cultural divides between Najwa and herself (114). Aboulela's portrayal of these two groups of women in parallel illustrates the cross-border inclusive nature of religious solidarity, in contrast to national relationships that are often governed by class and cultural barriers. Through her characters, Aboulela invites readers to question the social norms and cultural prejudices that may prevent genuine connections and which encourage the formation of superficial relationships in a world where class and privilege often determine one's social and economic opportunities.

A less idealised picture of Muslim women's friendship is depicted in Aboulela's *Bird Summons*, which revolves around the transnational relations of three Muslim women friends who live in Scotland. I maintain that this novel offers a far more realistic portrayal of female Muslim relationships than the previous novels, which present a rather idealised picture. However, Aboulela's representation of the complexity of her protagonists' relationships and the agency that they display during their journey is another instance of her exploding the stereotypical myth of the "Muslimwoman". Here, she shows complex, fractured and changing relationships among three women, and how they explore the possibility of transgressing against religious principles or rejecting expectations. Each of these women come from a different Muslim country: Salma from Egypt, Iman from Syria, and Moni from Sudan. Salma is the leader of an Arabic-speaking Muslim women's group and she is married to a Scottish convert to Islam. Salma's closest friend, Iman, is still in her

twenties, but already up to her third marriage. Moni had been a high-powered banker but has left her job to take care of her disabled son. These women are connected by religious ties that help them to compensate for feelings of strangeness in this secular environment. However, those ties start to weaken as they progress further along their journey away from the formality of their home city and from the boundaries of their religion.

The novel begins with the group's decision to go on a journey to read *Fatiha*, a prayer recited as an offering to the deceased, at the grave of Lady Evelyn (located on a remote hillside on her Glencarron estate), because she was the first British woman to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is Salma who suggests this trip. She is the most enthusiastic because she believes that such a trip will help them "[…] to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soil and of their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home" (*Bird Summons* 1). Salma's cultural alienation from the people of Scotland and her frustration at her growing distance from her children, who are becoming more British as they grow older, make her feel an affinity with Lady Evelyn. She is enthusiastic about the expedition because she expects to derive lessons from Lady Evelyn's life because Lady Evelyn too had been a Muslim living among non-Muslims.

The journey begins with a harmonious atmosphere among the group, who share a common language and religion. Salma's kindness towards her friends is evident from the start, as she actively works towards lifting Iman's spirits, reminding her that she is still young and has time to start a family in the future. Salma's supportive nature is further demonstrated as she assists Moni in leaving a nursing home where she had felt reluctant to leave her son. As the leader of the group who suggested the trip, Salma shoulders the responsibility of taking care of her two friends. She endeavours to maintain a supportive and cooperative atmosphere, until dissent and criticism begin to come from Moni and Iman. Despite some

disagreements, there are still moments of harmony. For instance, the author describes how Moni and Iman grow closer through cooking and mutual appreciation. They also band together to take care of Iman after she is attacked by a dog, illustrating the strong bond of solidarity between them. This more friendly atmosphere inspires Moni to suggest that the group start a women's massage clinic, with Moni managing the business, Salma providing the massage therapy, and Iman taking care of the reception (148). The idea illustrates the friends' desire to support one another and work together as a team in pursuit of their collective goals.

Nevertheless, as the journey progresses, tensions start to emerge between the group members. Their separation from their busy city lives and daily routines exposes each individual member's frustrations and faults. These frustrations cause them to violate the teachings of their religion and distance themselves from each other. Hence, blame-shifting takes over, and each of the women finds it difficult to take responsibility for their actions or acknowledge their own mistakes. The disintegration of the group is hinted at in the early stages of their journey. During their first stop at a castle, each of them is eager to pursue their own interests. Salma wants to explore the castle, Iman wants to enjoy the beautiful scenery of the sea, and Moni is tired from walking and wishes to remain in the car: "Salma, Moni and Iman together but not together, fellow travellers, summoned by Fate. Salma wanted to visit Lady Evelyn's grave, Iman wanted to be with Salma, Moni worried about the amount of walking involved" (20). This sentence foreshadows the detachment and drifting apart that will occur later.

First, Aboulela's representation of Salma's growing disappointment with the increasing gap between her and her children drives her towards her friend Iman. As her children become increasingly assimilated into Western culture, Salma is shown to feel as though she is losing control, leading her to seek support and comfort from Iman. Salma is drawn to

Iman's passivity and dependence, as it allows her to exercise her own need for control. For instance, when Ibrahim, Iman's husband, divorces her, Salma instantly takes control of the situation by packing Iman's belongings into her car and insisting that Iman come and live with her family. This shows the feeling of being needed that Salma seeks from her friendship with Iman. Another instance highlighting this dynamic appears when Salma nurses Iman after she is attacked by a dog: "She was speaking for Iman so that her friend could feel babied and cosseted, looked after and safe" (147). However, in her efforts to take care of Iman, Salma inadvertently fosters a dependent and fragile character who is incapable of caring for herself.

In addition, Salma's characterisation is further complicated by her decision to rekindle her relationship with her old friend Amir, using a new phone her husband has given her as a gift. Instead of feeling grateful for her husband's generosity, Salma uses his gift to cheat on him. The portrayal of her relationship with Amir is built on nostalgia and shared past experiences, with the lure of her former dream of being a doctor being particularly strong. Amir's addressing her as Doctor Salma resonates with her subconscious, and she finds herself willing to sacrifice what she has worked hard to attain in order to pursue the relationship. However, her friends view this relationship with disapproval, leading to a widening of the gap between Salma and her companions.

The character of Iman is initially presented as dependent and immature, lacking in education and easily subject to the control of others. She is surrounded by possessive husbands and friends, unable to assert herself or rebel. She realises that "All her husbands, one after the other, were possessive. Even Salma was a possessive friend. Iman, surrounded by this tight grip of adulation and comfort, didn't long to escape; like a pet, she neither bristled nor rebelled" (13). Iman's reliance on others is also shown during their stay in the loch, where she does not contribute to housework. Nonetheless, the shock of Iman's

second divorce triggers a significant change in her. Feeling burdened by her beauty, which has only attracted possessive men, she longs to be a part of nature and rid herself of the trammels of femininity. In addition, Iman's experience of going through three marriages has taught her that marriage is not a reliable source of financial security, leading her to express a wish to be independent and to find work, despite her poor qualifications. Iman's rebellion starts to manifest in her refusal of authority, such as Moni's criticism of her revealing clothing (114). For the first time, she even takes an active role in resolving a dispute between Salma and Moni, marking a significant growth in her character (169). However, Iman's assertiveness remains immature and ineffective in resolving the issue, leading to annoyance on the part of Salma and Moni. Iman's journey towards independence and growth serves as a testament to the challenges and uncertainties that come with breaking free from societal norms and expectations.

Furthermore, Moni has her own frustrations. She is characterised with ongoing feelings of inferiority for having given birth to a disabled son. The arrival of Adam in her life, and the discovery of his disability, has put her whole life on hold. She leaves her job and neglects herself and her husband in order to take on full care of him. The imbalance of her life and her husband's lack of sympathy towards her and her son drive them apart and make her unable to forgive him. The first time the women stop during the journey north, Moni receives a call from her husband in which he urges her to send copies of their passports because he wants them to follow him to Saudi Arabia, where he works. However, Moni refuses his request and insists that she will stay in Scotland as it offers better health care for her son. Moni's reaction draws disapproval from her friends, who remind her of the importance of obedience to husbands in Islam. Still, Moni believes that "'obedience' was not a blind imperative; it was an acknowledgement of leadership, but still leadership could be challenged and interrogated" (32). Again, the group's conflicting opinions separate them from each other.

As time goes on, the deteriorating tolerance among the group becomes more evident as rain confines them indoors, thus preventing them from pursuing their hobbies and resulting in them criticising each other. Moni begins by voicing her disapproval of Salma's over-protective treatment of Iman as being harmful to her growth and independence. Moni's remarks encourage Iman to speak up for herself, and for the first time in her life, she voices her desire for independence, declaring that Salma is not guiding her towards a better future. Salma's response to Iman's newfound assertion of independence is one of outrage, as she sees Iman's rebellion as a reflection of her own daughter's rejection of the offer of a place at medical school and choosing to study sports science against her mother's wishes. Recalling this aggravates her frustration, and she reminds the group that she is the one who brought them on this trip in her own car, further highlighting her own desire for control and dominance (178). As tensions continue to simmer, Moni and Iman begin to reproach Salma for rekindling her relationship with Amir, viewing it as an act of disloyalty. Meanwhile, Salma and Iman criticise Moni for her negligence and disobedience to her husband. However, Moni contends that her son's disability is a top priority that she cannot ignore, and that such disobedience is better than losing virtue and veering towards adultery. In the midst of this ongoing conflict, Iman now makes a bold decision to stop wearing the hijab, citing the dress restrictions imposed on her by her village and successive husbands as reasons for now wanting to make her own choices. Ultimately, the harmony among the group is completely disrupted by these interpersonal conflicts, highlighting the complexities of balancing individual needs and desires against the expectations and obligations imposed by societal and religious norms.

It should be noted that the frustrations experienced by each character leads each of them to transgress their religious principles. These transgressions ultimately disrupt their friendship and drive them apart. Aboulela's depiction of the complex relationships between her female characters and their tendencies to oppose social and religious expectations offer a

nuanced depiction of Muslim women as opposed to the West's predominant and misconceived notion of a fixed identity for the "Muslimwoman". In the novel, Aboulela shows us that Muslim women can and do fight against social norms and rebel against religious expectations. Salma becomes involved in a disloyal relationship outside of marriage that allows her to escape from her problems and transports her to an idealised past. Moni's preoccupation with her son's condition causes her to prioritise his needs over those of her husband and leads her to neglect and disobey him. Iman, meanwhile, embarks on a desperate quest for independence, which leads her to remove her hijab. Each character's disapproval of the others' actions leads to increasing tension and conflict, causing them to distance themselves from the bond of their shared religion that brought them together in the first place.

The group's persistent conflicts and lapses are followed inevitably by retribution. In a literary manoeuvre, Aboulela deftly transitions into a fantastical and magical realist mode, intensifying further the significance of the female relationships. First, Salma embarks on a quest to track down Amir, ultimately resulting a surrealist scene where her muscle tissues are extracted. This extraordinary act of removal robs her of the physical strength she had once proudly possessed, serving as a powerful symbol of the punishment she faces for her actions. The fact that Amir is the one who carries out this punishment emphasises that her pursuit of him was ultimately the source of her harm. Moni, on the other hand, is transformed into a ball that can be carried and played with by a boy whom she is fascinated by due to his resemblance to her own son. This transformation highlights the danger of prioritising her son's needs at the expense of everything else. It emphasises that while her son should be an important part of her life, he should not be her entire focus. Then Iman's ongoing longing to be part of nature and rid herself of her femininity and humanity result in her being transformed into an animal incapable of speech. Following these transformations, the women's attitudes towards each other shift. When Moni meets Iman

after her metamorphosis, she speaks about Salma and assures Iman that "She would help us as she always helped us before. She would know what to do" (233). The group reunites, renewed and emotionally overcome by each other's distress. It took Iman and Moni all this suffering to acknowledge Salma's favour and admit that they trust her to provide guidance and take on a leading role despite her physical weakness, realising that "No matter what, they would always look to her for guidance. They trusted her'" (246). So, Salma resumes the leading role, despite her weakness and inability to move. The weakness of the three women makes them realise the importance of unity. They stick together, putting aside their differences for the greater good. The friends' reconciliation and unity help to eliminate their sufferings and finally, they regain their original shapes and celebrate together. Through their experience, their characters undergo significant transformations.

Firstly, Iman grows up: her "revulsion against being cast as feminine, or even human. All melted away" (261). Secondly, Moni starts to love her life and appreciate the beauty around her. She feels the ability "To step away from herself and her problems. To be more than a mother of a disabled child, more than a full-time carer" (261). Finally, Salma finds satisfaction in her life, accepting the job she has always been ashamed of and realising the ways in which she has helped and benefited others. This realisation helps her overcome her low self-esteem and be content with what she has achieved. As the group head to visit Lady Evelyn's grave, Moni shows herself now willing to keep walking and reassures Salma that she does not need to worry because she will do her best. In contrast with the period preceding their transformations, this time the trio is able to walk harmoniously, "they walked at the same pace" without arguing or quarrelling (272). This change in each character's attitude makes them more appreciative of what they have and particularly of their friendship that helps them endure the difficulties of migration. Their dynamic characterisations and shifting, often conflicted, relationships contrast with the static picture of the "Muslimwoman".

In conclusion, *Bird Summons* represents a development in Aboulela's writing as she moves away from representing an idealised picture of Muslim women's friendship. In this novel the three friends deal with their lives' frustrations by acting against the expectations of their religion, which results in a deep chasm between them. It is ironic that this departure into magical realism gives us a more realistic portrayal of its characters than the previous novels, even though they belong to the genre of realism. Besides, in this work, Aboulela does not reveal any authorial position. She does not show her identification with any of her characters, in this way inviting her readers to appreciate the complexities of their evolving relationships. She portrays their life stories and conflicts and finishes the novel with an open ending that allows its reader to make their own judgements.

Relationships with Non-Muslim Women

Aboulela's representation of cross-cultural experiences also depicts her female characters' relationships with non-Muslims. In contrast to what some extremists claim, Islam encourages love and respect of all human beings regardless of their religious backgrounds. A contextual analytical study by Iman Kanani and colleagues of the relationships with non-Muslims states: "Under peaceful conditions, Muslims must be just and kind to all human beings" (Kanani et al. 263). The study concludes that "A historical study of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) interaction with non-Muslims in Mecca and Medina illustrates that as long as non-Muslims did not behave treacherously or turn to violence, a peaceful relationship was established and alliances and coalitions were formed" (Kanani et al. 258). So, following the Prophet's (peace be upon him) model requires exhibiting the best moral behaviour towards all mankind, irrespective of any religious affiliations.

The Islamic imperative to treat non-Muslims with kindness and respect is examined in Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*. The novel depicts a positive female relationship between the captive princess of Georgia, Anna, who is Christian, and her Muslim captor's

second and third wives, Chuanat and Ameena. Although they share no common religion, language or culture, from their first encounter with Anna, the two wives display friendly and inviting behaviour. Ameena welcomes Anna by saying: “We can become friends” (116). They surround Anna with a kindness that she needs during the trauma of captivity. What seems to connect these women is a shared humanity that takes no account of other markers of identity. Despite the bad conditions that Anna has to endure, Chuanat and Ameena ease her pain by their frequent visits, friendly conversations, and small gifts. The characterisations of Chuanat and Ameena illustrate that harmony can be found among all human beings if they show respect and consideration for each other. Aboulela’s depiction of this relationship reflects her interest in cross-cultural encounters, which she has experienced herself, and hence strives to convey in her fiction. It is my contention here that the positivity of this relationship reflects the writer’s personal belief in the possibility of a universal humanity that encompasses all human beings. The kindness that the two Muslim characters show to an unbeliever negates the terrorist image of the “Muslimwoman” and presents a very different model of Islam where relationships between believers and non-believers can tolerate differences.

Chuanat’s and Ameena’s treatment of Anna contrasts with that of the matriarchal Zaidat, who displays a hostile attitude towards other women in general and Anna in particular. Zaidat’s rigid attitude towards the “infidels” prevents her from showing them any kind of sympathy. She scolds Ameena for befriending Anna saying: “Since when do we make friends with infidels, Ameena!” (116). Her involvement in the negotiations of exchanging Anna for Jamaleldin reveals her greed. She does not show any consideration of her husband’s feelings and hope of getting his son back. In fact, she states to Anna bluntly: “What good is a man who drinks wine and dances with half naked women? What kind of fighter will he be? I cannot say this to my husband but I am telling you now, woman to woman: what use would Jamaleldin be to us? I say better a large ransom than such a son”

(189). The money that could be gained from the ransom becomes more important for her than her husband's son only because she believes that his adoption of a Western lifestyle makes him worthless. Zaidat's characterisation demonstrates Aboulela's attitude towards all forms of radicalism. It illustrates how the extremist adoption of any ideology can turn a person into an unsympathetic being who has no feelings toward other humans, even the ones closest to him/her.

In short, Aboulela's depiction of the complexities of her female characters' relationships and her focus on the feminine circle differs from the prevalent male/female narrative that dominates the discourse of the "Muslimwoman". In addition, her portrayal of the conflicts as well as the support that female characters receive from each other indicates the importance of religion and how it functions in strengthening the ties between them. It should be noted that although the characters' embrace of Islamic ideals makes their relationships full of support and nurture, we see those supportive ties start to weaken as characters violate the teachings of their religion, which stresses the importance of friendship, respect and kindness. More importantly, Aboulela's portrayal of Muslim women is multifaceted. Her depiction of the characters' struggles serves to normalise Muslim women and challenge the misconceptions often associated with them. Through her characters, Aboulela highlights the resilience, strength, and individuality of Muslim women, illustrating that they do not exist as a monolith and that their experiences are more varied and complex than certain stereotypes suggest.

Chapter Four: The Centrality of Marriage

A deeper exploration of Aboulela's portrayal of relational complexities between her characters requires an understanding of the sensibilities that govern marriage and non-marital relationships. Marriage in Muslim societies is endowed with a significant status, mainly due to its encouragement in Islamic teachings. Moreover, the prohibition of nonmarital relationships in Islam, combined with societal associations of taboos and shame, profoundly affects the ways members of the opposite sex interact with each other. This chapter examines Aboulela's representation of the integration of Islamic values, among which are those attached to marriage and relationships outside wedlock, with local cultural principles, and demonstrates how social exaggeration and harsh judgements distort these values and detach them from their original meaning. Essentially, my aim is to explore how Islamic principles have become integral elements of the collective mindset within Islamic societies, including Sudan, in such a way that even non-practising Muslims and individuals of different faiths are influenced by them. However, it is vital to note that there is a risk of Islamic principles being viewed merely as cultural norms rather than as deeply held religious values. This perspective increases the likelihood of these principles being abandoned once individuals detach themselves from their societal contexts, potentially leading to their erosion or neglect. The chapter explores the concept of marriage in the Muslim world and how it is represented in Aboulela's fiction. Then, it analyses Aboulela's portrayal of marital relationships and relationships outside of wedlock, examining the complexities and challenges posed by societal norms, cultural expectations, and Islamic teachings. The chapter also highlights examples where Aboulela's attempts to normalise Islamic practices and values that may challenge Western readers, who may find her beliefs regarding marriage and nonmarital relationships problematic.

Marriage in the Muslim World

To comprehend how marriage is depicted in Aboulela's work, it is crucial to recognise the importance of marriage in Islam and the principles underpinning it. Marriage is highly valued by both men and women in Islam and is deemed a fundamental aspect of individuals' lives in Muslim societies of the Middle East, which serves as the backdrop for Aboulela's characters. In fact, Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) stated that: "When a man has married, he has indeed made his religion half perfect. Then let him fear Allah for the remaining half" (Al-Tabrizi 633–34). Other scholars have asserted that "Unlike in some other parts of the world, in the Islamic Middle East marriage is an indigenous concept and institution of great importance, whose organisational potential is often explicitly recognised by Muslims" (Tapper and Tapper 3). Marriage occupies this prominent position not only in the Middle East, but also in almost all Muslim majority countries. In Indonesia, for example, marriage "[…] is almost universal and represents an important phase of life. Marriage establishes a new household and marks the achievement of adult economic and social status. It is the only institution where man and woman can legally engage in sexual relations" (Riyani 21). This reverence for marriage in Islamic texts elevates its status in Muslim societies, making it one of the main objectives that individuals seek to achieve in their lifetimes.

Islamic marriage is founded on a set of mutual rights and duties, which are set out in the Qur'an and Hadith. The husband bears the responsibility of offering dowry and providing financial support for his wife and children, while the wife is to be obedient and make herself sexually available to her husband. In the view of Kecia Ali: "The legal tradition fundamentally views marriage as an exchange of lawful sexual access for dower, and continued sexual availability for support" (Ali 13). In a similar interpretation: "The Muslim matrimonial contract bestows upon the husband the primary responsibility to

support the wife and it pledges the wife to obedience to her husband" (Fluehr-Lobban and Bardsley-Sirois 39). This view of marriage is frequently critiqued by feminists for depriving women of personal autonomy—especially since there are examples where the rules are misinterpreted and wives are subjected to non-consensual sexual activities. However, Muslims are expected to follow the ideal construct of Islamic marriage, which underscores the importance of love, mercy and mutual respect towards each other. Marital sexual relations also carry with them a sense of "considerateness", as confirmed by a study of South African women (Hoel and Shaikh 80). In the Qur'an, Allah encourages Muslims to find peace and comfort in their marital relationships: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy" (Qur'an 30:21). Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) further emphasised the importance of treating women well: "The best of you are those who are best to your women" (At-Tirmidhi 531). Asma Lamrabet also points out that the Prophet's support for the welfare of women continued up until the end of his life: "In his Farewell Sermon, when he reminded men of the Qur'anic principle: "*I urge you to take good care of your wives.*" And the Prophet repeated this recommendation three consecutive times" (Lamrabet 69–70). Thus, Islam has come to stress the importance of mutual care and love between spouses and, in effect, has divided the roles among them, by assigning financial responsibility to men and obedience to women, in order to ensure stability. Ali also adds: "Significant texts in the Qu'ran and Hadith allude to the importance of female gratification and satisfaction in the sexual act" (7). This acknowledgment of female sexual desires within conjugal relations further underlines the importance of marriage in Muslim societies.

Along these lines, Islam stresses not only the necessity of marriage but also highlights the significance of values such as respect, love, kindness and responsibility as integral components of this practice. The importance of the institution of marriage in Islam and the

values attached to it have significant implications for Muslim societies and can impact the ways in which individuals conduct their personal relationships. A qualitative study by Zahra Alghafli and others among devout Muslim couples found that "Almost all participants mentioned that Islam either directly or indirectly affected how they live their lives, especially in relation to their families. Many commented that Islam plays a vital role in promoting marital stability, security and happiness" (Alghafli et al. 820). Masumeh Saeidi and colleagues add that the Qu'ran instructs parents that children should be provided for and protected until they reach adulthood (Saeidi et al. 111). In a similar manner, it stresses the importance of "feeling grateful to parents, and doing good to them […] obeying and respecting them, speaking softly and kindly, avoiding harsh words or harsh tone, giving them company when they are lonely, caring for their physical and psychological needs" (Saeidi et al. 107). Therefore, marrying and having children are encouraged in Islam because of the promise of living a comfortable life in old age while fostering positive familial relationships built on mutual respect and love.

Moreover, the proscription of premarital and extramarital sex in Islam and the limitation of sexual relations to marital unions gives marriage a distinguished status thought to be desirable by most Muslims. As Hoda Rashad and colleagues state: "In Arab culture, marriage is also a well-defined turning point that bestows prestige, recognition, and societal approval on both partners, particularly the bride […] Finally, it is also a rite of passage to a socially, culturally, and legally acceptable sexual relationship" (Rashad et al. 2). It should be noted that Islam fully acknowledges the sexual needs of both men and women; however, it restricts them within the frame of wedlock. Ali explains that "Key Islamic texts present marriage, and sex within it, as a natural and desirable part of human life. The Prophet Muhammad reportedly objected to celibacy ("no monkery in Islam") and specifically claimed marriage as part of his *Sunnah*, or authoritative practice" (6). Thus,

marriage is encouraged in Islam to regulate the lives of its followers and secure society from the instability of illicit relationships.

Marriage in the Fiction of Aboulela

Most of the critiques of the representation of marriage in Aboulela's fiction deal with the proscription of Muslim women marrying non-Muslims. Such discussion can be found in the critiques of Shirin Edwin, Yusuf Awad, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Geoffrey Nash. However, Aboulela's representation of the status of marriage in Sudanese society has been overlooked. Hence, in this section I focus on the author's depiction of the centrality of marriage in Sudanese society as part of the broader Muslim culture.

Although *The Translator* has received the greatest critical attention amongst Aboulela's works, none of its critics dwells on the author's representation of the importance of marriage. From this very first novel, Aboulela focuses on the significance of marriage within Sudanese society through the character of Sammar. Sammar is represented as a passive and weak female character. Abdel Wahab argues that she is "constructed by her patriarchal aunt Mahasen. Sammar's deep thoughts always see her own personhood in terms of her larger family affiliation and dependence" (234). Her attachment to the idea of marriage is extreme. As Friedman suggests: "She has much to learn about not defining her worth solely through marriage" (114). After the loss of her husband, Tarig, in a car accident and despite her love for him, it becomes clear that Sammar does not want to spend the rest of her life as a single woman. Therefore, less than a year after Tarig's death, she is willing to marry an older man who already has two wives. Her preparedness to enter into such a marriage leads her to confront her patronising aunt, Mahasen, who is bewildered by Sammar's attitude. Abdel Wahab suggests that "The aunt expects her niece to sustain the same compliant stance of the obedient niece and the unsexed widowed mother who is supposed to just concentrate on her career and her son and never fall in love again" (234).

However, what the aunt is unable to grasp is that marriage for Sammar is more than financial support. She needs to have love and a "focus" in her life (*The Translator* 28). Aunt Mahasen's attitude is represented as an interference; nevertheless, the exaggeration of Sammar's attachment to marriage, her willingness to be the third wife of an old man, and her static life after the death of her husband, can all be viewed as a critique of the privileging of marriage in Sudanese society.

Because of Sammar's attachment to marriage, she is shocked to learn that Diane, the postgraduate student with whom she shares a campus room, completely rejects marriage in favour of leading a single life. In addition, Sammar places married couples in privileged positions: "She envied Fareed because he was married and she was not, and marriage was half of their faith" (108). As a consequence, instead of pouring her attention and care on her only son, Sammar's shock at losing her husband separates her from her son and leads her to live in isolation. She realises how "She was far from what her aunt wanted her to be, the child was not the focus of her life, not the centre where once his father had been" (112). The bitterness of being a widow has transformed Sammar's emotions towards her son into hostility and animosity: "She was unable to mother the child. The part of her that did the mothering had disappeared. Froth, ugly froth. She had said to her son, 'I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you'" (7). Thus, Sammar's extreme position in favour of marriage leads her to ignore her duties towards her son for the sake of grieving her deceased husband.

Aboulela portrays the profound impact of Sammar's grief over the loss of her husband on her mental and physical wellbeing. In addition to neglecting her son, Sammar also isolates herself in a hospital-like room for four years without making meaningful progress towards recovery: "Ill, diseased with passivity, time in which she sat doing nothing" (15–16). She lives in a bare room without bothering to take care of herself or her appearance: "Since

Tarig died she had not bought anything new. She had not noticed time moving past, the years eroding the clothes Tarig had seen her in" (67). Even the food that she eats during these years is mostly spoilt. Aboulela describes how "Sammar had eaten such food, hacking away at the good bits and not questioned what she was doing, as if there were a fog blocking her vision, a dreamy heaviness everywhere" (67). Sammar goes to the extreme in her grief over her husband. Her behaviour and state of mind contradict the Islamic principle of patience, on which Allah says that "Only those who are patient shall receive their rewards in full, without calculation" (Qur'an 39:10). This contradiction is seen in her long period of mourning. Islam generally prescribes a period of four months and ten days for widows; however, it takes Sammar four years to move on from her grief. Aboulela has her reflect on it thus:

> Four months and ten days, was the sharia's mourning period for a widow, the time that was for her alone, time that must pass before she could get married again, beautify herself again. Four months and ten days. Summar thought, as she often thought, of the four months and ten days, such a specifically laid out time, not too short and not too long. She thought of how Allah's sharia was kinder and more balanced that the rules people set up for themselves. (69)

Mahmoud Khalifa describes Summar's period of bereavement: "[This] rhythm seems to mark time in a way that accommodates a widow's psychological need for private space that is uninterrupted by male marriage proposals at a time when a woman is psychologically vulnerable and bereaved" (61). Edwin describes it thus: "This decision highlights the burden of emotional grief with which she continues to grapple and emphasises the unmistakably personal dimension to her praxis by juxtaposing the doctrinal imposition of mourning with her own personal mechanisms for coping with grief" (71). In

fact, it is the emergence of a new relationship that helps Sammar overcome her attachment to the past.

Subsequently, Sammar's attitude towards life changes dramatically after beginning to fall in love with Rae. "Do you think that he could one day convert?" is the question that keeps her awake after a very long period of hibernation (21). It was after coming out of Rae's house that Sammar feels as if "Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her" (20). Sammar's new sense of being at home in Scotland indicates that, finally, she has just found the person who will be her home and place of security and comfort. With Rae, she experiences new feelings that she has been missing for four years. Thus, she feels as if she has just woken from a long sleep: "Now she looked around the hospital room and said to herself, 'I am not like this. I am better than this" (67). So, she starts to clean up and air her room, and to apply some self-care that she abandoned after the death of her husband. These changes show that her sense of herself as a sexual being (that died with Tarig) is aroused again.

Even by Islamic standards, Sammar's obsession with marriage exceeds cultural norms and appears extreme. This, I argue, is evidenced at the climax of the novel, when she asks Rae to convert to Islam, solely for the purpose of marrying her, even though she knows his conversion may not stem from a genuine desire to become a Muslim and abide by Islamic doctrines. What is noteworthy here is Sammar's active role in the marriage proposal, which subverts the typical "Muslimwoman" association with passivity and submissiveness. Surprisingly, Sammar initiates the proposal by visiting Rae in his office and telling him that his conversion would be sufficient for them to marry:

> If you say the *shahadah* it would be enough. We could get married. If you just say the words…' 'I have to be sure. I would despise myself if I wasn't sure.' 'But people get married that way. Here in Aberdeen there are people who got married

> like this…' 'We're not like that. You and I are different. For them it is a token gesture.' She thought, it is clear now, it is so clear, he does not love me, I am not beautiful enough. I am not feminine enough, coming here to ask him to marry me when I should have waited to be asked. (127–128)

This passage shows Sammar's immaturity in desperately seeking marriage, with the sole condition being that Rae must convert to Islam. She seems ignorant about the deep spiritual conviction that conversion entails, associated with specific obligations and prohibitions. Friedman discusses this:

> That she cruelly curses him to live a life forever alone and lonely reinforces Aboulela's point that in insisting on the letter of Islamic law without its spirit, Sammar has lost her way as both a Muslim and a woman. Aboulela's critical stance toward her protagonist at this moment of the narrative identifies the author's position on the spectrum of Muslim feminisms: advocating for the independence of women who submit not to men or marriage but to Allah as a devout Muslim attuned to the spirit of the law. (115)

Certainly, Aboulela advocates feminism in which women derive their strength and independence from submitting to the will of God. Rae's rejection of Sammar's proposal prompts her to seek strength from God, marking a significant maturation process for her.

Ultimately, Rae's conversion, which could not be accomplished before Sammar's spiritual growth and independence towards the end of the novel, illustrates the author's belief on it being a prerequisite to a successful marriage. This conversion takes place after Sammar realises that "She had never, not once, prayed that he would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone" (175). Thus, Sammar's realisation is accompanied by her contentment at remaining

single and her constant and sincere prayers for Rae to become a Muslim for his own sake. Friedman declares here that "The resolution of the conversion plot and the marriage plot depends upon Sammar's greater understanding of Islam's spiritual dimension, an understanding that can develop only with her learning to become an independent woman, not solely dependent on marriage for fulfillment" (114). Furthermore, Abdel Wahab suggests that in Aboulela's novels, female protagonists make efforts to reinterpret their personal sense of empowerment in the face of societal and familial oppression. In *The Translator*, Sammar rejects the expectation of remaining celibate, which her "patriarchal" aunt imposes on her following her husband's death. Instead, she assertively expresses her "feminine sexuality" (Abdel Wahab 236). So Sammar's decision to marry Rae, despite her aunt's refusal, can be interpreted as another form of empowerment and agency.

I suggest here that this form of agency negates the passiveness of the "Muslimwoman" and normalises the experience of Sammar in which she needs to grapple with her weaknesses to overcome them. Not only does Sammar demonstrate her agency through this marriage, but, as Toossi asserts, she goes even further to challenge the conventions of the society to which she fervently belongs. Toossi argues that we should not hastily label her as another traditionally minded and oppressed Muslim woman. Sammar's decision to marry a white Western convert is just as contentious within her cultural context as Rae's embrace of Islam is within his own (126–27). In agreement with Toossi's perspective, I contend that marrying a westerner, even if he is a Muslim, is a brave act that would contravene Sudanese cultural expectations. I also contend that, despite her many flaws, Sammar disrupts the conventional notion of the "Muslimwoman" by firstly taking the initiative to propose to Rae and subsequently marrying him, despite their ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences. Finally, Aboulela's representation of Sammar's feelings of loss and her strong attachment to marriage could be read as a critique of the exaggerated value of marriage in her society.

The elevated status of marriage in Sudanese society is also represented in *Lyrics Alley*, which is set during the 1950s, through the story of Soraya and her lost hope of marrying her lover, Nur, who became disabled after an accident. Unlike her sister, Fatma, who was forced into marriage and had to abandon her education, marriage symbolises empowerment, independence, and a connection with the outside world for Soraya. Abdel Wahab comments thus:

> Unlike the traditional marriage of her sister Fatma that forced her to drop out of school to get married to her cousin Nassir, Soraya's engagement to Nur Abuzeid empowers her creative skills of reading and writing and consolidates her sense of independence … Through Nur, Soraya can enjoy following the updates on discussion forums, poetry recitals, political lectures, and the outside world that was not made for girls according to the Sudanese tradition. (235–236)

While Abdel Wahab focuses his argument on the translational aspects of Aboulela's characters and their quest for a medium ground between modernity and traditionality, I assert here that in respect to the ideal of marriage, these characters hold on to its traditional centrality in their lives, even considering it an empowering act. Furthermore, Soraya's prospects of marriage as a means of independence, education and modernity disrupts the cliché that for the "Muslimwoman", marriage is another form of oppression. Thus, in addition to her desire to be rid of her offensive father, Soraya's belief in the societal value attached to marriage causes her to reject celibacy. At no point can she imagine herself single or celibate for life. On the contrary, her reflections about Sister Josephine, the Italian nun who works as the headmistress of the Catholic school, indicate just how significant marriage is for her. She thinks how Sister Josephine "[…] would stay as she was; a virgin, celibate. It seemed too cruel to contemplate […] she made Soraya feel privileged. *She* was going to get married; *she* was going to have a bride's trousseau, *she* was going to

experience a man's love and a man's body" (145). Therefore, Soraya would hate to put herself in the nun's place; the mere imagination of such a life upsets her. She worries that "If she never, ever married, she would be like them, forever a virgin, cut off from motherhood and running her own house. The prospect filled her with self-pity," (236). Abdel Wahab comments that this is a "[…] definite example of traditional femininity, Soraya's speculations over virginity and celibacy fill her with self-pity" (235). According to her, life without marriage is tragic because it deprives a person of the many privileges that marriage entails such as running one's house, motherhood, trousseau, and sex. In addition, Soraya, despite her best intentions, feels jealous of Batool, Waheeba's relative, who lives at her house, because she is going to marry before her. Those feelings make it hard for her to congratulate her despite their friendship. Thus, the progression of Soraya's inner thoughts and reflections convey the importance of marriage in Sudanese society and present it as the main objective for this character.

Eventually, after a long denial, Soraya realises that her wish to marry Nur has been shattered by his disability and that his recovery is unattainable. Therefore, she starts to imagine her future, prosperous life with a different man: "As for the head of that household, he was faceless, nameless—almost insignificant" (239). In fact, Soraya's love for Nur does not alter her perception of marriage, nor does it make her sacrifice her youth for the sake of serving her beloved: "She couldn't be Nur's nurse. She was incapable of such a sacrifice. She would feel hard done by and ignored, she who aspired, like her Uncle Mahmoud, to a modern, upbeat life" (256). After Uncle Mahmoud breaks Soraya's engagement to his son, Nur, she becomes available for other suitors, to her dismay, as Aboulela describes: "When Soraya was engaged to Nur, she was flawless. Now that she was available in the marriage market, her imperfections were all on display: short-sighted, loose-limbed and soon to be over-educated" (238). When Soraya hears that she is described in the university as "too tall", "she was strangely disappointed. It was not just

hurt vanity or a competitive spirit, she genuinely felt bypassed" (237). Soraya's disappointment at her reduced chances of marriage indicates that her superficial indifference to this matter covers a deep wish to be someone's wife.

A point that is worth mentioning here is the metaphor of the market. The narrator's description of Soraya as a candidate in the marriage market speaks volumes about the value that the entire Sudanese society attaches to marriage and the way women are regarded. The comparison of eligible women to commodities in a market appears to critique the degradation of women in that era and to signal gender inequality, also a feature of that society. The fact that Islam elevates the status of marriage and that it polices this institution with a set of rights and duties expected of both partners is unfortunately contradicted by a patriarchal society that views women as goods to be sold in a market. The commodification of women is highlighted by the fact that the higher qualifications they have, the larger the dowry that can be sought. This unequivocally goes against the Islamic regulation of marriage, which mandates that women be treated with respect, love and kindness. According to Lamrabet, the dowry or 'mahr' in Islam is not a price or indicator of the bride's worth. Rather, it is a gift from the groom to the bride as a symbol of his serious desire to marry her and his sense of responsibility towards her. This custom is a transformation of a previous discriminatory practice that devalued women, into a new framework that values them and grants them rights as well as obligations. The Qur'an profoundly changed the status of women from being owned property of fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands, or in-laws to becoming autonomous individuals with full human rights (Lamrabet 64–66). Hence, through her choice of the word "market", Aboulela effectively encapsulates the prevailing societal attitude towards women prior to the twenty-first century, the period in which the novel is set. This attitude is one example of the many inherited cultural tenets that came clothed in religious garb, notwithstanding they contradicted fundamental Islamic principles.

Soraya's decision to choose Tuf Tuf, Nur's educated and progressive friend, as her husband, despite his close friendship with Nur, shows that she views marriage as a pathway to agency and modernity. She rejects a proposal from her friend's brother, justifying her decision by stating that he is "not progressive enough" (245). Tuf Tuf, on the other hand, is different, as highlighted by Nur's description of him, by the end of the novel. This illustrates why Soraya approves of him:

> That easy-going, disinterested Tuf Tuf is a better husband for Soraya than he could have ever been. Through him, she is realising her dreams of modernity, discarding her *tobe* and cutting her hair short, moving away from Umdurman's conventions, wearing her glasses freely and carrying her degree like a trophy, gliding through the fashionable salons and parties of the capital. (306)

Hence, the conclusion of the novel portrays Soraya's attainment of her aim of marriage, which forms an integral aspect of her life, one that will enable her to manage her household, have children, and achieve the level of agency and modernity she has long desired. Most noteworthy, her decision to select a progressive husband emphasises Aboulela's rejection of the stereotypes of the "Muslimwoman" as helpless and passive. While Soraya and Sammar's views of marriage differ, marriage remains a central theme in both their lives. Whereas Sammar is desperate to find a focus in life, Soraya displays her agency through her intelligent approach to marriage, using it as a method to realise her independence and autonomy with a partner who supports her. In essence, despite differences in perspective, both protagonists view marriage as a vital element of their lives.

Aboulela's writings also explore the significant stress that delaying marriage can exert on the family unit. In the short story "Circle Line", featured in the collection *Elsewhere, Home*, the female protagonist, who lives alone in London, talks about her mother's persistent efforts to find her a husband. The mother continually arranges meetings with

prospective suitors, fretting about her daughter's future and reminding her in every phone call that time is passing: "I have heard this lecture time and time again. Years flying, fertility falling; how I'm becoming more and more set in my ways, how no man is perfect" (185). Aboulela depicts the mother satirically in this story, highlighting the pressure Sudanese parents often put on their daughters to marry. The daughter's insistence on marrying according to her own requirements contradicts the frequent portrayal of Muslim women as helpless and meek. Her life alone in London and her rejection of suitors sent by her mother denote her self-sufficiency, thereby challenging such stereotypes.

Aboulela's representation of the significance of marriage for Muslims also appears in her latest novel, *Bird Summons*, albeit in a more contemplative tone. Salma contrasts the lifestyle of Christian priests with Islamic principles and suggests that such exclusive devotion to God is denounced in Islam. While worship is essential to a Muslim's life, other responsibilities are also important. Salma believes that the life of priests "was a way of living that her own religion condemned. Instead men should love women, have children…" (99). She sees priestly celibacy as not a sacrifice but an extravagance because it allows them to abandon their other duties towards the world, such as marrying, having children, and raising them, and contributing to society. This is the kind of balance that is encouraged in Islam and that takes all the different aspects of human life into consideration. Aboulela's work highlights the Islamic approach of achieving a balanced perspective on all aspects of human life, including the recognition of marriage as a fundamental duty, without favouring one over the other.

Marital Relationships (Husband/Wife)

In this section, I analyse Aboulela's portrayal of marital relations in Islam, demonstrating how her fiction contests and disrupts stereotypes of the Muslim woman. I argue that Aboulela challenges the traditional notions surrounding the "Muslimwoman" in her

characterisations. Through her portrayal of supportive conjugal relationships, in which women are respected and appreciated, the author subverts the widely held belief that Muslim women are oppressed. My examination of Islamic concepts, such as a husband's authority, a wife's obedience, and sexual availability, certainly exposes the entrenched patriarchy in Muslim cultures. However, it also highlights the distinction between cultural practices and Islamic principles, which emphasise respect for women. In essence, this analysis forcefully argues that Aboulela's work challenges long-standing misconceptions of Muslim cultures, replacing them with a nuanced understanding of the Muslim woman's agency, power, and right to respect and autonomy in marriage.

One of the most interesting marital relationships described by Aboulela is Shamil's relationship with his wives in *The Kindness of Enemies*. In this novel, Shamil exemplifies the kindness that men are required to offer their wives. As Almaeen states: "Shamil practices supportive patriarchy due to his religious knowledge and moral insight" (83). Despite his toughness during battles, this compassion carries over to his domestic life. Through the eyes of his wife, Chuanat, Aboulela highlights Shamil's sensitivity to her emotional needs, underscoring how his religiosity has not led to his forcing her to abandon her own faith. Instead, he proudly calls her his "Christian wife", who earns respect from both himself and others (150–51). This portrayal implies that Islam respects women and challenges the misconception that it degrades them. Furthermore, the material poverty and harsh circumstances of Shamil's life have not prevented him from showing gratitude and affection towards his wives, a quality that doubles as a compensatory factor in their challenging conditions. The tender but nuanced representation of Shamil's relationship with his wives emphasises the compassionate and respectful nature of Islamic marital relationships and challenges the misconception of Islam's degradation of women.

While Aboulela foregrounds the importance of supportive patriarchy that aligns with Islamic principles, her portrayal of male authority in the household has raised questions about her treatment of gender roles. Wail Hassan argues that "Aboulela's version of Islam reinscribes male supremacy. There are several instances in Aboulela's writing where feminism is rejected in favour of patriarchal gender roles" (196). However, Alqahtani counters this view, arguing that "Aboulela does not reject feminism; feminism in her fiction addresses gender ideology from an Islamic perspective...Thus, Aboulela seeks to conciliate Islam, secular modernity, freedom and women's empowerment on a spiritual level in *The Translator* and *Minaret*" (209). In support of Alqahtani's position, I contend that while Aboulela's fiction often portrays hierarchical gender relationships, it does not reject feminism or women's empowerment. Instead, it stresses the necessity of a supportive patriarchy that corresponds with Islamic principles. For instance, in *Minaret*, Najwa reflects on Shahinaz not cutting her long hair because of her husband's refusal, a scene that reveals her characters' acknowledgment of male supremacy and their ready submission to its doctrines (103). Similarly, Shahinaz's disapproval of Najwa's romance with Tamer is anchored on her belief that a man she cannot look up to cannot guide her, again highlighting the importance of male authority: "When I think of a man I admire, he would have to know more than me, be older than me. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to look up to him. And you can't marry a man you don't look up to. Otherwise how can you listen to him or let him guide you?" (215). On this subject, Aboulela has elaborated in an interview with Peter Cherry:

> The patriarch is (traditionally) benevolent […] He is able to look after the women in his family—financially, socially and morally. Therefore, when the head of the family becomes dysfunctional […] he cannot play that role anymore and it can be severely disappointing from the perspective of a Muslim woman. It's not liberating,

> it's severely disappointing because the Islamic gender relationship is built on men being supportive and protective of their women. ("Interview" 6)

I argue here that Shahinaz's views on male authority reflect Aboulela's own position on the matter. Almaeen concurs with this view, stating that the author's perception of patriarchy is derived from the Islamic concept of *qiwamah*, which legitimates a man's authority over the moral and material affairs of women (81), adding that Aboulela "sees patriarchy that conforms to this framework as supportive and performing an essential role in women's religious agency" (82). Shahinaz herself acknowledges male authority, emphasising that it must be accompanied by maturity and wisdom on the husband's part because male authority can be misused if a man is unworthy. As Wail Hassan declares "Gender equality is out of the question; men are supposed to be protective of women, and women want and expect to be protected by men" (197). This opinion stands in stark contrast to John Stuart Mill's advocation of an absolute equality between the sexes in his ground-breaking essay *The Subjection of Women*, first published in 1869, in which he states that a family "[…] should be a school of sympathy in equality, of living together in love, without power on one side or obedience on the other" (Mill 65). Undoubtedly, this principle highlights a major point of difference between Muslim feminism and Western feminism, and it poses a challenge for Aboulela because it puts her literature in tension with Western readers' expectations. Similarly, this different thinking represents a challenge for Western readers reading her fiction, who may interpret it as an unpalatable endorsement of patriarchy.

The novel *Bird Summons*, which has received little critical attention so far, offers a nuanced and varied examination of marital relationships in Islam and Muslim society, serving to deepen readers' knowledge of these topics. In addition, this novel represents a departure from the clear authorial position that characterises Aboulela's previous novels

and leaves space for the reader's further negotiations and reflections. In this novel, Aboulela introduces a different form of male authority, exemplified by her depiction of Ibrahim, Iman's husband and his possessiveness (13). This trait is problematic, as the author describes his possessiveness as reflective of his flaws and extremism. For instance, he vehemently opposes Iman's trip with her friends because according to him: "Three women on their own gallivanting across Scotland—it was wrong and unnecessary" (33). He is even obsessive about her hair, insisting that she removes any strands from the bathroom to prevent others from seeing it, reasoning that "one single strand was enough to determine the length of [her] hair, its colour and texture" (74). This trait is not limited to his relationship with his wife but extends to his attitude towards other women. Ibrahim avoids interacting with them unless necessary, avoiding eye contact and refraining from greetings. When he looks for Iman, he does not stop to greet her friend Moni and he even avoids looking at her because of his excessive sense of propriety. Surprisingly, his action amuses Moni as it boosts the self-confidence that she had lost with the birth of Adam. His actions make her feel that she is attractive, and therefore should not be looked at by men to avoid arousing any temptation (47). Aboulela's portrayal of Ibrahim's character condemns his extreme possessiveness, questioning its impact on relationships, even when stemming from deep love.

Additionally, the novel illustrates the nature of marital relationships in Islam through Iman's contemplations. Iman's complete financial dependence on her husband, coupled with his constant lust for her, leads her to question the nature of their marriage and whether it resembles a kind of prostitution. She wonders how much of a difference there is between the two since, in her view, both involve a man paying for something in return (34–35). This reflects ongoing debates on the topic of a wife's sexual availability in Islam, with Iman's confusion alluding to its complexity. Iman's query echoes the depictions of "patriarchal bargains" presented by Nina Hoel and Sa'diyya Shaikh in their study of South

African Muslim women's understanding of sex and sexuality. Hoel and Shaikh observe that the notion of "patriarchal bargains" reinforces a particular sexual paradigm: this holds that marital stability is dependent on men and women adhering to their designated roles, with men being faithful and generous partners who provide for their families, while women are sexually receptive and available as wives (89). Yet, Iman's contemplation after her divorce leads her to understand the fundamental differences between marriage and prostitution. While both may resemble each other externally, the internal dynamics are profoundly different because she realises that a marriage built on love sees both partners "give and receive in a flow generated by love with neither one keeping tabs, with neither one viewing the relationship as a transaction" (72). This resonates with Hoel and Shaikh's call for a change in prevalent sexual concepts to become "foundationally premised on recognising the equal personhood of male and female subjects", and to build "ethics of mutuality and reciprocity that allows us to imagine the realm of sexuality as restorative and abundant rather than commodified and coercive" (Hoel and Shaikh 91). This revelation articulates the central Islamic logic in marital relationships where men have sexual access and authority while bearing financial responsibility, and both spouses' rights and duties become acts of love. The text here suggests that this ideal on which marriage should be built is the ultimate factor that makes it different from prostitution and that helps to ensure its continuity.

In addition to exploring male authority in *Bird Summons*, Aboulela examines the notion of a wife's obedience to her husband through Moni's ordeal. Moni's husband, Murtada, wants her and their son to relocate to Saudi Arabia, but she refuses due to the needs of her son who needs the specialised health care that is available in Scotland. Though her friends argue that she should obey her husband, Moni refuses to comply with his demand on the grounds that it would disadvantage her son's health. Aboulela deliberately chooses the conventional Moni, rather than a more progressive character, to explore the issue of

obedience. Moni's conventionality shifts the focus from showing assertiveness and challenging the norms and conventions of society towards the importance of estimating the advantages and disadvantages of the issue in contention: "By refusing to join Murtada in Saudi, she was not, in principle, asserting herself or flaunting convention. She was just unable to let go of what she believed was best for Adam" (102). In addition, by representing the agency of a conventional Muslim woman and her ability to challenge her husband and do what she believes to be right, Aboulela highlights Muslim women's agency, and reveals how they can make decisions that secure the best interests of their families, even questioning their husbands' judgement where necessary. Through Moni's character, Aboulela flips the image of the submissive "Muslimwoman", demonstrating the potential for wives to negotiate obedience, according to their marital reality's necessities and priorities.

Moni's refusal to obey her husband also highlights the issue of obedience in Muslim societies, with her family and friends alluding to the religious sin associated with her act of disobedience (180–81). Despite this, Moni's justification for her decision prompts the reader to question this ideal and consider the benefits and drawbacks of obedience in the context of the family's wellbeing. Towards the end of the novel, Salma sees hints of Moni's future at Lady Evelyn's grave, which paves the way for discussions on the issue of obedience. The prophecy shows Moni successfully convincing Murtada to return to Scotland, where the couple have a healthy daughter. Nevertheless, they renew their quarrels with Murtada's decision to return to Sudan and Moni's refusal. The initial positive picture of Moni's future indicates her newfound ability to balance her husband's and son's needs, while their having another child implies that their sexual life resumes. However, by renewing the couple's dispute over the issue of departure and leaving it unresolved by the novel's end, Aboulela emphasises the importance of Moni's choice to prioritise her son's welfare over obedience to her husband. Even though Moni has re-evaluated her life and

achieved balance, she remains steadfast in her conviction that sacrificing her son's wellbeing is not an option, even if it means defying her husband. Such an open ending allows readers to assess and form their opinions without any predetermined authorial position, which signals an evolution in Aboulela's writing.

Despite the examination of Muslim male authority found in *Bird Summons*, I maintain that Aboulela critiques misogynistic practices prevalent in Arab societies by contrasting them with attitudes of Western Muslim husbands. The portrayal of harmonious relationships between Western Muslim husbands and their wives contrasts with the patriarchal strictures associated with Islam that appear to be rooted in regional cultures of Muslim communities outside the West. Lamrabet's analysis supports this by noting that the true Qur'anic concepts of marriage are not applied in current Muslim practices, such as "[…] hegemonic power of the husband; the right of men to decide, to revoke; the right of men to 'legitimacy', just because they are men. Too frequently in our Muslim reality, customs have been turned into religious principles that must be observed" (76). Attributing rigid patriarchal practices to Islamic principles has led to their persistence in Muslim societies. As Almaeen observes: "In Aboulela's view, women's agency is severely affected because they have to endure the dysfunction of the supportive patriarchy caused by misogynist traditions" (116). However, Aboulela challenges this notion by illustrating how, when viewed without cultural influence, Islam promotes respect and love in marital relationships. Her portrayal of Western Muslim husbands highlights their very different attitudes towards women. Aboulela's stance is illustrated in her description of British converts as "refreshingly free of the cultural baggage that we carry […] Some new converts can interpret Islamic rules rather simplistically but they don't have the cultural elements that we mix with religion and so there is an attractive purity about them" ("Interview" 5). This contrast is reflected in *Minaret*, where Najwa's comparison between her Sudanese lover, Anwar, and her friend's British Muslim husband, Ali is pertinent.

According to her, Anwar lacks tenderness and affection while Ali, a Western convert, is kind and protective of his family. By debunking misconceptions surrounding women's status in Islam, Aboulela aims to destigmatise the religion but still shed light on some patriarchal systems that are products of regional cultures, not Islamic principles.

This significant disparity is portrayed more extensively in *Bird Summons*, which highlights the stark difference in how women are treated in Arab and Western Muslim societies. We see how Salma is treated better by her Scottish husband, who "[…] gave her all the freedom she wanted. He respected her opinions. He shared all the household tasks" (10). Salma's experience with David highlights his willingness to let her take the lead in their relationship, allowing her to haggle and make decisions while taking pride in her abilities, in contrast to Amir who always assumes the lead, disregarding her thoughts and opinions (109). David's treatment of Salma is what attracts her to him because he offers her a role that she has never experienced before. Thus, Salma becomes exhilarated by her newfound freedom to make choices and express herself in a healthy, loving relationship with David, something that is not usual in the traditional and patriarchal Muslim world. Her appreciation of David's willingness to listen and value her opinion becomes a significant factor in her decision to choose him over Amir. I argue that the leadership role that she assumes in their relationship fascinates her and that Aboulela depicts this dynamic in a deliberate strategy of showing the falsity of the "Muslimwoman" construct, which assumes that Muslim women are inherently submissive and devoid of autonomous decision-making power.

On the other hand, Salma's experience with Amir, a product of the patriarchal system he has grown up in, shows how women are expected to please their husbands and do their best to serve them. It had been her duty to support his dominant position in every respect, whether it was studying, or even playing games. Salma serves Amir in every possible way,

photocopying past exam papers for him and neglecting her own work to do his. In every shared experience with Amir, "[…] she did the legwork and the research so that they could brainstorm and fumble towards a decision in which he would have the final word" (132). Amir's reluctance to show gratitude to Salma, even when deserved, highlights the rigid and misogynistic nature of many traditional Muslim marital relationships. Thus, Salma's dual experience exposes the flaws of many Muslim marital relations and reveals their divergence from Islamic principles. This portrayal illustrates the cultural expectations of marital relationships but also reminds us that the rigid patriarchal system in the Muslim world is inherent in other national cultures rather than being exclusive to Islam, because David's conversion to Islam does not alter his perception of how to treat his wife. On the contrary, it may have enhanced his sense of responsibility and care because his understanding of Islamic teaching is taken purely from its original sources, free from any cultural influences. Ultimately, Aboulela's work presents a nuanced and sophisticated picture of gender dynamics in Muslim society, complicating simplistic views of male supremacy and feminist rejection of such domination.

Relationships Outside Wedlock

As previously discussed, in Islam marriage is the only recognised and legitimate form of relationship between individuals of opposite sexes. Any nonmarital forms of relationships are denounced by Islam and are considered taboo in Islamic societies. Yasmin asserts in *The Translator* that "we prize virginity […] and chastity" (19). However, in many cases, social norms and expectations take precedence over religious values and teachings, leading to a conflict within individuals. This recurring theme is evident in Aboulela's fiction, where her characters' adherence to their religious principles and values is tested in a Western setting. The commitment to religious ideals in a free society, as embodied by Aboulela's characters, is considered a true indicator of one's sincerity in embracing

religious principles and values. Thus, she uses the Western setting as a criterion against which to assess her characters' dedication to and respect for their religious beliefs.

For instance, the protagonist of *The Translator*, Sammar, faces a difficult situation in Scotland where she is alone and confronted with choices, including the freedom to explore non-marital sexual relationships. Although offered the chance to engage in such a relationship, when Sammar begins to develop feelings for Rae, she attempts to keep their involvement strictly professional. As their relationship progresses beyond work, Rae invites Sammar on a car ride, but Sammar hesitates, conscious of the consequences for her reputation in her society. However, Sammar realises that her belief in God's presence is more important than her reputation, stating that "reputation was the idol people set", yet she "watched Reputation lose its muscle, its vigour, shrink and frizzle out in this remote corner of the world. When idols fall, the path to the truth is uncluttered, clear. Who saw her, knew her, was with her all the time wherever she went?" (57). Therefore, because of her belief that God is with her everywhere, she refuses Rae's invitation. Sammar's decision here reflects her awareness of God's presence, even in this foreign land, and explains her dedication to her religion's regulations. Amrah Abdul Majid notes that Sammar's decision demonstrates her control of the relationship and her determination not to let any deviation compromise her strong religious beliefs (153). Zannoun adds that Sammar "[…] privileges the Islamic ethic of self-monitoring, over both Western and Eastern notions of individual freedom. Providing an ethic that transcends place, geography, and culture, Islam here figures as a venue for a third space and a third vision" (212). I endorse Zannoun's idea that Sammar's "position, and the novel's, distinguishes between culture and Islam, which are usually jumbled together" (212). Ultimately, Sammar's decision showcases Aboulela's concerns about the clash between religious and social values and how individuals must maintain their ideals regardless of geographical location.

Sammar's internal struggle between her love for Rae and her adherence to Islamic principles intensifies as their relationship progresses. Despite her restraint, Sammar finds herself responding positively to Rae's confessions of love, realising that "everything under the surface would converge and break" (113). The weight of her guilt becomes oppressive after Rae holds her hands, compelling her to try to rectify the situation. Sammar then impulsively requests that Rae convert to Islam to enable them to marry. However, when Rae rejects her proposal, Sammar makes the difficult decision to leave him and return to Sudan, resigning from her work. The novel's exploration of Sammar's internal struggle between her love for Rae and her religious devoutness has led to the novel being labelled by the *Muslim News* as "the first *halal* (permitted by the religion) novel written in English" (Abbas 87–88). Sammar's character exemplifies the many ways that Aboulela's fiction defies stereotypes about Muslim women. She unveils the intricate and complex nature of Muslim women and their agency in making choices based on their beliefs and principles. Her actions exemplify that Muslim women are not passive victims of oppression but instead are individuals capable of making difficult decisions based on their values.

Aboulela's characters' struggles with relationships in secular settings and the inherent conflict with Islamic values are a recurring theme in her fiction. In "The Museum", included in the *Coloured Lights* collection, the protagonist, Shadia, travels to Scotland to pursue a Master's degree in statistics while engaged to a rich Sudanese man. She resists entering into a romantic relationship with Bryan, a Scottish student, initially dismissing his invitation for coffee. However, when Bryan responds to her criticisms of his appearance by cutting his hair and removing his earrings, Shadia accepts his invitation, though not without guilt and embarrassment from the reactions of fellow African students. Their meeting is followed by another one in an African museum. Shadia's guilt about accepting Bryan's invitation to the museum deprives her of sleep, and makes her think about her fiancé's reaction if he knew about her date (99). The situation culminates during their visit

to the museum when she pulls away from Bryan when he accidentally touches her arm (104). This exemplifies the predicament that Aboulela's female characters all face while conducting relationships with men in secular settings. Moreover, it illustrates the expectations with which they must comply, according to Islamic principles. Shadia's growing feeling of guilt about her actions reveals the internal struggle that Muslim women encounter when engaging in premarital relationships. However, Western readers may find this scenario difficult to understand, and may question why Shadia reacted in such a way, given Bryan's respectful behaviour. Aboulela's attempts to normalise Islamic experiences for a Western audience can read awkwardly, as some values do not translate. Nevertheless, this exchange highlights the multiple perspectives that arise when trying to portray the tensions between two different cultures and value systems.

Aboulela portrays her female characters' response to freedom in Western settings in different ways throughout her fiction. In *Minaret*, Najwa's journey in London starts with a failure to uphold religious values regarding premarital relationships. Despite her westernised upbringing and liberal lifestyle back in Khartoum, Najwa upholds cultural notions of reputation and shame and regards sexual engagements outside wedlock as a taboo. However, those values seem to collapse as soon as she finds herself living alone in London, after the death of her mother, prosecution of her father, and imprisonment of her brother. Najwa quickly becomes fascinated by the freedom that she enjoys in this new setting. However, her reflections on the situation highlight her uncertainty regarding her newfound freedom, and she starts to speculate about how the situation would be different had it taken place back in Sudan: "A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack [...] And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom" (174–75). Najwa's reflections reveal her critical attitude towards her newly-found freedom. Her attitude is criticised by Tamar Steinitz, who states that: "Najwa, by focusing on sexual mores, trivialises a wider concept of individual

freedom that is central to post-Enlightenment philosophical and political discourses in the West, reducing it to an empty cipher and rejecting it altogether" (379). However, I believe that Aboulela's representation of Najwa's speculations about freedom are not reductive. Rather, her portrayal of her protagonist's uncertainty about it is used to illustrate her belief that freedom should not be celebrated in its entirety because restraint and cultural restrictions can sometimes protect people from harmful choices. When asked about Najwa's description of freedom as an "empty space", Aboulela states her belief: "[…] especially for young people in the West, freedom of choice just becomes a kind of confusion. They have a lot of choices, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are making the right choices. Freedom then can be a negative thing, rather than a galvanizing force" ("An Interview" 100). To sum up, Aboulela's representation of Najwa's acceptance of Western norms of freedom by engaging in a premarital sexual relationship, in contrast to Sammar's self-control, reveals the vulnerability of cultural laws. In other words, Najwa submits easily to temptations because she behaves according to cultural norms, which can easily fade away in the diaspora, while Sammar's resistance is derived from a sincere dedication to religious morals that do not waver, regardless of where she resides. Although her viewpoint might be problematic to Western readers, Aboulela's fiction does illustrate the multifaceted nature of cultural norms and their varying impact on individuals in different settings.

As the novel progresses, Najwa's transformation from a westernised, liberal woman to a devout Muslim is depicted through her decision to end her relationship with Anwar and repent for her sins. Steadily, she strengthens her sense of religiosity and abides by Islamic teachings. When she meets Tamer, a religious man, their relationship deepens, but they feel guilty about pursuing a nonmarital relationship. Hence, Tamer proposes to Najwa, despite the social barriers and the age difference between them, highlighting his freedom from those concerns in London. Najwa's ridicule of his proposal prompts him to declare:

"I can do what I like here in London. My parents aren't here." (212). My contention is that freedom is viewed here in a different context. Tamer's notion of freedom does not involve a break from Islamic values. Instead, he uses freedom to protect himself from committing adultery: that is, by marrying the woman he loves in opposition to his family's disapproval. Despite Tamer's commitment to Islam, Najwa realises that their marriage faces significant difficulties, and they eventually break up. Aboulela's representation of Najwa's transformation suggests that it is adherence to religious morals rather than cultural ones that represents a constant, lasting commitment to an individual's principles. Najwa's change in behaviour, before and after her religiosity, illustrates the importance of her faith and the impact it has on her decision making.

The Kindness of Enemies explores the topic of nonmarital relationships from a unique perspective via its mixed-race protagonist, Natasha, who has a Sudanese father and a Russian mother. Natasha spent her early childhood in Sudan, though in a non-Islamic way. Later, her mother left her father and married a Scottish man and moved to Scotland. Natasha's Sudanese roots (albeit her upbringing was secular) demonstrate how cultural norms and values can remain ingrained despite attempts to break away from them. Therefore, Natasha is unable to forgive her mother's adulterous relationship, which has led to a rift between them, causing Natasha to live an independent life. Her failed romantic relationships accentuate this struggle and she states that "my own failed romantic attachments seemed like an apt punishment, because though I went through the motions, these casual relationships never felt right" (72). This leads her to undergo a secret abortion, an act that haunts her thoughts and makes her deeply ashamed, demonstrating how cultural norms affect her thinking. Despite her secularity, Natasha's consciousness is governed by the sensibilities of her Sudanese upbringing and she admits that "I was a Sudanese woman or at least, when I learnt the facts of life, I was preparing to be one. No matter how much I changed when I came to Britain, [or how much I] changed my behaviour and my thoughts,

there would be layers of me, pockets, membranes and films that would carry these other values and that other guilt" (139). Almaeen elaborates:

> As a secular character living in a secular society, Natasha's sense of guilt for engaging in premarital sex and having an abortion is not influenced by a religious consideration, a social tradition or a collective moral interaction. However, she is aware of the discomfort that these acts caused her conscience. Skilfully crafting the intersection between this guilt and Natasha's social alienation, Aboulela spiritualises Natasha's experience. (106–07)

Indeed, in *The Kindness of Enemies*, this investigation of premarital relationships from the perspective of a secular character makes it unique in Aboulela's oeuvre. As Almaeen points out, this novel is the first of Aboulela's to portray "full characterisation of a character with secular affinities" (105). Natasha does not have the religiosity that might stop her from engaging in premarital relationships, yet her secularity does not prevent guilt from washing over her, because her first five "formative" years, spent in Sudan, are still printed in her mindset and her consciousness is still governed by the sensibilities of her original home (*The Kindness of Enemies* 248). The novel concludes with a hint that Natasha may follow Malak's religious path to find the spiritual fulfillment she has been missing. The novel highlights the impact of cultural norms and values on individuals, even in secular societies. This portrayal illustrates how the struggle to reconcile two cultures can leave individuals feeling spiritually unfulfilled and lead them to explore alternative paths.

The issue of abortion (which results from irregular relationships) and its associated complications, is the subject matter of the short story "Make Your Own Way Home", included in the *Coloured Lights* collection. The story opens with Nadia, a Muslim Egyptian who lives in London, visiting her childhood friend Tracy, who is in a nursing home after undergoing an abortion. Aboulela's depiction of Tracy's unstable relationships,

her uncaring parents, and her irresponsible boyfriend, who does not bother to visit her or pick her up from the hospital, is striking. Almaeen notes that Aboulela uses the uncaring reactions of Tracy's family and boyfriend to illustrate the negative consequences of secular promotion of individual agency, which grants individuals complete autonomy over their bodies. Thus she blames secularism for the pain caused by these experiences, which lead individuals to feel isolated and suffer alone (Almaeen 108). Nadia's visit to Tracy exposes her to the loneliness and suffering of her friend and the other patients, making her realise the justification behind her mother's restrictions. When asked about her treatment of abortion in this story, Aboulela commented: "I wanted to present it as an inevitable and coldly practical solution to an unwanted pregnancy resulting from premarital sex" ("Leila Aboulela" 109). Almaeen points out that "For Aboulela, the individualism that Natasha and Tracey are offered by Western standards of women's agency is not tolerant of mistakes" (107). Therefore, Nadia contemplates how her mother might be right and wrong at the same time. Even though Nadia's mother's old-fashioned views about the fate of "fallen girls" has no place in today's London, the outcome of their choice is not a happy one. It is characterised by pain, loneliness, unspoken disappointment, as well as physical consequences to their health (*Coloured Lights* 85). Again, Aboulela underlines that her belief that Western freedom, with its abundance of choices does not necessarily ensure happiness. Her projection of the negative effects of Western freedom emphasises the value she places on self-restraint and chastity, as promoted by religious doctrines. Although Aboulela's portrayal of abortion resulting from premarital relationships might be problematic for many Western readers because of its apparent dismissal of Western freedom of choice, it does highlight the impact of different cultural and religious values on an individual's perception of personal morality and responsible behaviour. It can ultimately help them to understand how Muslims view this contentious topic.

The gender of the protagonist who exhibits self-restraint is reversed in the short story "The Boy from the Kebab Shop", included in *Coloured Lights* collection, as the male protagonist, Kassim, takes it upon himself to preserve his chastity. Kassim, who is born to a Moroccan father and a Scottish mother, has not had an Islamic upbringing, but feels different from his Scottish cousins. This feeling leads him to start practising Islam when introduced to it by some Arab friends. Kassim starts to develop a liking for Dina, who has an Egyptian mother and a Scottish father but has, like Kassim, had a secular upbringing. Despite his attraction to her, Kassim refrains from touching or kissing her, displaying the chivalry required of Islamic men. Aboulela's treatment of this moral behaviour highlights the Islamic teaching that both men and women are required to practice restraint and abstain from non-marital sexual relations. As Aboulela states in an article, "Islam restrains women, but it also restrains men" ("Restraint"). The storyline indicates to Western readers that many of the restrictions that Islam places on women are also imposed on men, undermining the Western idea that Islam is only oppressive to women.

Aboulela's latest novel *Bird Summons* presents, in a magical realist style, the inner conflict of its protagonist, Salma and the consequences of succumbing to temptations. Salma is represented as having been chaste all her life because she believes that avoiding temptation is the best way to preserve her soul and her marriage. For example, despite warming to a client, Salma is portrayed as having avoided messaging him to prevent any dangerous temptations (164). Nevertheless, Salma does guiltily rekindle her relationship with Amir, her old boyfriend and unofficial fiancé, ignoring any warning signs and gradually succumbing to temptation. Their continual messages and phone calls make her ever bolder, and the guilt that kept her safe in the beginning becomes "trampled by repetition" (161). Salma ignores the bad smell of her phone which symbolically results from her misuse of her husband's gift, and her conversations with Amir become more flirtatious and adulterous. Later, she gives in to this source of temptation and starts to chase a man in a

red T-shirt, whom she believes to be Amir. As Salma chases him, in a magic realist episode, she encounters various symbols and signs that remind her of the disgraceful nature of her actions. For instance, inside a building, there were paintings with "the faces of the Scottish aristocracy gazing down at Salma" (237), and in another room, the tapestry "of a Scottish queen with her only child, reminded Salma of Norma and David" (238). In another room, among the many possessions, there were guns on display, and an ancient Egyptian coffin. Salma realises that these artefacts are in fact signs for her to back out: the painting is supposed to remind her of the disgrace she is about to commit, the tapestry of the loving husband and mother-in-law whom she left behind, and the guns and coffin of the expected punishment for this action in her homeland (242–43). Nonetheless, Salma continues her pursuit until she finally catches up with Amir, throws herself into his arms, and loses consciousness, waking up alone on an operating table with her muscle tissues removed. Thus, Salma realises that her pursuit of the forbidden has ended up with a punishment that she cannot escape until she goes through a sincere repentance. Aboulela emphasises that worldly temptations exist everywhere, and happy marriages do not necessarily protect one from adultery. Thus, preserving chastity requires sincerely following the Islamic principles of self-restraint and abstaining from any path that may lead to an illicit relationship. Similar to her previous works, the novel ends on a spiritual note, with Salma regaining her strength after overcoming temptations and finding solace in visiting Lady Evelyn's grave, from which she can derive lessons that help her to regain her strength (282).

To sum up, this chapter has examined Aboulela's representation of marriage and its significant value in Muslim societies. She illustrates the nature of marital unions, and how the Islamic prohibition of extramarital relationships affects her characters' behaviours. While Aboulela shows us characters governed by Islamic logic, she also critiques certain social principles, differentiating between Islamic ideals and some societies' distorted

versions of them. Aboulela validates marriage as the only legitimate way to approach the opposite sex and have children in the context of society's excessive pressure on unmarried girls. Moreover, her portrayal of the contrast between Arab Muslim husbands and Western Muslim husbands illustrates her belief that misogyny in Muslim societies is rooted in regional cultures rather than religious teaching. Aboulela's fiction portrays non-marital relationships as misdeeds that must be avoided by both sexes to preserve purity, but she refrains from denouncing those perceived as sinners, showing how repentance can restore purity. This chapter highlights Aboulela's appreciation of Islamic law in regulating relationships between the sexes, emphasising the importance of personal acceptance of religious doctrines. However, Aboulela's representation of marriage as a hierarchical relationship between husbands and wives, and her negative perception of freedom and open relationships may be problematic to Western readers, who may view this kind of morality as oppressive and inhibiting individual agency. Having said this, Aboulela's works serve as a first step towards building a better understanding of Islamic values and ethics in Western countries, where a growing population of Muslim migrants face a challenge to explain these ideals. Her writings, therefore, present an opportunity to improve cross-cultural communication and encourage productive dialogue between different ideologies and belief systems.

Chapter Five: Other Male-to Female-Relationships

Having delved into the tantalising complexities of Aboulela's depiction of Muslim women, this chapter now turns to the multifaceted relationships that her female characters share with the men in their lives. These relationships are complex, as they are governed by cultural and religious expectations that prevail in the Muslim and Arab world. This chapter is divided into three sections in which each specific kind of relationship is explored comprehensively. I briefly analyse familial relationships in Islam between mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, and sisters and brothers, with the exclusion of husbands and wives, as this was covered in the previous chapter, and I refer to how Aboulela's characters conduct them. In addition to marital relationships, those relationships are the ones most represented in Aboulela's fiction and hence repay intense scrutiny. This chapter outlines Islamic teachings regarding these relationships and shows that Aboulela's characters often diverge from Islamic ideals, thus demonstrating the complexity of Muslim women's relationships as they struggle with negotiating traditional Islamic ideals in the modern world. Moreover, the chapter critiques the patriarchal strictures that govern gender relationships in the Muslim world and reveals how deeply embedded patriarchy is within Muslim societies, despite its contradiction with Muslim teaching. Furthermore, this exploration of female–male relationships, will discuss how Aboulela's treatment of them subverts the fixed Western image of the "Muslimwoman". By delving more deeply into the dynamics between the female protagonists and the significant male figures in their lives, this chapter addresses a relatively unexplored aspect of how Muslim women are represented in contemporary Western literature. The discussion highlights the interplay between religion and culture and how adherence to religious doctrines can shape societal and cultural norms.

It is necessary to understand how deeply embedded and pervasive gender discrimination is in Muslim societies in order to appreciate how Aboulela challenges sexist conceptions of Muslim women's potential and agency. The prevalence of patriarchal practices in Muslim societies, including Sudan, can be attributed to a combination of cultural, social, and religious factors. Helen Rizzo and colleagues, in *The World Values 2000 Survey* found that while many respondents in Muslim-majority countries acknowledged some aspects of gender equality, such as equal rights to education and a preference for monogamy, they also held certain entrenched opinions that oppose gender equality. These include views such as that men should have priority in job opportunities, that men make better political leaders than women, and that a wife must always obey her husband. Arab populations were found to be more supportive of these views than non-Arab populations (Rizzo et al. 1162–1163). In this regard, Cemal Öztürk maintains that the consequences for women in Islamic societies, where fundamentalist views dominate, are disastrous, as evidenced variously in Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan. Women may face a range of injustices, including enforced compliance to their husband's wishes, domestic abuse, and gender discrimination within legal proceedings. This patriarchal mindset is characterised by laws that enforce strict gender segregation and a coercive dress code in public spaces. Evidence shows that Muslim-majority societies significantly reject gender equality in domains such as economics, education, and politics, with patriarchal norms and tribal kinship networks imposing traditional role expectations and ideas about female chastity. Öztürk held that religious fundamentalism is a key driver of these patriarchal customs with which individuals are pressured to conform (176). A case in point can be found in Liv Tønnessen's description of various laws and decrees related to women's dress code, travel restrictions, nationality, family law, and public behaviour in Sudan. These laws, which were introduced and ratified in the 1990s under the Islamist government, involved the requirement for a male guardian for women to travel or enter into a marriage contract, the

prohibition of certain activities deemed contrary to Islamic values, and the imposition of restrictions on women's work options and public behaviour. These laws made women responsible for upholding the moral standards of society, as defined by the ruling party (Tonnessen 588). Additionally, Nagla Taha highlights how the school environment in Sudan reinforces gender stereotypes: for example, girls are confined to domestic duties and care-giving activities and are not provided with opportunities to develop their physical abilities. Teachers often have negative attitudes towards girls and consider them less capable, affecting girls' self-esteem and future expectations. Taha found that boys also undermine and mistreat girls in class, subjecting them to different forms of physical and verbal aggression (7–8). These depressing discriminatory practices reinforce gender stereotypes and restrict opportunities available to girls in their educational and social development, which ultimately affects all relationships between the opposite sexes. To reach gender equality, a change in social and cultural values is necessary, along with the promotion of wider educational opportunities for girls and women. This change must begin with the formative bond between mothers and sons, as this has been shown to significantly influence their future relationships with females.

Mother-Son Relationship

The relationship between parents and children in Islam is built on reciprocal rights and duties. While parents are responsible for nurturing and educating their children to become righteous individuals, children are bound to treat their parents with love, care, and gratitude. Saeidi and colleagues explain that parents are entrusted with the responsibility of rearing their children in Islam, and they will be held accountable before Allah on the Day of Judgment for fulfilling this duty. The aim is to nurture righteous and upstanding individuals who provide comfort to their parents in both this life and the hereafter by satisfying their spiritual and religious needs (Saeidi et al. 109). They also emphasise that

"Children have the right to be fed, clothed and protected till they grow up to adulthood" (Saeidi et al. 111). Meanwhile, Norma Tarazi asserts that failing to show proper respect and care is considered a major sin in Islam. The importance of the mother in particular is emphasised in several Qur'anic verses and Hadiths, as they are the ones who go through the physical hardships of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing (Tarazi 41). The Qur'an notes that "His mother carried him through hardship upon hardship, and his weaning is in two years" (The Qur'an 46:15). In a hadith, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encapsulated the importance of motherhood and that children must show continual respect and companionship to their mothers in the following passage:

> A man came to Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) and said, "O Allah's Messenger! Who is more entitled to be treated with the best companionship by me?" The Prophet said, "Your mother." The man said ,"Who is next?" The Prophet said, "Your mother." The man further said, "Who is next?" The Prophet said, "Your mother." The man asked (for the fourth time), "Who is next?" The Prophet said, "Your father". (Al-Bukhari 17)

Tarazi adds that this duty "is required regardless of whether they are Muslims or not" (Tarazi 42). Thus, the relationship between parents and their children is bound by a set of duties and rights which must be met by both parties. Fulfilling these duties nurtures children to develop essential traits, such as responsibility and compassion, that benefit their relationship with others and make them productive members of society.

Despite Islamic teachings about the importance of equality among siblings, as will be elucidated further, patriarchal cultural traditions frequently take precedence, leading to sons being afforded a privileged status over daughters. In many Muslim societies, families with only daughters evoke sympathy, whereas a single son is treated with delicate attention, as he is the sole carrier of his father's name. This preference is exemplified in

The Translator through Mahasen's intense grief and the sympathy she receives after the death of her only son, Tarig. Sammar recalls the exclamations of their community: "Her only son. The words on everyone's lips, said in disbelief, Mahasen's son dies. Mahasen's son dies […] My heart is breaking over Mahasen, her only son" (141). Moreover, Aboulela incorporates subtle details, such as Hanan seating Sammar's son, Amir, in the front seat while seating her daughter, Dalia, in the back seat, emphasising the higher status and privileges that males hold in Sudan (186). These seemingly minor details point to the privileged status and preferential treatment of males over females.

Aboulela's treatment of mother–son relationships in *The Translator* is illustrated through Sammar and Amir's relationship. After the loss of her husband, Sammar's relationship with her young son changes significantly. Aboulela depicts Sammar's agony at her loss, which is intensified by her two-year-old's seeming indifference to his father's death. While sunk in sorrow, "It seemed to Sammar cruel and shocking that he would not stop or pause and that with the same undiminished zest he wanted to play and eat and be held so that he could sleep" (9). Sammar's profound shock at her loss leaves her depleted of her energy and results in her giving up her son to his grandmother for rearing. Aboulela's choice to focus on Sammar's failings here exemplifies how she does not always portray perfect characters. Although Abdul Majid argues that Sammar abandons her son due to jealousy (143–44), my interpretation is that Sammar's neglect of her son stems from her overwhelming shock and sorrow at the sudden loss of her husband, along with her acquired dependency, which has deprived her of her ability to function independently and mother her son. Sammar's decision to abandon her son conflicts with Islamic ethics that demand provision of love and care for children. Abdul Majid regards Sammar's attitude as "contradictory" for "while she is adamantly maintaining her spiritual duties to God, she purposely chooses to forgo the physical and natural duty of raising her son and showering him with love, affection and attention, the way any mother should" and his view is that

"Aboulela paints this terrible failing as a sign of the inadequacy of Sammar's religious devotion" (144–45). However, I argue that despite Sammar's conformity with religious practices, such as performing prayers, fasting, and wearing the hijab, her neglect of her duty towards her son highlights the deep impact of her bereavement on her emotional wellbeing and mental health, underscoring the central role that marriage plays in her life. More importantly, her failure to prioritise her role as a mother, which goes against the social expectations of her aunt and, indeed, her whole society, marks a point of departure in which she challenges not only the prevailing societal expectations placed upon her people but also the oppressive stereotypes and preconceptions that have shaped Western perceptions of Muslim women.

Aboulela's second novel *Minaret* provides another significant example of a mother–son relationship, in which Islamic ideals are violated by the son. The female protagonist, Najwa, describes her brother Omar's disrespectful and abusive behaviour towards their parents, particularly their mother. For instance, she recounts the scene that takes place after each argument between Omar and his father. During one argument, she explains that: "I began to fear a scene. I swallowed, afraid of Baba shouting and Omar storming out of the house. I would have to spend the rest of the day phoning round searching for him" (17). After their exile to London and their father's prosecution, Omar's addiction to hashish worsens and he starts physically abusing his mother to obtain money for his drug habit. Najwa is haunted by the vivid memory of her mother's fear during one altercation with Omar:

> I remember how he shook her shoulders, shouting, "Give me my money. It's my money!" I saw fear, stark genuine fear in her eyes. And she used to feed him when he was little, scoop him in her arms. When he got what he wanted from her and stormed out of the flat, she said, "I hope he is never ever successful. I hope he is

> never ever happy." She spoke with anger, without bitterness, calmly like a judge passing a sentence. This is how a mother can curse her son. (264–65)

This portrayal of a strained and abusive mother–son relationship underscores the complex nature of familial relations and reflects Aboulela's tendency to present characters that do not always conform to Islamic ethical standards. The novel highlights the importance of treating mothers with kindness and respect, as often emphasised in the Qu'ran, and Najwa sees Omar's sentence of imprisonment as a punishment for his violation of these fundamental values. This example illustrates how Aboulela's works can be interpreted as reflections on Islamic ethics and how human relationships can sometimes diverge from these fundamental principles.

In consequence of Omar's mistreatment of his mother and his imprisonment, Najwa becomes more attentive to the value placed on this relationship. When she gets to know Tamer, she is drawn to the ease in his relationship with his mother, as well as his willingness to help and accompany her (87–88). However, as their relationship develops, minor quarrels between Tamer and his mother begin to arise. Najwa, sensitive to mother–son relationships due to Omar's abuse of their mother, tells Tamer to control himself. Najwa bitterly recalls her brother's past: "[…] echoes of other quarrels and other mothers ring in my ears […] I try and reach him. I whisper, 'Control yourself, control yourself, it's not worth it. You will regret your rudeness afterwards; your sensitive nature will be troubled" (207). When Tamer's mother disapproves of his relationship with her, Najwa, fearing a repeat of her brother's mistake, decides to terminate the relationship. She relates how seeing Tamer's mother's tears makes her feel: "Her words pour over me and I remember my mother speaking like that, crying about Omar" (263). She regards the issue as "[…] 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" (264). Hence, she instructs Tamer to mend his

relationship with his mother, which he does, and Najwa then feels a sense of peace (267). By the end of the novel, Najwa's new-found contentment compensates for her sense of loss (270). It is worth noting that in Muslim societies, the mother is revered as the most important familial role and is often regarded with utmost respect and reverence. However, this portrayal of mothers has often been warped by Western media to depict Muslim women as passive and downtrodden. In contrast to such negative stereotypes, Aboulela portrays Tamer's mother as a woman who exercises agency and control over her son's life, particularly in his choice of a partner. Her refusal of Tamer's marriage to Najwa challenges the Western notion of Muslim women as powerless, instead highlighting that women in Muslim societies have a real say in familial decisions, especially those that pertain to their children.

In contrast to the disrespectful and abusive behaviour of Omar, Aboulela's portrayal of Sohayl in *Minaret*, as a respectful and obedient son, highlights the complex dynamics of mother–son relationships in Muslim societies. However, Sohayl's submission to his mother's wishes causes tension in his relationship with his wife, Shahinaz. For example, when Sohayl changes his mind about going out to eat with his wife after his mother tells him not to, Shahinaz is frustrated. In this way, Sohayl serves as a foil for Omar, illustrating the importance of respectful conduct in familial relationships, while also highlighting the challenges that obedience to parents can pose and the importance of balanced and reasonable conduct in all familial relationships. When Shahinaz vents about this incident to Najwa, Najwa advises her to be patient and reminds her "of all the rewards from Allah you're getting" (105). While Shahinaz acknowledges the importance of respecting mothers, she also affirms the need for balance and reasonableness in this respect (105). Notably, in a similar manner to Tamer's mother, Sohayl's mother's retention of control over his life demonstrates that women can have agency and control in a patriarchal society if they communicate assertively and effectively. This portrayal is significant as it

challenges the simplistic and one-dimensional representations of Muslim women in Western media. Ultimately, Aboulela's work serves to disrupt these inaccurate stereotypes and complicates our understanding of Muslim familial relationships, highlighting the complexity and diversity of these relationships.

Father-Daughter Relationship

Aboulela's most stringent criticism is reserved for the treatment of daughters in traditional cultures, which is often in conflict with Islamic teachings about the importance of nurturing male and female children equally. The responsibility of caring for children is not exclusive to mothers but also extends to fathers. This point is emphasised in Ibn Omar's narration of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), which underscores the importance of guardianship and care for one's family: "I heard Allah's messenger saying: 'All of you are guardians and are responsible for your wards and the things under your care […] A man is the guardian of his family and is responsible for them'" (An-Nawawi and Yahyah 321). Islam highlights the importance of providing equal treatment and support to all children, regardless of gender. This is exemplified in a hadith that narrates a story about a man who gives a gift of a slave to his son. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) advises the man to take back the gift, as giving it is unfair to his other children (An-Nawawi and Yahyah 1115). This advice demonstrates the Islamic principle of treating children equally to prevent jealousy and discord. Sadly, misogynistic practices were prevalent among Arabs before the advent of Islam; girls were regarded as a disgrace to their families, which led to the practice of female infanticide. Asma Alahmad states that if a woman in Jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic era) was pregnant, she would dig a hole and give birth near its top. If she gave birth to a girl, she would bury her alive in the hole and cover her with soil. But if she gave birth to a boy, she would keep him with her (7). This barbaric practice is condemned in Quran as an evil act in this verse: "And when one of them is

informed of [the birth of] a female, his face becomes dark, and he suppresses grief. He hides himself from the people because of the ill of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably, evil is what they decide" (Qur'an 16: 58–59). Hence, Islam emphasises the importance of caring for and raising daughters, and great rewards are promised to those who do so. For instance, "The Messenger of Allah said: 'Whoever raises two girls then I and he will enter Paradise like these two.' And he indicated with his two fingers (Sahih)" (At-Tirmidhi 34–35). Muhammad At-Tirmidhi goes on to explain this Hadith: "Raising daughters and nurturing them well is such a meritorious deed that anyone who does well with it shall have the honour of entering Paradise and staying there as closely together with the Prophet as are the two fingers of a man" (35). In short, it is important that parents fulfill their responsibilities equally and strive to raise their children well, especially their daughters, with kindness, consideration and perseverance.

Aboulela's works illumine the flawed father–daughter relationships that exist in Sudanese society and also remind us that these show patriarchal traditions overriding Islamic principles. She highlights the unequal treatment of newborn girls compared to boys, explaining how boys are prioritised and celebrated while girls are marginalised. She describes paternal negligence of daughters, and the deprivation of their rights. Aboulela has said that her stories reflect the absence of the traditionally benevolent "patriarch", who aligns with the Islamic gender relationship, which "is built on men being supportive and protective of their women" ("Interview" 6). Rather, her work depicts the challenges that arise when cultural values and religious teachings conflict and the need to address these conflicts in discussions of gender relations and cultural practices.

Although *The Translator* does not explicitly elaborate on Sammar's relationship with her father, the novel hints at a sense of distance between her and her family ever since they

moved to Sudan from London when she was just seven years old. Sammar remembers how she "shrugged off [her] own family and attached [her]self to them, the three of them. Made a gift of [her]self, a child to be moulded" (7). Sammar's sense of distance from her family, in contrast to her younger brother, Waleed, suggests her parents' indifference towards her compared to her younger brother, and explains her later negligence of her son. The absence of a father figure in the novel, and the rare references to him, signifies the absence of his paternal role in her life and exposes the fragility of their relationship. Similarly, *Minaret* depicts a disconnection between Najwa and her father, as she reflects on the lack of communication between them and his lack of ambition for her:

> I don't think I spoke to him much. I know he didn't think a lot about me, not because he didn't love me but because I was a girl and Mama's responsibility. He had detailed, specific plans for Omar's future, while I was going to get married to someone who would determine how the rest of my life flowed. (78)

Najwa's father's prioritisation of her brother Omar's future over hers demonstrates the fragility of their relationship and how his inability to recognise her potential has affected her self-esteem and educational attainment. Despite Aboulela's depiction of their westernisation, through their dress and attendance at events like those hosted at the American club, Najwa's father still adheres to patriarchal norms that disregard women's abilities and harm their opportunities for success. Aboulela's depiction of these relationships serves as a commentary on gender roles in Sudanese culture and highlights the critical need to move towards a more egalitarian society where women's potential is recognised and nurtured.

A more tragic relationship is portrayed in *Lyrics Alley* between Soraya and her traditional father, Idris. From the outset of the novel, Idris is depicted as a harsh paternal figure to his three daughters, who have already lost their mother. The death of his wife fails to soften

Idris's heart, and most of his conflicts are with Soraya, the youngest and most progressive of his daughters. Idris's adherence to tradition is deeply ingrained in his personality and guides his treatment of his daughters, always leading him back to his patriarchal mentality. Despite Soraya's intellectual abilities, passion for knowledge, and high aspirations, qualities that should make any father proud, Idris uses all his power to subdue her and reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, he forbids her from reading newspapers, arguing that "newspapers are written for men" (8). Alqahtani comments that "In a patriarchal Sudanese society, women's simple rights turn out to be a challenge. Some traditional Sudanese view reading as a masculine act and inappropriate for women. However, Soraya finds in reading a source of inspiration and hope" (Alqahtani 293). But when her eyesight starts to deteriorate, her father's bizarre response is: "[…] no girl of mine will wear spectacles like a man" (11). Soraya is even afraid to talk to him about it because she realises that "[…] he didn't talk to her, most of the time he didn't look at her, and to ask him for something, anything was preposterous" (11). Alqahtani suggests that "Soraya's reading glasses are thus turned into a metaphor of gendered resistance against her patriarchal father, who punishes her whenever she reads or wears glasses" (293). The ongoing conflict between Soraya and her father, who opposes her ambitions, persists throughout the novel, and it is only with the aid of her progressive uncle and Sister Josephine, her teacher, that she gains her father's approval to attend university (236). Soraya's uncle and the head of the family, Mahmoud Abuzeid, represents the ultimate contrast to the traditionality, rigidity, and backwardness of his brother, Idris. His words help to reassure Soraya and validate her ambitions: "I want you to sit for the Cambridge School Certificate and I want you to go to university. There is nothing wrong with a girl wearing glasses. If you need them, then you must have them" (158). Soraya's revolt against the oppression of her father and her perseverance in further studying and realising her dreams are another contradiction of the "Muslimwoman" cliché.

Idris is not an isolated case; rather, his attitude epitomises the prevailing mentality of the majority of Sudanese individuals during the 1950s, as depicted in the novel. Amna Badri and Lee Burchinal demonstrate that during the twentieth century: “The prevailing view was that girls required no formal education: they could learn all they needed to know from their families, particularly their mothers” (17). In the novel, most Sudanese are portrayed as adherent to longstanding tribal customs, such as female circumcision, and their opposition to any form of modernisation would be viewed by Idris as “a patriotic act of resistance” (199). However, these entrenched attitudes actually constitute a departure from the principles of Islam concerning the equitable treatment of women and their inherent entitlement to essential rights such as education, employment, and active involvement in public affairs. Amal reflects on the pervasive attitude of men at that time, exemplified in her rhetorical question, “How many men [...] are ready to marry doctors?” Such attitudes toward women were not limited to older generations, as the narrator remarks that even younger men might decline to marry “over-educated” women like doctors (238). Soraya’s story shows both her intellect and her aspirations, representative of a generation of women whose talents were buried by patriarchal fathers, unaware of the benefits of educating their daughters. If not for her uncle’s encouragement, Soraya might have followed in her sisters’ footsteps, ending up with no qualifications to provide her with the independence she longs for.

Another representation of patriarchal behaviour is reflected in the short story “Farida’s Eyes” included in the *Elsewhere, Home* collection. Farida, a studious daughter who excels in all subjects, is ignored by her father, who “never voiced his approval” of her high grades (50). Like Soraya, when Farida’s eyesight starts to deteriorate and her teacher recommends glasses, her father says no because of their expense. He muses: “More expenses. Not just the fees, the uniform, the books—now you come up with something new. She will look ugly in glasses!” (53). Instead of acknowledging his own neglect when Farida’s grades

decline, he is quick to assume that his daughter has just become "stupid" (55). Farida's request for spectacles is not granted until her teacher visits them and stresses the importance of treating their daughter's poor vision (59). Reminiscent of Soraya's plight, Farida can only obtain her rights with the help of her teacher. Farida's story serves as another instance of Aboulela underscoring women's right to education and fulfillment, indirectly criticising the social and cultural barriers that distort Islamic teachings.

The Kindness of Enemies depicts two opposing pictures of father–daughter relationships which reflect Aboulela's ongoing critique of the patriarchal oppression and neglect of daughters. The novel narrates two parallel stories that are separated by more than a century. The contemporary story follows Natasha, the daughter of a Sudanese father and a Russian mother, as she searches for her sense of belonging in an unsympathetic environment. The novel begins with Natasha working as a successful lecturer and researcher at a university. As the story unfolds, we learn that Natasha's mother abandoned her father for a Scottish man named Tony. Natasha's father's shock at his wife's betrayal leads him to abandon his daughter, as she reminds him of the shame and disgrace her mother brought to him. Since her arrival in London, at the age of fourteen, Natasha relates that she has seen her father only twice and on these occasions she welcomed him coldly because of her inability to forgive him. Although her father is not a practising Muslim, he follows some religious rituals out of habit, as culture and religion are intertwined in Sudan, as described by Natasha (42). Unfortunately, her father's fragile embrace of Islamic teachings, combined with his attachment to the codes of behaviour and propriety ingrained in his culture and society, lead him to neglect his daughter. Nevertheless, Natasha does not allow her father's neglect to negatively impact her, but instead works hard to fill the void and compensate for his absence by pursuing her academic potential and taking up a position at a respected Scottish university. Her strong independence serves as another example of a character breaking the "Muslimwoman" stereotype. However, Natasha's

father's repressed guilt resurfaces when he becomes sick, and he reaches out to her in an attempt to make amends. He admits that he was wrong and asks his daughter to return to him, stating that: "I want to set it right. I want my daughter back with me where she belongs. Come over here and I will look after you […] your mother blackened my name, she turned me into a laughing stock. That's why I let you go. It was wrong and we need to set this right" (219–20). Unfortunately, this change comes too late, as Natasha has already established herself in Scottish society with a PhD in history and several academic publications to her name. Her father's patriarchal mindset is evident when he tries to control her by ordering her to return to Sudan. Natasha rejects this, feeling enraged that her father believes a simple phone call can make up for years of abandonment (220). Natasha's relationship with her father is yet another case of female oppression, where a daughter can be criticised and judged simply based on her mother's past actions. The depiction of this relationship reinforces Aboulela's critique of patriarchal oppression and neglect of daughters.

In the novel's parallel plot, set in the Caucasus during the nineteenth century, Imam Shamil displays a different kind of fatherhood. Chuanat, Shamil's wife, recounts to Anna his kind and gentle treatment of his wives and children, which contrasts to his military conduct in wars. Anna remembers observing him carrying his disabled daughter and playing with her (151). Shamil thus represents the supportive patriarch whom Aboulela notes is becoming harder to find in modern times. Aboulela has commented: "[…] the patriarch is [traditionally] benevolent, that he is strong, he is caring and nurturing to the women. That he is strong within himself. He is able to look after the women in his family—financially, socially and morally". However she states: "[…] in the Muslim world—or at least in Sudan from what I know—that patriarchy is no longer functioning as it used to" ("Interview" 6). Hence, her representation of positive patriarchy comes in the character of Shamil, who lives in the nineteenth century. Shamil's religiosity leads him to be kind and tender

towards all of his children, regardless of gender. Nonetheless, when Chuanat gives birth to a baby girl, it is noted that the celebration would have been bigger if she had been a boy, signalling the special status still ascribed to males, even in cultures where women are respected and treated well (153). Thus, although Shamil's attentive fatherhood stands in stark contrast to Natasha's father's abandonment, there is still a hint of gender bias.

In contrast to the previously mentioned examples, in *Bird Summons*, Salma's Scottish husband, David, serves as a model of an ideal father. He is always shown to be kind and respectful of his children, treating them equally. When his daughter opts for sports science and turns down an offer from the medical school, he respects her decision and does not oppose it, despite her mother's objection (8). Here, I propose that just as David is a foil to flawed husbands, as explained in the previous chapter, he is also a foil to the neglectful and oppressive fathers discussed in this chapter. Aboulela's portrayal of her characters often leads to the conclusion that European converts are better Muslims than those born into the religion, because they practise a pure Islam, free from the blemishes of patriarchy which has historically become intertwined with religion in Muslim societies. David, as a European convert, is an example of this purer form of Islam, and his character is positioned to highlight the deficiencies of other characters who fall short of being ideal parents.

Sister-Brother Relationship

In contradistinction to Aboulela's largely negative characterisation of the father–daughter relationship, her depictions of relationships between sisters and brothers are more positive. In almost all instances, brother–sister relationships are portrayed as harmonious and friendly. For example, the short story "Coloured Lights" in her collection by the same name is about the narrator's memories of her beloved brother who tragically died on his wedding day. Memories of their special relationship and strong bond are recounted, including how he often humoured and spoiled her (2). The shock of his death is described

as profound, leaving the narrator feeling raw and transparent for a long time (3). These memories reveal the affectionate brother–sister relationships typical of Sudanese society. They also represent a supportive form of patriarchy rather than the oppressive patriarchy that subjugates the figure of the "Muslimwoman". Similarly, in the story "Souvenirs", also included in the *Coloured Lights* collection, Manal is displayed as loving and considerate towards her brother Yassir. The story records her efforts at guiding him to the house of the painter, from whom he wants to buy a suitable painting that he can take to Scotland as a gift for his Scottish wife. In the story "Pages of Fruit", included in the *Elsewhere Home* collection, the protagonist praises her favourite writer's collaboration with her brother in publishing children's fiction, noting that "It showed how authentic you were, still tied to our family values" (205). These depictions highlight the importance placed on sibling relationships, particularly brother–sister relationships, in both Sudanese and Muslim societies. They also serve as a reminder that not all familial relationships are oppressive, and that positive relationships between siblings can happen in the same societies where father-daughter relationships are often portrayed as negative.

Nevertheless, Aboulela demonstrates that even positive brother–sister relationships in the Muslim world can rarely escape patriarchal strictures entirely. For instance, in the story "Something Old, Something New", in the *Coloured Lights* collection, a less positive form of sister–brother relationship is portrayed. In this story, the characters are not named, and I contend that this is a deliberate strategy to highlight their commonality. From their first encounter, the protagonist's brother does not show any sign of friendliness towards his sister's foreign fiancé. He receives him with a grim face that reveals his unease about the forthcoming marriage: "He was lanky with a hard-done-by expression. He looked irritated. Perhaps by the conflicting desire to get his sister off his hands and his misgivings about her marrying a foreigner" (125). With the brother present, the narrator is unable to sit next to her fiancé, who has travelled all the way from Scotland to marry her. The fiancé senses the

brother's comprehension of English and feels frustrated by his presence, as it restrains him from openly expressing his love and longing for the narrator (126).

Subsequently, after spending time together, the brother eventually admits to his sister's fiancé that he knew about her previous husband's relationship with another English girl. Yet, he married his sister anyway without informing her, reasoning that "I thought that it was just a fling he was having and he'd put his girlfriend away once he got married" (141). This attitude reflects his disregard for his sister's feelings and carelessness about mentioning an issue that could cause her misery. In addition, as events unfold, the brother's greed becomes evident when he exploits his sister's fiancé by asking for money, claiming that they lost a lot of money marrying her to her previous husband and that they face financial difficulties again (141). He even suggests keeping this matter from his sensitive sister (142). The brother's attitude reveals his selfishness and shows that his only concern is controlling his sister because she is divorced, and rumours can spread about her. However, this urge for control does not reflect an honest concern about her wellbeing. His behaviour stands in stark contrast to the siblings in "Coloured Lights" and "Souvenirs" who share strong ties of love, care, and consideration for each other.

The most complicated and detailed sister–brother relationship in Aboulela's works is portrayed in *Minaret*. From an early age, the protagonist Najwa is responsible for taking care of her brother, Omar, despite their being twins. The sense of responsibility towards him that her mother planted in her grows with her. Najwa explains that the worry about Omar "[…] has always been there, nagging at me. When I was young my mother said, 'Look after Omar, you're the girl, you're the quiet, sensible one. Look after Omar.' And year in, year out, I covered for Omar. I sensed his weakness and looked out for Omar" (13). Whenever he is late, she worries and phones around to know his whereabouts (31). She even signs the attendance sheet for him when he does not attend lectures (13).

Unfortunately, Najwa's suspicions of Omar's secret parties and his strange odour are not baseless. Eventually, he becomes addicted to hashish and he stabs the police officer who arrests him for drug dealing, ending up in jail. Despite his long sentence, Najwa never abandons him. She continues visiting him and advises him on the importance of seeking repentance as a way of purifying his soul. She states that "For twelve years now I have been trying to tell him the same things in different ways. Ever since I started to pray and wear hijab, I have been hoping that he would change like I've changed" (95). Omar's resistance to Najwa's efforts does not weaken her love and sense of responsibility towards him and she repeats her efforts with him during each visit. Despite Omar's assurances that she does not need to visit him, she refuses because "It is impossible for me not to visit him. As long as he is in prison, I am punished too" (194). Therefore, she secretly admits to herself that "I wish that he had been punished the very first time he took drugs. Punished according to the Shariah—one hundred lashes. I do wish it in a bitter, useless way because it would have put him off, protected him from himself" (193). Najwa's sense of responsibility towards her brother exemplifies Aboulela's representation of strong females who oppose the cliched representations of Muslim women as disempowered.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Najwa and Omar exposes the double standards concerning the treatment of males and females in Muslim societies. These double standards contradict Islam's teachings, which equalise commandments and punishments for both sexes. As Aboulela notes:

> Islam restrains women, but it also restrains men. Both are expected to accommodate their lives around the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, giving to charity and making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives. The 10 commandments that Islam honors apply to both sexes. ("Restraint?")

However, despite the westernisation of the protagonist, double standards are apparent between Najwa and her twin brother. For example, Najwa relates that after one party, "Omar dropped us and went off to another party, a private one this time—some seedy affair that he didn't want to take me to" (27). Almaeen points out that: "Although Aboulela's feminism does not involve gender equality, the lack of equality between Omar and Najwa still proves less than ideal within the novel, as it leads to gendered standards of morality" (101). It appears that in Muslim societies, there is an unspoken consensus that forgives all boys' mistakes, while any wrongdoing on a woman's part might jeopardise her future, including her ability to get married and have children. Anwar expresses this notion when he tells Najwa that Arab society has:

> […] double standards for men and women. I remember when Omar was allowed to smoke and drink beer and I was not. The seedy parties that he went to without taking me. I had taken these things for granted, not questioned them. Anwar told me that most of the guys in university used to visit brothels. Then they would beat up their sister if they so much as saw her talking to a boy. (175)

This statement contradicts Islam's teachings that prescribe equal treatment between men and women in terms of duties, prohibitions, and punishments. Aboulela, asked in an interview about drinking alcohol, said that it is prevalent in Sudan despite its religious prohibition. "It's a very male thing in Sudan, though. Women don't drink, it would be shocking for a woman to drink and yet it's OK for men; there's a kind of double standard" ("An Interview" 95). Aboulela returns to those double standards in Omar's story. Omar believes that all his mistakes are forgivable solely because he is male, and this notion encourages him to act irresponsibly, ultimately leading to his imprisonment. Thus, Aboulela emphasises the importance of treating males and females equally according to Islamic principles, because any failure to do so risks serious harm to both sexes.

Aboulela's choice of Anwar to deliver this message is significant. Muhammad Abdullah states that Aboulela has cleverly woven a critique on religious fundamentalism, inequality, gender gap, and sexual double standards of Arab world through her depiction of Anwar. His character serves as a motif for exposing the hypocrisy of Muslims, especially those in the Arab world who use religion to serve their interests rather than for spiritual growth (Abdullah 161–62). However, Anwar's supposed feminist views do not essentially translate into his actual treatment of women. On the contrary, he causes misery for the women in his life. Wail Hassan contends that Anwar is "[…] the only character who comes close to expressing feminist views (never mind his treatment of her)" (196), and Abdullah argues that Anwar is "not an ideal feminist character" (162). In my view Anwar is shown to use feminist agendas as means for exploiting women rather than for redressing their difficulties. For example, Anwar uses the notion of freedom to gain sexual access to Najwa. However, he never keeps his promise of marrying her. He also exploits her financially by encouraging her to buy a new computer for him and borrowing his PhD tuition fees from her without paying them back. This is the same money, which "he previously condemned as stemming from her father's 'corrupt' political career" (Almaeen 102). Anwar even takes advantage of Najwa's English proficiency by getting her to proofread his articles, but he leads her to believe that she is not "intellectual" enough to pursue her own studies (*Minaret* 235). My argument here is that Anwar's characterisation as unreliable signals that his voicing of feminist ideals does not necessarily translate to genuine advocation of the cause of women. On the contrary, he uses a feminist agenda to satisfy his own desires. Almaeen comments on this:

> Aboulela suggests that secular political and social activists in postcolonial nation-states tend to put pressure on Muslim women's religious agency. Anwar's manipulation of Najwa, for instance, is as much tied to his secular ideology as it is to his opportunistic character. (102)

Thus, Aboulela's essential message is to return to religion and follow a path that grants women rights that have been approved by Islam.

When asked about her attitude toward feminism, Aboulela states her position clearly:

> When I was writing *Minaret,* I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel. The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life: her father disappoints her, then her brother lets her down, she becomes very disillusioned with her boyfriend Anwar, and even Tamer—who is represented sympathetically because he is religious like her—even he disappoints her because of his immaturity. At the end, she relies on God and on her faith. That's how my logic went. And I thought that if this were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. In *Minaret,* on the other hand, I wanted it to be that at the end she's relying on her faith rather than a career. ("An Interview" 99)

Hence, it is important to bear in mind the writer's objective and logic in writing her novel, which redefines Western stereotypes of Muslim women as disempowered. Conversely, she emphasises her protagonist's agency and ability to make her own decisions, free from male control. But contrary to the Western feminist, who derives her independence from her career or studies, Aboulela's protagonist derives her strength from her belief in God, who has ultimate power. This is the line that separates Aboulela's Muslim feminist protagonists from secular feminists.

Zulfiqar Chaudhry comments that Aboulela's fiction

> […] undermines the supposedly rigid boundary between orthodox Islam and secular feminism, by placing female characters within a Sufi Islamic framework, but enabling

> them to take control of their lives without depending on any man, whether in the form of a father or a husband or a boyfriend. (199)

Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam that emphasises the spiritual connection between human beings and God. This relationship empowers individuals with strength and agency, allowing them to experience their unique identity and place within the world. Aboulela's female characters embody this strength and independence. Indeed, Aboulela succeeds in creating a middle space, in which Islam and feminism are merged to form an Islamic genre that appropriates feminist agendas according to Islamic principles. Zulfiqar Chaudhry concludes: "[…] reading Aboulela's work and understanding her characters' deep relationship with Islam shows that the religion cannot be considered as inherently regressive, anti-freedom, misogynistic, and against the spirit of feminism" (200). Thus, Aboulela's fiction redraws Islam in a different light: highlighting its support of women, while suggesting how feminism can be adapted to its teachings.

Overall, Aboulela's portrayal of her female characters' relationships with males outlines how patriarchy is embedded in Muslim societies in a way that frequently contradicts Islamic religious teachings. In her fiction, the tensions between characters are used to shed light on patriarchal practices in Arabic cultures, and to disentangle them from religion. Abdullah comments positively on this:

> There are throbbing expressions of Muslim women's choices throughout the novel in the form of a variety of sociocultural and ideological assertions. Aboulela's characters have a realistic demeanour; they do criticize patriarchy, but without confusing it with religion—an agenda that Islamic feminists advocate. (159)

Indeed, through their struggles with relationships, Aboulela's characters generally end up affirming Islamic principles, including parental, filial and sibling duties. Nonetheless, she

does not portray an idealised picture or dismiss the many faults that her society commits in conducting those relations. While her fiction always endorses Islamic teachings and principles, she is also careful to demonstrate how these principles are misinterpreted and distorted by certain patriarchal practices. Her questioning of the concept of blind obedience to mothers and her reference to the double standards that govern sister–brother relationships open up opportunities for further discussion and give the reader the chance to evaluate and judge according to their own perspectives.

Chapter Six: Religious Observance in Aboulela's Fiction

Aboulela's fictional exploration of Islam is one of the major elements that distinguishes her writing from other Anglophone literature about Muslims. Aboulela emerges as one of the very few writers, along with Shelina Janmohamed and Mohja Kahf, to represent Islam in a different light by diverging from the traditional stereotypes of Islam. According to Wail Hassan: "[…] written in English and committed to an Islamic worldview, Aboulela's fiction represents a linguistic and ideological departure from Arabic fiction, and a new dimension in Anglophone immigrant and postcolonial literature—a minor literature in relation to both traditions" (192). Another scholar, Hasan, contends that Aboulela and Janmohamed challenge dominant narratives about Islam and Muslim women, aiming to correct orientalist misrepresentations and to counter stereotypes. He adds that they respond to two influences: the perpetuation of outdated orientalist scholarship and the perspectives voiced by some individuals of Muslim backgrounds (96). Abdel Wahab also remarks that "In contrast to the Western translation of Islam in the post-revolution period, Aboulela's retranslation is much more focused on Islam as a faith that directly affects personhood and worldview. Religion-based identity is of central significance in Aboulela's fiction" (225–226). This chapter explores Aboulela's unique representation of Islam and illustrates how she attempts to redraw it positively for a contemporary Western audience. Aboulela has said in an interview:

> [I am] interested in writing about Islam not as an identity but going deeper and showing the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith. I want also to write fiction that follows Islamic logic. This is different than writing "Islamically correct" literature—I do not do that. My characters do not behave necessarily as a "good Muslim" should. They are not ideals or role models. They are, as I see them to be, ordinary Muslims trying to practice their faith in difficult circumstances and

in a society which is unsympathetic to religion.

(qtd. in Wail Hassan, 192)

I propose to analyse Aboulela's representation of religion in light of this quotation. In the first section, I discuss Aboulela's representation of Islam as a spiritual element and an inseparable part of the everyday life of Muslims, or as she describes it "the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith", rather than as a political force. Next, I illustrate her employment of what she calls Islamic logic in her fiction in presenting how her characters perceive their destiny. Aboulela's portrayal of imperfect Muslim characters, who do not behave necessarily as a "good Muslim" should is expounded in Chapter Seven, which covers the difficulties that Muslim characters face while practising their faith in secular societies and how well they are able to hold on to their ideals "in a society which is unsympathetic to religion".

In this chapter, my argument centres on the question of address: Who is Aboulela writing for? The fact that Aboulela makes the deliberate choice to write in English illustrates that her primary wish is to address her fiction, and with it, her perception of Islam, to a Western audience, in order to challenge the many misconceptions the West has developed about the Orient. However, Aboulela soon realised that her audience could be wider:

> I'm being increasingly well received by young, second-generation Muslims who grew up in the West […] Even though I started out writing for a Western audience, the word "Western" seems to have changed [its meaning] over the years, with the growing numbers of young Muslims who have grown up in the West. ("Leila Aboulela" 112–13)

Hence, the question of who Aboulela is writing for, and who she is being read by, that is, the question of address and reception, is central to my argument. In this regard, the chapter breaks new ground by connecting Aboulela's writings to Barbara Wall's notion of dual

address in children's literature, in which she argues that some children's fictional works could address a dual audience: that of children but also the adults who read for or supervise them. By the same token, I argue that Aboulela's fiction similarly addresses a dual audience, in this case Western readers and English-speaking Muslims, and that each audience receives her fiction differently.

In the case of Western readers, I argue that one of the primary effects of Aboulela's fiction on Western readers is to normalise Muslim experience. In this chapter, I draw on Liesl Olson's notion of "the ordinary", developed in respect to modernist fiction. Olson states that "modernist works are marked by a pull toward the overlooked, forgotten, and insignificant elements of experience, and the representation of them as such" (5), and that "The modernist novel treats the everyday with a new centrality" (18). My argument is not that Aboulela's fiction is modernist—it does not partake of modernist textual experimentation, and until her most recent novel, *Bird Summons*, stays firmly within the mode of realism. However, its representation of Islamic practices, despite their exoticism to Western readers, echoes the privileging of ordinary experience, pioneered in the works of Modernist writers such as Joyce and Woolf. Just as Olson's examination of modernist writers' representations of war reveals that "Though war is never an ordinary event, war nonetheless can be ordinary" (9), Aboulela's depiction of her characters' performance of Islamic practices, which are never ordinary for Western readers, is done in a manner that conveys their ordinariness. More specifically, Olson affirms: "[…] for many literary modernists, the ordinary possesses particular values at various times, including the values of stability, efficiency, and comfort" (5). This positive instance can be clearly seen in the fiction of Virginia Woolf, for whom "Ordinariness had an allure" (86). Similarly, I demonstrate that Aboulela conveys everyday Islamic practices with a positivity that recalls Woolf's appreciation of ordinary experience as a source of happiness. Certainly, Aboulela's writings portray Islamic practices as unquestioned ordinary daily routines that

her characters cannot live without. For instance, the absence of the sound of *azan* (which might sound strange to Westerners) is used to evoke the homesickness that Aboulela's Muslim characters experience after their migration. In this chapter, I elaborate on Aboulela's representation of everyday Muslim religious practices as the "Muslim ordinary".

As part of her strategy of normalising Islamic lives and religious practices, I argue that Aboulela structures her novels through an Islamic logic around which cause and effect are constructed. Moreover, I expand the frame of my analysis to assert that in order for the author to make her point more appealing for Western readers, and to avoid the accusation of didacticism, she normalises Islam by building a connection between it and other religions. Indeed, she presents Islam as a natural continuation of Christianity, even suggesting that their followers worship the same God.

In contrast to her strategy of rendering Muslim experience normal to non-Muslim readers, I maintain that Aboulela's address to English-speaking Muslim readers is premised on the Russian Formalist notion of *ostranenie*. This concept was developed by Victor Shklovsky, who wrote that:

> Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war… And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. (12)

My contention is that Aboulela's description of Islamic practices, while presented as ordinary for Western readers, is also defamiliarised for English-speaking Muslims whose encounter with the writer's portrayal of the particularities of their religion makes them relive the sensations of practising them, which they miss amid the burdens of daily responsibilities, in which they "retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic"

(Shklovsky 11). In addition, Olson states that "The representation of the ordinary *as* ordinary counterbalances the understanding of it as something that demands aesthetic defamiliarisation" (5). Yet, Aboulela, with her dual audiences in mind, combines these two counterbalanced techniques in her representation of Islamic practices that are presented as ordinary for Western readers, and at the same time are defamiliarised for English-speaking Muslim readers. Thus, Aboulela's fiction presents a rich, complex and recognisable picture of Muslim experiences for Western readers, and yet is received differently by Muslims, as it makes them see Islam anew.

Islam As a Spiritual Aspect in the Daily Life of Muslim Characters

Aboulela writes Islamic fiction that focuses simultaneously on the spiritual part that religion plays in the inner lives of her characters and the quotidian Islamic practices that Muslims perform as part of their ordinary activities. She points out that: "When I read books by Arab and Muslim authors, I am often conscious of the absence of religion in the characters' lives. I find this unrealistic, as religion in Third World countries in general is strong in people's lives" (qtd. in W. Hassan 234). Aboulela stresses this point: "Islam isn't just part of the culture in my fiction; it's not a social norm or something like that, but has to do with the individual and their faith, beliefs, and aspirations" ("Leila Aboulela" 111). Wail Hassan asserts that Aboulela's works "undertake to explain Islamic theology, *shari'a*, and rituals to Muslim and non-Muslim readers who have no access to the Islamic tradition in its original language and who live in predominantly secular or non-Muslim societies" (192). In this chapter, I argue that Aboulela purposefully creates characters who demonstrate that Islamic spirituality strengthens them and helps them to face difficulties. In addition, her representation of religious practices is characterised by a positivity that helps to reverse the stereotypical associations attached to them as harsh and limiting to human freedom. Tina Steiner observes that Aboulela "affirms religion, but not in an

oppressive form, rather stressing its positive function in the lives of ordinary women" (9). While many critics have noted Aboulela's positive depictions of Islamic practices in general, my analysis uncovers how she stresses the sensuous pleasures that Muslims find in their daily Islamic practices. Steiner notes that "Whereas the nostalgic memory conveyed by the characters through the senses of touch, smell, sight and taste emphasises the rupture of migration, Islam is presented in her texts as the antidote and therefore better response to this sense of loss" (9). In short, Islamic practices in Aboulela's fiction appear not only as good to do, but also as pleasurable to do. Aboulela's depiction of the practices of daily life as a source of pleasure echoes Olson's description of a "modernist ordinary", in the works of Virginia Woolf and other modernist writers. About Woolf, Olson writes, "Woolf realises that the dailiness of work and marriage often adds up to an unseen and private happiness" and that "Her diaries and letters suggest that ordinary life is a positive value, and one that she would like to substantiate in her novels" (87). This pleasure that Woolf finds in ordinary and daily life is similarly depicted by Aboulela in her characters' daily practice of Islamic rituals. Hence, I refer to this feature in the following discussion as "the Muslim ordinary".

Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator*, is rich with Islamic expressions and detailed depictions of Islamic rituals. Edwin affirms that "Aboulela successfully brings to fruition her task of writing about "the real thing" in the novel—that is, writing about Islam more as a faith and less as a political or doctrinal system—by precisely illustrating the situations in which faith permeates daily life" (76). Certainly, the novel's inclusion of Islamic practices within daily routines normalises them to Western readers. In this regard, Zannoun observes that "Islamic traditions and practices are dislodged from their exoticising Western representations to convey to the reader their natural and familiar quality for the protagonists" (199). Essentially, Aboulela not only normalises Islamic practices, but also presents them in a positive light. In my analysis, I extend Zannoun's observation by

focusing on the sensory language that Aboulela uses to depict how her characters experience routine Islamic practices in their everyday lives. Aboulela conveys "the Muslim ordinary"—to use Olson's concept—as a pleasurable daily routine that her protagonists enjoy. For example, the detailed description of Sammar breaking her fast, and lingering on her experience of taste, creates an atmosphere to non-Muslim readers and represents this ritual as rather enjoyable: "Sammar ate a date that tasted even sweeter because she was breaking a fast" (36). She remembers happily how, as children, she and her cousins used to boast of their fasting ability—happiness that non-Muslim readers would not expect from a fasting child. This is followed by a reference to her praying that brings in the pleasure of another sense: "Her prayer mat […] a smell that she liked. The only stability in life" (37). Here, Sammar's prayers evoke her sensuous delight in a particular smell. In fact, prayers affect Sammar profoundly, and when she prays in the university mosque, "[…] the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together" (74). Even when Sammar can barely drag herself to pray, she believes that due to those imperfect prayers, "She had been protected from all the extremes. Pills, break-down, attempts at suicide" (118). In effect, the "challenge" that she faced in performing these prayers at their allotted time is what protected her from losing "awareness of the shift of day into night" (16). Steiner remarks on this:

> A spiritual connection to Allah, Aboulela claims, can assuage feelings of grief and loss, and forge human connections that are unexpected and sometimes transcendent of cultural borders. Particularly the several references to the significance of prayer (both communal and private) and its potential to offer reassurance as well as a ritualised daily structure to the otherwise disoriented characters come to mind here. (9)

What is remarkable here is that Aboulela's representation of Islamic practices not only serves to normalise them to Western readers, but also defamiliarises them to Muslims. The

author's detailed depiction of the sensory pleasures that her protagonist experiences when performing Islamic practices makes her Muslim readers experience them anew in *ostranenie*. This double effect that Aboulela's descriptive language evokes in her readers is an example of how her address to Muslim and non-Muslim readers has effects specific to each audience.

Aboulela's Islamic feminist perspective is apparent in her positive portrayal of Islamic female practices that have long been viewed as oppressive, such as veiling. As Leila Ahmed notes "Veiling—to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam" (152). Moreover, Tabassum F. Ruby maintains that media outlets today continue to depict wearing the hijab as symbolic of Muslim women's subjugation, leading to widespread condemnation of this practice. This negative portrayal of Muslim women has become more prevalent since the 9/11 attacks, with the hijab being sometimes associated with the image of a "terrorist" woman (Ruby 63). These negative stereotypes contribute to a broader negative depiction of Muslim women in mainstream society. In the face of such disapprovals, Aboulela's writing presents a reimagining of Islamic practices as delightful, thereby challenging these perceptions and prompting readers to view the religion in a more attractive light.

For instance, she reverses the perception of hijab as a symbol of oppression by describing Sammar's hijab attractively: "She covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours" (*The Translator* 9). In this respect, Nash writes that Aboulela rewrites hijab "[…] through Sammar's thoughts, insouciantly asserting identity and re-appropriating loaded Islamicisms from the lexicon of Western intolerance" (30). This is a further instance of Aboulela's formulation of a "Muslim ordinary", in that her focus on the material

composition of the hijab renders it simply as an item of fashion to Western readers. From being a signifier of otherness, it becomes a source of aesthetic pleasure, changing the perception from fear to one of visual and tactile delight. Aboulela's formulation of the "Muslim ordinary" is therefore a radical reimagining of Islamic practices and artifacts as aesthetically fulfilling components of daily life, rather than a restrictive imposition on human freedom. This is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's representation of the ordinary. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's character, Maisie, experiences London streets for the first time and describes them in detail. Olson notes that, "Maisie (who is never mentioned again) demonstrates how the ordinary can be entirely decontextualised when put into such fresh focus, as Woolf does in describing it. But the 'stone basins' and 'prim flowers' are not strange to everyone" (70), concluding that "Woolf thus depicts the ordinariness of walking through London and also acknowledges (explicitly through Maisie) that representing the ordinary has the power to transform it" (71). Similarly, Aboulela's portrayal of everyday Islamic practices as a potential source of pleasure, rather than constraint, constitutes a transformation of the ordinary. Her association of the hijab with sensory pleasure reverses the negative associations of hijab in non-Muslim eyes. Here she evokes the sense of sight and describes Sammar's hijab as elegant to counter any connotations of ugliness. In this regard, I recall Aboulela's remark that "I hope that in time the West will come to look at the veil in a different light. It encourages me when a Western woman comments on my headscarf. When one says, 'That is a lovely colour' or asks 'Is that batik?' I feel that she has reached out to me" ("Restraint?" 5). In addition, Sammar's reflection on the mourning period that Islam has set for a widower has her concluding that God's laws are kinder than the laws people set for themselves (*The Translator* 69). Wail Hassan comments that "Islamic law, which is often described by non-Muslims as oppressive and outdated, is represented as contributing to individual and social wellbeing" (193). Again, the author

reverses negative perceptions of Islam's laws about women and highlights the benevolence of principles that are often criticised.

Even more critical is the main tension of the story, which is a religious one. Sammar is bewildered because of her inability to marry her lover, Rae, who is non-Muslim. Hence, the only possible resolution for this dilemma, without violating Islamic teachings, is for him to convert. Edwin comments in this respect that "The overemphasis, therefore, on the doctrinal aspects of Islam, such as the proscription on marriage in Islam between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim, sidelines the very personal responses of Muslims to the vicissitudes of life" (77). Thus, religious doctrine becomes the authoritative determining factor in this human situation. Philips also argues: "The necessity of Rae's conversion is not challenged but presented as natural. Within the narrative logic of the novel, human love is thus contingent upon divine submission" (67). Indeed, the fact that Rae has to convert is never questioned in the novel and the possibility of the lovers marrying without his conversion is not presented as an option. This reflects the author's aim to normalise Islamic practices and encourages readers to view the story through an Islamic lens. To validate her point, Aboulela has drawn a comparison between her novel and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*:

> I saw *The Translator* as being a Muslim *Jane Eyre.* The problem in *Jane Eyre* is that Mr Rochester can't marry both Bertha and Jane at the same time. As a Muslim I was reading it, and from an Islamic point of view there *is* no problem. I mean, he can be married to both women. But even though I realized that, I still got caught up in the story and I could still see things from Jane's perspective. When I wrote *The Translator*, then, I presented a specifically Muslim dilemma, that she can't marry Rae unless he converts. I was hoping that the reader, even though the reader is not a

> Muslim, would still get caught up in Sammar's dilemma, just as I had been engrossed by Jane's predicament. ("An Interview" 97–98)

The parallel that Aboulela draws between *The Translator* and *Jane Eyre* underscores how her work reflects both her Islamic perspective and the wider literary tradition. In *The Translator*, she presents a specifically Muslim dilemma, one that would be familiar to anyone from that faith, and presents it in a way that helps readers of any background to understand it and (like Jane Eyre's predicament), to be engrossed by it. Alaa Alghamdi comments:

> Just as Christian content is an accepted component of the nineteenth century novel because it had a deep and immediate personal relevance for characters, writers and readers alike, Islam is inextricable from other aspects of Aboulela's worldview, and co-exists easily with the story, neither dominating it nor hiding within it. (29)

Thus, Aboulela's presentation of a specific religious dilemma is less about promoting any particular belief system but more about reflecting on the nuances of these themes and how they can be communicated across boundaries of culture and religion. It is Aboulela's representation of secular problems through the lens of a Muslim woman that aims to normalise the Muslim experience for Western readers.

Moreover, Aboulela's depiction of Rae's initial avoidance of conversion as an empty gesture, followed by his later authentic personal conversion to Islam, highlights her exploration of Islam as a faith. This is yet another instance of what I have identified as the de-familiarising effect of Aboulela's fiction on Muslim readers, as it shifts their focus from desiring the conversion so the protagonist can be united with her lover, to a more spiritual focus: that is, to appreciate the character's sincere faith and readiness to embrace its doctrines. In this regard, Christina Phillips emphasises the importance of the process of

Rae's conversion, asserting that "[…] within the novel's system of values a token conversion is not acceptable, for it would compromise the religious theme. Thus Rae must reject this route, and he and Sammar are only united after he has embraced Islam in heart and mind" (Phillips 67). Nevertheless, Rae's conversion remains problematic for some readers. Nadia Butt criticises "[…] the wholesale conversion of a non-Muslim to Islam", and contends that "Aboulela's novel, in fact, stages the idea of the untranslatability of Islam as an indisputable fact of life in the interaction between a European man and an African woman" (168–69). In response, Alghamdi refutes this point, saying "There are aspects of culture and religion that cannot be translated or accurately transmitted from one culture to the other. At most, to gain understanding or union, one may attempt to transfer them wholesale" (25). Hence, I argue that despite the title of the novel, the plot differentiates between what can and cannot be translatable. Sammar is willing to leave Sudan and live in Scotland with her husband; however, she cannot transgress an essential principle of her religion and marry an unbeliever, illustrating in this case the immutability of Islamic principles.

The same religious attitude is evident in Aboulela's subsequent works. In *Minaret*, the protagonist relies on religion as the only source of salvation after losing all material benefits in life. I argue that Aboulela's positive depiction of religion, besides its insistence on the role that it plays in improving her character's life, also shows it to be pleasurable in itself. In other words, she not only portrays religious practices as regular tasks that Najwa performs to be a good Muslim, but she is careful to depict the pleasure that her protagonist experiences while performing them, much like Woolf's portrayal of the satisfaction that her characters derive from the daily routines of their lives. In this manner, Aboulela normalises Islamic rituals and reverses the way that they have been exoticised in non-Muslim representations. Despite her secular upbringing, Najwa expresses, in the first part of the novel, the inner emptiness she feels each time she sees religious students praying in

university. As Alqahtani observes, “Najwa’s Muslim environment in Khartoum has influenced her even though she does not know it” (251). In the novel, Najwa recalls “I envied them something I didn’t have but I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t have a name for it” (*Minaret* 134). So, even before her transformation into a religious individual, the author makes it clear that the heroine’s apparently perfect life has always been missing something that she is not aware of. Her later embrace of religion in London testifies to Aboulela’s representation of faith as a conscious choice that her characters make without it having to be imposed on them. Indeed, Najwa does not take this step until she experiences exile and finds herself left alone in London with no relatives or friends. As with *The Translator*, rich depictions of religious rituals are abundant in the novel. Najwa describes the change that she experiences from finding faith: “I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized that this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University” (243). Thus, Qur’an becomes a source of security on which Najwa relies in times of fear. In addition, she even wishes that Omar had been punished according to Islamic law, with a hundred lashes, from the first time he took drugs because she believes that would have protected him (193). Aboulela’s depiction of Islamic laws portrays them as merciful, despite their reputation as harsh. Through Najwa’s descriptions of Islamic customs and traditions, Aboulela effectively defamiliarises these practices to Muslim readers, prompting them to reassess their perceptions of them by highlighting their ability to provide comfort and guidance to individuals in the face of life’s difficulties. Thus, the author’s representation of her heroine’s feelings of satisfaction in reaching out to God, despite her unfortunate living conditions, highlights her prioritisation of spiritual gratification over any other worldly pleasure.

Moreover, Najwa’s description of her experience of wearing hijab is worth noting. She observes that: “I didn’t look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained;

something was deflated. And was this the real me? Without the curls I looked tidy, tame; I looked dignified and gentle" (245). The heroine's determined adoption of hijab and her description of that reverses its usual associations with oppression and subjugation. This has the effect of drawing non-Muslim readers' attention to the aesthetics of hijab, and presents it as a mode of dress that endows its wearer with dignity that commands respect. Furthermore, Najwa's description of wearing hijab for the first time effectively defamiliarises this religious custom to Muslim readers, who may have grown so accustomed to wearing it that they fail to notice the sense of neatness it imparts. In consequence, when Lamya's friends mock her hijab, Najwa is hurt because it has become part of her identity. Fasting is similarly depicted as a transformative practice, with its association with hunger and deprivation reframed as nourishing. When Najwa fails to recognise the coming of Ramadan, she relates that "I missed the lightness of fasting, my body clean, my mouth dry and then the special food at sunset" (232). She also recounts the impact of fasting on her energy level, describing how it can uplift the spirit and also improve physical wellbeing. After experiencing fasting in London, Najwa recalls: "I wonder where I got my energy from—fasting all day while working, then, instead of going home, going straight to the mosque" (188). On the whole, as in *The Translator*, Aboulela's representation of religious practices and the influence they have on her characters in *Minaret* is characterised by a positivity and a reversal of negative associations. She portrays religion as a transformative personal choice that enriches her characters' lives, fostering positive growth, and highlighting spiritual and psychological advantages that outweigh any transient discomfort.

The same spiritual tone is reflected in *Lyrics Alley*, though in a more subtle way. The novel portrays the life story of Nur Abuzeid and the catastrophic accident that results in his disability. Religion does not play an important role in most of the characters' lives as the novel is set in the 1950s during the final period of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. This

was a more secular period, in reaction against the previous religiously extremist Mahdi rule. However, Aboulela introduces a spiritual element in the figure of the Egyptian teacher, Ustaz Badr, whose ideas and perspectives on life are shaped by his rural upbringing, where religion was powerfully influential. Ustaz Badr is on secondment to Sudan and works as a private tutor to the Abuzeids. His perspective on the world is largely motivated by a deep faith in God, and this helps him to see goodness in all the hardships and misfortunes that he faces. His presence creates a sense of hope and optimism throughout the novel, and his ability to see the silver lining in every adversity acts as a counterbalance to the novel's more sombre themes. The writer makes it clear from the beginning that Ustaz Badr is not comfortable in his life in Sudan because he is displaced, suffers from financial difficulties, lives in overcrowded housing, and is responsible for his ageing and needy father. However, his strong spiritual beliefs help him to bear these adversities and to appreciate his blessings. As Alqahtani writes: "Badr's faith empowers him to endure the hardships of displacement, alienation and marginalization, much like Sammar and Najwa in Aboulela's previous novels" (306). For instance, he always reassures himself whenever something bad happens to him that "a believer does not despair in Allah's mercy" (56–57). In effect, Aboulela skilfully integrates spirituality into the novel by portraying Ustaz Badr's contentment despite his impoverishment and demonstrating the empowering nature of spirituality in the face of adversity.

Ustaz Badr's devout religious practice is yet another instance of Aboulela's "Muslim ordinary". For example, when it rains, he reminds his family that "Prayers made when it's raining are accepted" and he makes use of this chance by praying for his wife to give birth easily and safely (124). Furthermore, the month of Ramadan, with its associated rituals, allows Badr to organise his time to perform as many Islamic practices as he can, such as reading Qur'an and performing extra prayers. As in *Minaret*, Aboulela presents a refreshingly alternative view of Ramadan, countering its typical connotations of hunger

and deprivation, and instead emphasising its delights. In doing so, Aboulela highlights the pleasures that Muslims derive from the religious observances associated with this holy month, adding a further layer of complexity to her description: "This was part of the charm of Ramadan, turning day into night, treats of mixed nuts, dried apricots and dates", and Badr reflects on how Ramadan "[…] was a month of plenty, and he marvelled at how rigorous it was, and at the same time buoyant; solemn, and at the same time merry […] He felt a surge of love for his family that month" (124). In addition, Badr tries to occupy himself in any unpleasant work by reciting verses from Qur'an in order to "make the task lighter and even pleasurable" (127). Once again, the author simultaneously normalises Islamic practices and conveys the joy that her characters experience while performing them, in a manner that reflects Olson's notion of the "modernist ordinary": the celebration of the everyday. At the same time, the author defamiliarises these practices for Muslim readers by depicting the specific and often overlooked details of Ustaz Badr's enjoyment of his religious performances and practices. By defamiliarising the religious rituals of Ustaz Badr's life, such as prayer and recitation of Qur'an, Aboulela further emphasises their transformative and empowering effects for her characters.

Another example of the novel's depiction of the Muslim ordinary occurs when Mahmoud Abuzeid demonstrates to Mr Harrison, the Barclays bank manager, his repudiation of the political propaganda that causes hate and conflict. In this scene he insists that Islam does not forbid dealing with people from different religions. He says he advances his trade by dealing with everyone for the sake of developing his country, adding:

> […] true righteousness is not in taking a political stance or on serving slogans. It is in fair trade. I am not a religious man by any means, but there is one saying of the Prophet Muhammad that I cling to. He said: "The truthful and honest merchant will be with the prophets, affirmers of truth and martyrs". (196)

Mahmoud embodies Aboulela's rejection of political Islam that has caused hate and conflict. Instead, he advocates for honesty, truthfulness and building positive relationships with people from different backgrounds, which he sees as essential for the advancement of his country. Abdel Wahab suggests in this regard that "What Aboulela's characters actually attempt to retranslate is the compatibility of Islamic values with the global ethics of pluralism, individualism, and pragmatism" (229). By giving this statement to a non-Muslim, Aboulela illustrates the elimination of cultural barriers and suggests Islam's compatibility with a modern, globalised world.

Aboulela's condemnation of political Islam is illustrated more deeply in her next novel, *The Kindness of Enemies*, which operates in two different time frames: one following the life of contemporary character Natasha, and the other describing the Caucasian wars against Russia and the struggle of Imam Shamil in defending his country in the nineteenth century. The representation of the struggles of the characters in these two different eras illustrates present distortions of the original concept of jihad. I argue here that this novel takes up where the previous novels left off. In other words, in the same manner of the earlier novels' positive depictions of daily Islamic practices, *The Kindness of Enemies* carries on the purpose of defending Islam, with special focus on jihad as the most controversial and universally attacked concept related to Islam. According to Wajidi Sayadi and colleagues, the original meaning of jihad limits the option of warfare to specific and urgent circumstances, where fighting is necessary to uphold fundamental religious principles. Proper conduct in battle is also emphasised, including the prohibition of killing people carelessly or without reason, not harming women and children or mistreating prisoners. The overarching objective of jihad in any form is to promote peace and benefit society by upholding justice and eliminating tyranny (Sayadi et al. 6). However, the proliferation of terrorist attacks, conducted in the name of jihad, has resulted in a distortion of its original meaning and made it one of the most controversial tenets of Islam.

On one level, Imam Shamil is represented as a courageous leader who goes to war to free his country from its oppressive Russian invaders. His character is attributed with qualities of kindness, mercy, respect, and bravery. All the wars that he is involved in are for the cause of defending his country. Hence, in *The Kindness of Enemies*, Malak asserts that "This type of jihad is different from the horrible crimes of Al-Qaeda" (9). Majed Aladylah notes that "Shamil represents the moderate Islam free of hatred, extremism, terrorism, fundamental and radical thoughts and movements, creates spaces of coexistence, tolerance and generates a mutual language between different religions and cultures based upon the divine love" (483). To emphasise this point, Shamil's respect for his Christian wife, Chuanat, whom he has never asked to convert, is another indication of his tolerance and openness. Moreover, when Shamil's army captures the Georgian princess, Anna, for the sake of exchanging her with his captive son, Jamal el-Din, Shamil makes sure that she is treated as a guest. Ultimately, when Shamil realises that defeat is imminent, Awad notes that "Shamil and his men refused to resort to terrorism and violence" (Awad, "Fiction" 77). Indeed, Shamil does not choose to bomb himself, or sacrifice his life and the lives of his people, as modern-day terrorists would do. Instead, he surrenders, despite his deep wish for martyrdom. This is shown when he accepts Ghazi's suggestion of surrender: "The longer Ghazi knelt the clearer it dawned that this was defeat and that defeat was Allah's will. Instead of martyrdom, it was time for Shamil to accept his failure" (299–300). Even after his defeat, Shamil compromises with non-Muslims. A case in point is when Zaidat complains about the sound of the church bells of Kaluga, and he insists that: "they too can remind us of Allah. If you listen carefully you will hear them say His name. Truth! Truth!" (301). Here Aboulela represents Shamil fighting the invasion of Russia and his jihad to free his land as a noble struggle, in contrast with the contemporary negative conception of jihad. Thus, Aboulela debunks many negative stereotypes that exist about Islam, showing that a moderate, tolerant, and peacemaking Islam is possible.

In the same vein as her previous novels, Aboulela's portrayal of Shamil's battles against the Russians is conveyed in a positive language that is characteristic of her representation of all Islamic practices. I argue here that even the terrifying scenes of the battlefields are represented positively in Aboulela's fiction, as long as they are performed in the right manner of jihad. An example of this is when Shamil describes the dead body of his wife, Djawarat, whom he identifies as "his first woman martyr":

> […] her body was as supple as he remembered it. He wiped her face and her skin felt alive under his fingers. His warm, heavy breath on her hair, ears and eyelashes. She was living, living with Allah, though Shamil knew she was dead. Even her lips, resting evenly on her teeth, were soft with moisture. (35)

This description evokes the sense of touch and reverses the terrifying and stiff image of the dead body by presenting it as normal, and even soft to touch. Nonetheless, a different view is conveyed in the novel's parallel twentieth-century plot, when the name of jihad is used to justify the terrorist attacks of extremists. Other Islamic rituals are represented more positively and shown to be sources of relief for Shamil. For example, after his surrender towards the end of the novel: "[…] the mosque become a haven for Shamil, a place to escape to" (302). Overall, Aboulela's careful depiction of jihad in her novel challenges common misconceptions and shows that it does have some positive aspects; she chooses to emphasise its original spiritual roots and minimise distorted interpretations often linked in Western commentary with extremist acts.

In the parallel plot, Natasha's discussions with her student, Oz, and his mother, Malak, who descends from Shamil's line, shed light on modern distortions of the concept of jihad. Although they not refer to specific terrorist attacks, the conversations between characters demonstrate how wrong perceptions of jihad can lead to violence and terrorism. Not only is the concept of jihad distorted, but the name of Shamil is also used by religious

extremists to lend credibility to their terrorist activities, despite Shamil's opposition to violence and extremism. This can be seen in the omniscient narrator's reference to how "The name of Shamil hovered over the recent Chechen rebel wars. The militant leader Shamil Basayev was responsible for the terrorist attacks on the North Ossetia school and the Moscow theatre hostages" (14). Malak explains that "Ever since 9/11, jihad has become synonymous with terrorism" (8). Aladylah notes that Aboulela "tries to clarify the concept of Jihad, particularly after 9/11 and creates a spiritual understanding of it […] Aboulela strives to defeat the ideology of terrorism in the name of Jihad and Crusade and how they are manipulated for political gains" (481). Nevertheless, and despite those extremists' allegations, in the novel Malak stresses that if Shamil were alive today, "He would have seen through these militants—that they 'fulfill neither a contract nor a covenant. That they call to the truth but they are not its people'. He would have gone after the hate preachers who say to the young men of this day and age, 'go out and make jihad'" (215). Therefore, Natasha concludes that "No wonder that the founders of political Islam […] never took Shamil as a role model. Al Qaeda was a modern phenomenon, with no patience for Shamil's traditional spirituality and utter contempt for the choices he made at the end of his career" (*The Kindness* 215). Awad comments on this point: "While Aboulela's novel upholds Imam Shamil for not resorting to violence and terrorism, it condemns contemporary Jihadist groups that terrorize civilians and slaughter them in the name of Islam" ("Fiction" 85). Indeed, the author's choice of representing Shamil's struggles along with the modern-day story of Natasha illustrates the difference between the original meaning and objective of jihad and how contemporary extremist leaders use it to lure supporters and exploit them to realise their political aims. In effect, she places the concept of jihad back to its authentic Islamic basis: one that reflects ideals of peace, justice, and respect for human life.

In addition to her reframing of the concept of jihad, Aboulela stresses the importance of spirituality for achieving balance in life through her portrayal of Natasha's dissatisfaction with her life, despite her academic success. Despite Natasha's continual efforts to detach herself from her original Sudanese heritage, this "baggage" weighs on her and she can never set herself free of it completely (72). Then, when she meets Malak, she experiences a strange new feeling— that something was lacking from her life. As Alqahtani observes: "Natasha has longed for a place of belonging until she meets Malak who is 'petite but … spiritually strong.' Malak acts as Natasha's mentor, preaching the Sufi faith and taking Natasha to modern *zikr* (lessons)" (310). So what Natasha does not recognise, or more accurately, ignores, is her need for spirituality, and it is this need that attracts her to Malak and makes her appreciate her friendship. This point is made clear at the end of the novel when the narrator reflects: "Malak, the teacher disguised as an actor. Natasha the student, acting the part of a teacher [...]. Perhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual. She was ready to be a guide and I would fight my weakness in order to follow" (314). It is only after connecting with Malak and being influenced by her spirituality that Natasha starts to acquire a sense of belonging, which reduces her feelings of displacement.

Spiritual faith is also at the centre of Aboulela's novel, *Bird Summons*. In this magical realist novel, three Muslim women living in Scotland embark on a journey to pay a visit to the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold, to honour her as the first British Muslim woman to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah. Thus, the religious purpose upon which the whole novel is built is established from the first page. Like her previous novels, religion is seamlessly integrated in the novel and Islamic practices are presented as "Muslim ordinary" daily routines of the characters. For instance, when Moni unpacks at the loch, she sets a place for her prayer clothes and mat, which she carefully keeps clean and scented, highlighting the sensory pleasures of prayer: "It was always pleasant to touch

down to fragrance, to rise up with the lingering scent of musk" (63). In addition, when Moni finds free time, she reads Qur'an from an app on her phone. This suggests the normality and ease of performing religious practices with the aid of modern technology. At the same time, the narrator's description of Moni's efforts to read Qur'an in the face of life's difficulties defamiliarises this practice for Muslim readers by associating it with modern technology. Readers may be inspired to re-examine their own approach to this practice, realising they can perform it in creative and adaptable ways. Moreover, Salma reflects on how she "[…] sometimes felt that her hijab protected her, made her hazy and distant, further out of reach. The signals she sent out were muffled by clothes, obscured by layers, buried out of the way" (149). Here, hijab is represented as a source of protection and safety for its wearer. Salma's view of her hijab as a protective garb offers Muslim readers a fresh perspective on hijab and a deeper appreciation for its benefits. This portrayal normalises the practice of Islam, encouraging Muslims to rediscover the beauty and significance in customs of their faith.

Just as the novel moves away from an idealised portrayal (as discussed in Chapter Three), it also conveys a less ideal picture of Muslim women's religious practice in the West. In other words, rather than portraying characters who simply conform to or discard the teachings of their religion, Aboulela represents the conflicts that her characters face in their daily practice and elaborates on their temptations to cross some of the boundaries set by Islam. This theme is epitomised in the epigraph of *Bird Summons*, taken from Al-Ghazali's book, *On Conduct in Travel*, where he states that: "It is travel which lifts up the curtain hiding people's characters". This quotation prepares the readers to expect a change in the behaviour of the protagonists. The narrator of *Bird Summons* further hints at the likelihood of the protagonists committing violations: "Getting away from it all. Away from responsibility, away from authority, bodies set free from routines, perspectives altered, distances distracting. Every holiday was a test. Every holiday was a risk" (36). In time,

Salma's almost adulterous transgression, Iman's abandonment of her hijab, and Moni's neglect of her husband represent the conflicts that her characters face in their religious practices. In consequence, the three women undergo transformative metamorphoses: Salma loses her muscle tissues, Moni is turned into a ball, and Iman into an animal. It is only then that they realise their transgressions:

> They had come to the loch with their prayer mats and copies of the Qur'an, but they had not looked after them, they had not kept them safe. They had come to a country where people had stopped praying and not realised that they were the ones brought here to pray. They did not consciously take up the worship which others had left… They underestimated their own importance and exaggerated their shortcomings. They inflated their problems and followed their egos, counselled each other but rejected what was right. (256–57)

This realisation awakens them, and the three characters resume their prayers and repent, enabling them to go back to their original forms. Aboulela's use of magical realist elements to represent tangible punishments for her characters' violations illustrates her belief in the importance of spirituality and the appalling consequences of transgressing the boundaries of religion.

Furthermore, I argue that Aboulela's treatment of religion in her fiction, though it may appear didactic to many readers and critics, does in fact help to justify Islam to non-Muslims and build a connection between it and Christianity. The fact that the author is a practising Muslim, who experiences daily the practice of her religion in Islamophobic surroundings, is what inspires her to write fiction in which she normalises and justifies her religious affiliation. I contend that Aboulela does not try to convert her readers; what she really tries to do is to represent the characters of moderate Muslims who try to practise their faith in a secular world—and this has rarely been attempted. In addition, the author's

open association with both Islam and Christianity reveals her appreciation of the act of worship and the spirituality of other religions, and alleviates the hostility that Muslims face. Hence, although the author indicates in her note at the end of the novel that the figure of the hoopoe bird was mainly inspired by its story with Solomon in Qur'an and Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, she also reminds readers that "the Hoopoe is also well versed in the fables of selkies and shape-shifters that originates from the folk tales of Aberdeenshire and the surrounding areas. He is familiar with the *Pilgrim's Progress* and the fantasy worlds of George McDonald" (287). This reference to a mixture of fables (that the spiritual mentor of the novel uses to instruct his women characters) is intended to demystify Islam and represent it as a continuation of Christianity. Leen Arkhagha and Yousef Awad points out that "This magical realist intertextuality places both Eastern and Western heritage, as well as the Eurocentric novelistic form and the Arab Muslim immigrant narrative in a position of coexistence" (Arkhagha and Awad 122). Certainly, my claim here is that Aboulela, as a Muslim migrant, rather than proselytising for Islam in the West, employs fiction to present a possible coexistence between West and East.

Therefore, I argue that the author's intention to show connections between Islam and Christianity in *Bird Summons*, serves to normalise Islam without attracting any potential accusation of proselytisation. By asserting her appreciation of worship and portraying Islam as a continuation of Christianity, Aboulela is saying that what her fiction opposes is the absence of religion in peoples' lives. This can be seen in the narrator's statement that the source of Salma's knowledge about Christianity is Qur'an (100), and in her reflection in a chapel on how "[…] people knelt here and worshipped. They weren't her ancestors and she didn't share their religion, but she understood them because she herself believed and she herself lived each day knowing she would, after she died, be held to account" (40). The narrator's noticing that the chapel faces the direction of Mecca is another indication of

the author drawing associations between Islam and Christianity, and her acknowledgment that belief and worship are basic values of human life.

Another element that the narrator refers to in the novel is the monastery's refectory, a place that elicits similar sensations among all three Muslim protagonists. First, Salma feels that "[…] now, long after the monks had gone and their lifestyle with them, this spirituality lingered and refreshed. A thickening, that's how she would describe it" (101). This exact impression of heaviness is also felt by Iman when she enters the monastery and glimpses a magical figure of a medieval worshipper in the refectory who reminds her of Nathan from the hoopoe's story. This vision makes her feel that if she has been wearing her Islamic dress, "They would have understood each other, asked forgiveness from the same God, followed the Ten Commandments, experienced the trajectory of weakness, sin, regret, then redemption" (142). Even Moni, who is usually oblivious to her surroundings, senses the weight of this spiritual connection, and feels similarly about the refectory, observing: "[…] there was a quality in the room, something that lingered from long ago, magnetic and lulling; something that understood and welcomed" (156). Thus, when the three friends go back in time and witness the building of the monastery: "They felt the sincerity that filled the manual work […] saw the years sweep over the monastery, the wanting of faith bringing with it corruption and corruption and further eroding faith […] They saw worldliness encroach upon the sacred, the secular triumphing over the religious" (265–266). As time progresses, the protagonists witness Nathan praying in the refectory.

> They recognised him as one of them, a believer, though he had not lived long enough to know the Last Prophet, not to hear the final revelation. They had in common with him the knowledge of their Creator [...] They understood him and he would have understood them too, if he had lived in their own time. (267)

This comparison, drawing similarities between medieval Nathan and the Muslim protagonists, underscores Aboulela's assertion of the commonality of all believers, regardless of religion, time, and place.

In due course, the scene of the refectory changes to the future; the hoopoe tells them to go inside, and instinctively they start to recite verses from the Qur'an, believing "There was nothing radical in what they were doing, nothing contrary. It was a continuation. A flow meandering but not changing direction, because the direction had always been the same. The paths might be infinite, but the destination one" (268–269). This scene represents Islam as a natural continuation of previous religions where worship leads to one destination, that is, towards God. Arkhagha and Awad also comment on this scene:

> This magical realist experience also corresponds to faith-based magical realism in its establishment of faith-based identities which transcend the barriers of ethnicity and organized religion. Therefore, the experience might as well respond to "Islamophobia" and the "War on Terror" which have affected Arabs as part of the larger—and more visible—Muslim community in Britain. (126)

Arkhagha and Awad add that "The magical realist narrative foregrounds Islamic tolerance and demystifies faith as 'home'" (126). Undoubtedly, Aboulela is exploring faith-based identity and creates a connection between her characters and believers of other religions to decrease the misconceptions with which Islam is associated. Consequently, when Salma manages to reach Lady Evelyn's grave, she refers to the concept of sisterhood and affirms their connection with each other: "You were lonely too, you were tired, help me. I came here for rejuvenation, a recipe for patience" (282). It is for this reason that Salma endures the hardships of the journey to the grave. Her trip is a spiritual quest for rejuvenation and patience, seeking solace from a Scottish Muslim woman who also practised her faith in a non-Muslim society. Thus, the novel highlights the intrinsic connection between people of

faith and the universality of spiritual values. By emphasising the importance of faith and promoting a culture of tolerance, her work bridges cultural divides and challenges misconceptions about Islam. The spiritual journey that Salma takes helps to connect Muslims with different cultural backgrounds and serves as a reminder that they are not alone in their struggles.

This common thread of defamiliarised spirituality and normalisation of Islamic practices can be detected in Aboulela's short stories, too. Prayer is represented as an essential part of the everyday life of a Muslim. Therefore, when Shadia forgets to pray the morning prayer in "The Museum", "That morning folded out like the nightmare she sometimes had, of discovering that she had gone out into the street without any clothes" (*Coloured Lights* 91). Later in the story, she tells Bryan that "I miss things I didn't think I would miss. The *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer from the mosque" (91). So a sound that can be strange and unfamiliar is presented as an indispensable element in the day of Muslims. On the other hand, when the Scottish Muslim fiancé in "Something Old, Something New" hears the *azan* outdoors for the first time, during his visit to Sudan, he responds that "It seemed to blend with the sound of the birds and the changing sky" (133). These examples illustrate the centrality and ordinariness of Islamic practices, among which are prayers and their rituals, to people in Muslim countries. At the same time, Shadia's yearning for the sound of *azan* while in Aberdeen, along with the Scottish Muslim fiancé's comment about its seemingly harmonious coexistence with nature, would offer a transformative insight for Muslim readers, who of course hear it five times daily, renewing their appreciation of its aesthetic appeal. Moreover, this story presents the wearing of hijab in a novel way, showing the wearing of it in a positive light. For instance, when the heroine goes out with her lover for the first time on a windy day, "Because her hair was covered, she looked neat, slightly apart from everyone else" (130). Later, when they become engaged, her fiancé acknowledges: "He didn't know her well enough. He had yet to see her hair, he had yet to

know what she looked like when she cried and what she looked like when she woke up in the morning" (134). Thus, instead of portraying hijab as a piece of material that hides his future wife from him, Aboulela represents it as an element of suspense that makes the wedding day more special because it marks the first moment in which the bridegroom gets to see the whole of his wife. In the story, the bridegroom has to wait for the wedding day to recognise "how altered she was, how so much more of her there was", and he secretly thinks "So that was how soft she was, so that was how she smelt, that was her secret" (145–146). Hence, rather than portraying Islamic customs as outdated or oppressive, Aboulela shows their beauty and significance for Muslims, who may take them for granted, while opening up a fresh perspective for non-Muslim readers.

Just as spirituality is represented as fulfilling and rewarding, its absence from people's lives is presented as unsatisfying in the short story "The Boy from the Kebab Shop". In this story, Dina, who is born to an Egyptian non-practising Muslim mother and a Scottish non-Muslim father, lives a life whose dreariness is symbolised by the lack of proper food in their home due to her mother's continuous efforts at dieting. However, Dina's constant gnawing appetite and her search for food in the restaurant in which Kassim works symbolises her hunger for spirituality, which she can fulfill if she follows his embrace of Islam. During her first encounters with Kassim, Dina feels a kind of pity for him because of his refrain from indulging in physical intimacy until they are married. Her pity turns to surprise when she sees him prostrate in prayer, which is a new and strange experience for her. The story ends with her struggling to decide between following this more spiritual way of living or going back to "the peckish unfulfillment of her parent's home" which signifies the absence of spirituality in their life (63). Aboulela's foregrounding of Dina's sense of deprivation and the parallel value placed on spirituality once again illustrates the role of faith in fulfilling people's lives. This message may come across as didactic to non-Muslim readers who may no longer find metaphysical beliefs significant. Nevertheless, the author's

emphasis on mysticism as a way of life (that is not limited to the context of Islam by the end of the short story) provides a relatable perspective that invites readers to comprehend the author's assertion that spirituality is essential in everyday experiences. Hence, this is another instance of Aboulela's disapproval of secularism and her advocation of incorporating spirituality into daily life.

Islamic Logic

> "In this society," he said, "in this secular society, the speculation is *that* God is out playing golf. With few exceptions and apart from those who are self-convinced atheists, the speculation is that God has put up this elaborate system and left it to run itself. It does not need Him to maintain it or sustain it in any way. Mankind is self-sufficient." (Aboulela *The Translator* 42)

This passage spoken by Rae, is described by Khalifa as "a revealing passage, one that delineates the difference between the Muslim outlook and Western outlook, between a God-centred world and a godless world" (Khalifa 105). In this excerpt, Rae elaborates on what he perceives to be the West's general system of belief—a belief that does not deny the existence of God, but that does not believe in His efficiency in managing the world. This perception is what Aboulela aims to counter through her fiction. The events of her novels and short stories are all perceived by her characters as resulting from God's will. Hers is a world "where cause and effect are governed by Muslim rather than non-Muslim rationale" (Larson qtd. in Ameri 103). Therefore, she states: "Sometimes I try to make the logic direct the overall development, at other times out of a number of paths, I choose the one which makes more Muslim sense" ("Islamic Individualism" 620). This focus on Muslim reasoning is evident in her fiction and serves to emphasise the importance of Islamic beliefs in interpreting the world. Ultimately, this instance further demonstrates

Aboulela's desire to integrate Islamic values into Western literature and to offer readers new perspectives on Islam and its role in modern society.

Aboulela's notion of Islamic logic is embodied in *The Translator* through Sammar's interpretation of her life's events. This perspective is on display through Sammar's reaction to the death of her husband, where she finds solace in the belief that only Allah is eternal (9). Khalifa points out that for Sammar "Death is just a passage from temporality to eternity through a responsible commitment towards God who is the ultimate destination" (104). Thus, the author's emphasis on the temporality of life explains her characters' attachment to God and their commitment to religious values as the means of ultimate salvation. Furthermore, Sammar's belief in the role of God in shaping her fate is highlighted in her response to her job, which she believes was made accessible to her by Allah's will: "My fate is etched out by Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be. To think otherwise was to slip down, to feel the world narrowing, dreary and tight" (73). Abdul Majid comments that "This duality of causation is indicative of the on-going struggle that Sammar experiences as she holds on to her unwavering belief" (149). Hence, Sammar not only reminds herself of this concept, but also teaches it to Rae, who initially lacks an understanding of Islamic logic, which further exemplifies Aboulela's preoccupation with the Islamic logic of cause and effect. When Rae tells Sammar that her soup is the catalyst that cured him "She said, 'Allah is the one who heals.' She wanted him to look beyond the causes to the First, the Real" (102). Conversely, Rae's daughter's wording of "Get Well Soon, Dad" without any mention of Allah appears illogical to Sammar, indicating the contrasting perspectives of Islamic and Western readers, and she " […] found the wording strange without 'I wish' or 'I pray', it was an order and she wondered if the child was taught to believe that her father's health was in his hands, under his command" (103–104). Khalifa comments: "The idea of not mentioning the name of God when wishing somebody

recovery or success is anathema to a Muslim mind" (107). Rae's daughter's greeting, although sounding quite familiar to Western readers, is represented as bizarre and inappropriate to the Muslim protagonist. This emphasis on the Islamic system of cause and effect prevails in this novel and continues in subsequent works.

Aboulela's perspective of Islamic logic is exemplified more vividly in the resolution of *The Translator*, which includes Rae's conversion. This incident does not happen until Sammar realises that her prayers for his conversion have always been for her own sake; only to be able to marry him, rather than for his own goodness (175). After this realisation, Sammar starts to change her prayers, asking now that he will convert so as to be saved. It is only after this that Sammar receives news of Rae's conversion. Philips comments that "It is significant that Rae's conversion occurs very soon after this epiphany" (67). Toossi also notes that "In the world Aboulela portrays, one simply cannot give all the credit for Rae's conversion to Sammar. The Individual's agency is only half of the story" (119). Later on, Rae's words to Sammar confirms this when he says that "I found out at the end, that it didn't have anything to do with how much I've read or how many facts I've learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that's true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah" (198). I argue that Rae's statement serves two purposes: first, it corresponds to the author's representation of Islamic logic, which asserts that the limits of human agency are governed by the will of God; second, it negates any potential claim of her fiction as proselytising by asserting that conversion results from God's will, rather than from spreading knowledge of Islam. This argument is best articulated by Hassan when he states that "The novels and short stories seek to extend the knowledge through cultural translation (and also by indicating the limits of translation), but not the faith. They do not aim to convert because from their own ideological standpoint that would be impossible" (W. Hassan 14). Thus, Aboulela's representation of Islamic logic demonstrates the dominance of God's will over

human agency and rejects any suggestion of proselytisation, as Rae's conversion is attributed to God and not mere knowledge.

The same method of reasoning is reflected in *Minaret* through Najwa's perception of her destiny. After her religious awakening, Najwa starts to perceive the world and its events through an Islamic lens. Her interpretation of events is built on her belief of an ultimate power that governs the world. Therefore, she seeks refuge in prayers when faced by misfortunes. Ameri describes her character as one to which "[…] modern reason is not the supreme ruler, and it is God's will that determines everything" (Ameri 104). Hence, she accepts the downfall of her family and herself as a punishment for their disregard of religious teachings. Whenever she visits her brother, Omar, in prison she tries to convince him of this idea: "'If Baba and Mama had prayed,' I say, 'if you and I had prayed, all of this wouldn't have happened to us…Allah would have protected us, if we had wanted Him to, if we had asked Him to but we didn't. So we were punished'" (*Minaret* 95). Moreover, just as Najwa recognises her fate as a punishment for her past misdeeds, she realises that she will be rewarded for her good deeds, and this is what helps her to hold on to her faith firmly. In one instance, she reminds her lover, Tamer, that "Allah will reward you for trying to please your parents" (101). Thus, Aboulela chooses a religious first-person narrator to convey her story, from an Islamic perspective that posits that the world is governed by a divine power.

By the same token, Ustaz Badr in *Lyrics Alley* conveys the same worldview that Najwa and Sammar present in the previous novels. When asked about the religious aspect of *Lyrics Alley*, Aboulela said in an interview:

> The character of Badr is central to the novel. He is the one who sets out to make sense of the dilemma "Why does Allah Almighty make bad things happen to good people?" As a believer, he worships an All-Powerful, All-Compassionate God and,

> in exploring this question from a theological point of view, I feel I have gone deeper in writing about Islam—and about the meaning of faith—than in my other novels. ("Leila Aboulela" 103)

Aboulela's construction of Ustaz Badr's deep spirituality and unwavering belief in God balances the inner turmoil of her other characters and reinforces the presence of God. It is Ustaz Badr's spiritual insights that help to comfort Nur and revive his faith in God and in himself. Alqahtani points to the fact that Badr "functions as a spiritual mentor to other characters, namely Nur, helping him to overcome his depression after the accident" (309). When Nur raises the 'why me?' question, Badr reminds him that '"The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said, *When Allah loves a people, He tries them.* This is a trial, son, not a punishment'" (*Lyrics Alley* 167). He also encourages Nur to appreciate the blessings that he still has, including the love of his family, his sharp mind, and his eyesight. Moreover, Badr opens Nur's eyes to the fact that exit from this pain does not necessarily mean recovery, but there are other kinds of release that he might not be aware of. This foreshadows his prosperous successful future as poet that could never have happened had he escaped the accident. To strengthen the effect of Badr's words, Aboulela places him in a dilemma that arouses the same questioning in his heart. When Badr finds himself unjustly accused of theft and thrown into jail, leaving behind a wife, four children and a helpless father, he understands Nur's anger and asks the same question. Alqahtani maintains that "Rather than passive submission, Badr's concepts of faith and fate provide him with the psychological strength to endure, and he concludes that it is wrong to despair" (307). Certainly, it is here where Aboulela locates the moral of her story through Badr's words when he states: "Perhaps the shortest journey to Allah is through the disliked, uncomfortable routes. The seeker asks, 'Where shall I find the Divine?' the answer is, 'Come close to illness, poverty and oppression'" (*Lyrics Alley* 214). The question of why evil exists is further explained three pages later: "Why do bad things happen? For

pedagogical reasons, so that we can experience the power of Allah, catch a glimpse of Hell and fear it, so that we can practise seeking refuge in Him and, when relief comes give thanks for His mercy" (217). Thus, Badr's presence is central to the novel because he articulates the religious reasoning which structures Aboulela's fiction.

Aboulela's concept of Islamic logic is thus effectively communicated and solidified by the conclusion of the novel. Badr's faith is vindicated with Nur's eventual success as a poet, and he remembers: "There had been a time too—before the accident—when he wanted to be a poet, but his voice was feeble and the roads were blocked. These days he recites and people listen to the sincerity of his words". This was the "Balm to his bitterness, the solace he needs, the compensation he ached for when he despaired and asked, why, why me?" (301–02). Against all odds, Badr is also released and secures the lease of a new flat, because the false accusations against him have come to the attention of Mahmoud Abuzeid. In the end, Badr remembers how he had "[…] prayed for that flat and chased that opportunity. There were times when he had despaired, but today he would walk up those stairs" (291). In addition to the long striven-for flat, Badr realises the joy of another un-asked for blessing in the form of the birth of a baby daughter. Watching her, he contemplates how "[…] the sweetest things in life were not necessarily what one strove for and grabbed. Instead, many many times the All-Merciful, the All-Generous would give his servants without being petitioned, without waiting to be asked" (293). Thus, Aboulela ends her novel happily, with Nur and Badr being rewarded for their patience and acceptance of the misfortunes that have befallen them as testimonies to their faith in God.

The same Islamic system of cause and effect is reflected in Aboulela's subsequent novel *The Kindness of Enemies*, specifically in the story of Imam Shamil's war against the Russians. Shamil's unyielding faith in God leads him to believe that nothing can happen without His will. Hence, he understands all the occurrences, successes and defeats in his

life as caused by the divine power. As an example, when Anna asks Shamil about his ability to escape the Russians multiple times, he credits Allah's will for his success and asserts that "'I escaped by the will of Allah Almighty; my abilities are not enough'" (182), thus shaping her perception of events according to his. Similarly, when Jamaleldin questions why his father's army abducts Anna to exchange her with him, he sees it from his father's perspective and thinks "[…] as his father would no doubt say, it was Allah's will and nothing could be done to change it" (196). Later, as Jamaleldin returns safely to his father after the exchange, Imam Shamil remembers how he had prayed to Allah for his protection, which he sees as a manifestation of divine kindness. Hence, Aboulela's portrayal of her characters interpreting events through the lens of Islamic logic illustrates how belief in Allah and submission to His will strengthen individuals, enabling them to overcome life's difficulties.

Eventually, Shamil's acceptance of his defeat in the war against the Russians is a testament to his deep-rooted acceptance of God's will. Despite his desire to be a martyr, he recognises that this failure is also part of Allah's plan: "[…] this was defeat and that defeat was Allah's will. Instead of martyrdom, it was time for Shamil to accept this failure" (300). Towards the end of the novel, Shamil questions the reasoning behind his abrupt defeat, and Sheik Jamal el-Din explains that the loss occurred when Shamil felt his military prowess made him self-sufficient and so he ceased relying on the spiritual guidance and support of his teacher. Now Shamil understands his downfall, and accepts it, in contrast to the Russian's materialistic system of reasoning: "Without spiritual support, nature took its course […] Without blessing, without miracles, the physical laws of the world govern supreme and those strong in numbers and ammunition sooner or later must defeat the weak" (305). These lines reflect Aboulela's logical reasoning, through which Muslims derive their strength. According to her, it is submission to God and praying for his blessing that can change the course of events; otherwise, the rules of nature will prevail.

In contrast to the previous novels, *Bird Summons* explores the sense of dissatisfaction that arises from one's inability to accept one's destiny, as evidenced through the stories of the three women in the novel. This dissatisfaction is most evident in Salma, despite her seemingly happy and successful life. Salma's constant efforts to fit into Scottish society leave her feeling restless, and the growing independence of her children only compounds her sense of insecurity. Salma's Egyptian heritage also creates a cultural divide between her and her Scottish family, creating further stress. More importantly, her failure in passing the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board exams, and her giving up her dream of becoming a doctor, only reinforce her regret and longing for a parallel life, in which "Amir was her ideal mate, her home city the true beloved, medicine her rightful vocation. She was forty-five and her life was a mistake" (189–90). This restlessness and dissatisfaction ultimately lead Salma back to Amir, who evokes in her a sense of nostalgic desire. Aboulela then portrays Salma's punishment following renewal of her relationship with Amir—a punishment that forces her to reassess her life. Ultimately, Salma learns to appreciate the blessings in her life and recognise her important role in helping others. The fact that she has been saved by Norma, to whom she used to give free messages, makes her feel "[…] a whole sense of satisfaction that she has eased someone's pain. That she had helped. Why all these years putting herself down, ashamed that she had failed her PLABs, that she was not a doctor as she had always dreamt of being? […] She had been unfair to herself" (263). Salma's inability to accept her fate and reconcile herself with her present circumstances ultimately leaves her vulnerable to temptation, in contrast to the resilience displayed by Sammar and Najwa in their acceptance of their fate.

By the same token, Iman has her own sources of dissatisfaction. From the beginning of the novel, she is disappointed because of her inability to conceive, and after her encounter with the hoopoe, she raises Nur's question: "'Why me?' They didn't explain to her why Moni was a mother and she was not. Why Salma had four and she had none. They would say that

it was Allah's will and she knew that already, but why was it His will? What was the logic behind it, the purpose, the intention?" (228). Not only that, but Iman finds herself frustrated with society's expectations of femininity, and the male attention she receives leaves her feeling burdened with a responsibility she does not necessarily want, which makes her long for another form of living. "Iman wished for another kind of existence, a beauty that wasn't a responsibility, needs that could be easily fulfilled. Why was I born human? I don't want it!" (210). This refusal to accept her fate earns Iman a punishment that transforms her into an animal, leading her to recognise her mistake in not embracing her femininity and accepting God's will. Through this cathartic experience, Iman learns that she does not have to hate the femininity she was born with, and that acceptance of her fate brings her strength and satisfaction (283). The catastrophe that happens to Iman illustrates the importance of embracing God's will without equivocation. It is only when she accepts her fate with grace and dignity that she becomes strong and able to live a life of contentment. This change illustrates one of Aboulela's Islamic feminist stances, in which the protagonists defy the limitations of traditional gender roles that often confine women to particular paths, enabling her to exercise agency and replace her subservience with empowerment. Rather than depending on finding a potential husband to provide for her, Iman takes an active role in shaping her future and improves her qualifications. Her experience represents Aboulela's concept of Islamic logic, which requires individuals to accept their destiny, while also taking an active role in shaping their own lives to achieve personal fulfillment.

Similarly, Moni's feelings towards her life conditions are no better than those of her friends. Having a disabled child makes her suspend her life in order to take care of him, and this makes her feel miserable: "No one on the whole of planet Earth could possibly be suffering more than her" (18). What mortifies Moni most is "that although her family and Murtada's all said that Adam's disability was Allah's will, which must be accepted

graciously, they all tended to imply that it was somehow her fault" (155). Thus, it is not only Moni, but also her relatives, who find it hard to accept her destiny, which only exacerbates her self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Moni's obsession with taking care of her son to the detriment of her own personal needs and relationships leads to her punishment and subsequent realisation that "It shouldn't be a burden looking after Adam, a sacrifice to be self-righteous about, it should be carried with firmness and ease. With gratitude, too, because he was special in his own way, unique" (261). The novel concludes with all three friends having attained a sense of gratitude and acceptance of their respective fates. By embracing their destinies, they find happiness and satisfaction, regardless of personal struggles—this is Islamic logic in practice, according to Aboulela.

As this chapter shows, Aboulela's portrayal of Islam focuses on its spiritual aspect as a strengthening factor for her characters. Her depiction of her protagonists' performance of Islamic practices and the positivity with which these practices are conveyed demystify them to Western readers, while simultaneously defamiliarising them to Muslim readers. In addition, Aboulela's structuring of her novel on an Islamic premise of cause and effect allows the author to explore spiritual aspects and create fiction that not only represents Muslim characters, but also has plot lines built on a foundation of Islamic logic. This thorough representation of Islam offers all readers a perspective on the multifaceted nature of Islam and its role in shaping individuals' lives within a broader societal context.

Chapter Seven: Cultural Complexities

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I explored the negative and essentialised representations of Muslim women that have been perpetuated by external sources. These sources define the identity of Muslim women instead of allowing them to define themselves. However, it is important to acknowledge that Muslim women have diverse experiences and identities that are shaped by cultural, political, and economic factors, and that their identities cannot and should not be homogenised. As Jawad argues:

> This attitude overlooks the variety of Muslim women around the globe and the different treatments they receive in their respective countries […] women's lives are largely affected by the customs and government policies prevailing in the area; which might work in favour or against them. ("Historical and Contemporary Perspectives" 10)

Additionally, Saimah Ashraf poses the question of "[…] why, in the West, Muslim women are clumped into one large group and viewed as homogenous clones of one another, while their Christian and Jewish counterparts are rarely ever stereotyped in this way" (Ashraf). She offers as an example: "One probably wouldn't classify a Mexican woman with a French woman, though both may be Roman Catholics and hold the same beliefs" (Ashraf). In all societies, social and cultural differences shape one's identity and system of beliefs. Even the way in which Muslim women practise their religion is largely influenced by the distinct customs of the society to which they belong.

Cooke's neologism of the "Muslimwoman" has prompted some critics to further analyse Muslim anglophone literature through her framework: One such is Banan Al-Daraiseh who adopts Cooke's terminology to discuss how Aboulela, as well as Ghada Samman and Ahdaf Soueif, use the trope of the journey to establish a variety of distinctive Muslim women protagonists who negate this essentialisation. In her analysis of Aboulela's works,

The Translator and *Minaret*, Al-Daraiseh contends that "Aboulela's two protagonists engage nuanced and complex identity negotiation through their journeys and so defy fixed representations of female subjectivity" (5). She argues that "these protagonists affirm female agency as well as a dynamic disjunctive hybridity that engages the complexities and paradoxes of identity formation upon culture-crossing and moving between national, international, and transnational borders" (2). Similarly, I argue here that Aboulela articulates distinctive identities of Muslim women in her fiction that transcend the reductive "Muslimwoman" cliché. To explore these characterisations, I use Cooke's neologism and expand on Al-Daraiseh's analysis to critique a selection of Aboulela's protagonists and their diverse female experiences. Such experiences include the various effects of migration on the characters, and also highlight different ideas about assimilation between first and second generation migrant Muslims, born-Muslims, hybrid Muslims, and Muslim converts. Al-Daraiseh confines her discussion to *The Translator* and *Minaret*; however, I extend my analysis to include other protagonists who demonstrate that if cross-cultural experience results in a strengthening of religious ties for some migrants, for others it might end with a complete disavowal of its doctrines.

Given that many of Aboulela's characters are shown living in diasporic contexts, it is necessary to clarify the concept of diaspora. Robin Cohen suggests that despite the diversity of interpretations, "all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that 'the old country'—a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore—always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions" (ix). Rogers Brubaker identifies three fundamental elements consistently associated with diaspora: spatial dispersion, an attachment or orientation towards a perceived homeland as a source of identity and allegiance, and "border maintenance", meaning the preservation of a distinct identity within the host society. Brubaker emphasises that these core components, though subject to variations in emphasis, underpin

most definitions of diaspora (5–6). If we consider Cohen's notion of the enduring influence of the "old country" together with Brubaker's identification of the key constitutive elements, we can create a comprehensive framework that enables deeper analysis of Aboulela's diasporic characters and their experiences.

Moreover, in studying the dynamics of identity formation, it is important to dispel the notion that people have fixed or essentialised identities. Stuart Hall, in his influential article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", argues against the notion of a static identity. He posits:

> We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about "one experience, one identity", without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities. […] Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (131)

Hall's argument is essential in understanding the dynamic nature of identity formation. His perspective is particularly pertinent in the context of diasporic communities, as they must navigate the complex space between their original culture and that of the host country. In diasporic communities, the appropriation and reappropriation of cultural elements occur through ongoing negotiations within the social systems of the settlement countries. Dominic Pasura describes it thus:

> […] the intersection of religion and diaspora is constructed and renegotiated through everyday interactions within structural constraints of the countries of settlement.

> Diasporic identities are not static but processual, relational, fluid, and migrants are active in the creation of their new 'in-between' worlds. (118)

This continual process of negotiation highlights the adaptable nature of diasporic identities, influenced by the interplay of cultural traditions, societal influences, and individual choices. The ever-changing nature of identity gives migrants nuanced experiences of the diaspora and highlights the fluid boundaries that shape their sense of self. Thus, integrating Hall's concept of dynamic identity formation with Pasura's understanding of active identity negotiation provides a tool to understand the complex realities of diasporic communities and migrants' evolving identities.

In consequence, Muslim experiences of migration to almost every Western country are diverse. For example, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith write about Muslim women in US society:

> America's Muslim women, of course, are as diverse as the constituency of the whole community. They are indigenous and immigrant; they are citizens and transients, professionals and members of middle or lower middle class; they are indigent and prosperous, highly educated and illiterate; they are "born-Muslims" and "born again Muslims;" they are first, second and third generation Americans, as well as women whose ancestors have long been an established part of American society. (40)

This demonstrates the diversity of Muslim women living in a single society. Let's imagine the diversity of Muslim women living across many countries and cultures!

Another case in point is Australia, where the Muslim diaspora has been studied by Abdulla Saeed:

> Muslims in Australia are marked by their ethnic diversity. Muslim migration to Australia was, and is, from a variety of nation states themselves possessing distinct cultural and ethnic groups. Migrants coming to Australia bring not only their religious faith, but also their cultural identities with them, and quite often these cultural identities figure as strongly as the religious identity. Muslims also vary in their commitment to Islam as well as in their approaches to it. (64)

Accordingly, the different countries of origin, as well as the varying levels of religiosity, make it impossible to place all Muslim women into a single category. Saeed and Akbarzadeh argue that contrary to this homogenising notion of Muslims, "Muslims, therefore, carry layers of identity: familial, tribal, provincial, national and Islamic" (4–5). These complex identities are fleshed out in Aboulela's fiction, which features diasporic Muslim women characters from various parts of the Islamic world. Each of Aboulela's female characters brings with her a unique ethnic and social heritage and practises her faith in her own individual way. As such, Aboulela demonstrates Muslim women's diversity and rejects homogenising notions of Muslim identity.

The heterogeneity of diasporic Muslim women is also illustrated by their different forms of adjustment to the host country. Their adaptation is often marked by a transformation in their religious practices, which might depend on their level of religious commitment and how they situate their religiosity within a secular society. Pasura, in his exploration of this question, writes: "These religious changes can take different possibilities or trajectories, going forward, backwards or sideways" (118). Studies reveal that there are notable variations in how migrant Muslim individuals experience alienation in the diaspora, and to what degree they are willing to assimilate to gain a sense of belonging to their adopted countries. Haddad and Smith examine the different ways that American Muslim women form a new sense of identity: "[…] they may appropriate hyphenated identities

representing to a greater or lesser extent other ethnic, national, and cultural affiliations" (41). They suggest that one of the most difficult issues that Muslim women negotiate in dealing with their diasporic experience is how to manage the new sense of freedom they find in the host country. Taking the example of hijab, they argue that some immigrant Muslim women who have not worn hijab before, start to wear it to assert their Islamic identity, while others, who used to wear it as a fashion item, remove it to hide their Islamic affiliations (60). In a similar manner, Gary Bouma and colleagues speculate, in their discussion about Muslim communities in Australia: "The settlement process may trigger in the immigrant a new way of looking at their religious identity […] Some Muslim immigrants may try to ignore or hide their Muslim identity while others may seek to focus on it" (59). The varying adaptation strategies that Muslim women employ in their diasporic experiences, and their different levels of assimilation, are explored in Aboulela's fiction, as this chapter will elaborate.

Another source of tension that many Muslim women experience after migration, and which Aboulela dwells on in her fiction, is the conflict between first and second-generation migrants and the difficulties that parents face in balancing their children's need for integration without transgressing religious boundaries. Haddad and Smith argue that "Young people themselves are struggling with what it means to be Muslim in American society. Some of them actively rebel, not wanting anything to do with customs or symbols that mark them as different from their colleagues" (47). Such rebellion causes many tensions between children and parents and creates a source of discomfort and fear among elders. Similarly, Saeed writes that in Australia "Children of migrants adopt the ideas, values and institutions of the host country and become born-and-bred Australians" (207). These difficulties that parents face in rearing their children in Western environments were witnessed personally by Aboulela during her residence in Scotland and consequently they feature strongly in her fiction.

This analysis of Aboulela's portrayal of diverse Muslim women characters encompasses both those who reside in Islamic countries and those who choose to migrate to non-Islamic countries. My aim is to reveal how Aboulela's fiction challenges the idea of homogenous Muslim female experience, often in unforeseen ways. The analysis reveals the centrality of the concept of belonging in the lives of Muslim migrants, eliciting the various dynamics at play as they navigate the interplay between their aspirations for integration within host societies and their emotional ties to their homelands, termed by Cohen as the "old country". Examining Aboulela's various characters, it becomes evident that their sense of identity is heavily influenced by their need to establish a delicate equilibrium between these two opposing forces. Aboulela's work lovingly delineates and captures Muslim women's identities, emphasising the nuanced nature of their experiences and rejecting simplistic and homogenising categorisations. It underscores the significance of cross-cultural encounters and their impact on identity formation, offering valuable insights into the complexities of Muslim women's lives within diasporic contexts.

Religious Awakening in Exile

Aboulela's novels *The Translator* and *Minaret* challenge the prevalent Western narrative of Muslim women migrants as victims of oppressive systems by portraying empowered female characters who find strength and belonging in affirming their religious identities. Kezia Batisai notes that diaspora can be seen as a transnational platform that provides agency for immigrants to renegotiate restrictive frameworks that govern gender and sexuality in their home countries (177). This agency is displayed in Aboulela's portrayal of her protagonists' determined embrace of Islam within secular settings, which reverses the dominant notion of the "Muslimwoman" whose religiosity has been imposed on her by an oppressive patriarchy. Moreover, Cohen highlights the significance of religion in newly forming diasporic communities, stating that "religions can provide additional cement to

bind a diasporic consciousness" and that "spiritual affinity may generate a bond analogous to that of a diaspora" (189). This bond will be demonstrated in the following analysis of Aboulela's first two novels.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela de-essentialises the figure of the "Muslimwoman" by her depiction of the character of Sammar, who has lived alone in Scotland for four years. Steiner argues that:

> In order to delve into issues of migration, Aboulela confronts orientalist and Islamist hegemonic discourses which both stereotype and predetermine "The Muslim Woman" in particular ways. Aboulela presents narratives of complex negotiations of identity which turn to Islam for affirmation in order to free up a space for her female characters in which Western stereotypes have no signifying power, in which cultural memory is validated and incorporated into the present. (9)

Aboulela's depiction of her female character in *The Translator* aims to dismantle Western stereotypes and reclaim the narrative of Muslim women on their own terms. Cooke affirms that the "Muslimwoman" is defined as someone who is subjugated and protected by the males in her society to ensure her purity. However, Aboulela flips the notion of the vulnerable Muslim woman by depicting Sammar as someone very different. Even if she is weak in certain respects, she is totally capable of protecting herself while living alone. When Sammar is invited for a recreational ride by Rae, she refuses because she recognises it would contradict Islamic values, which discourage men and women from mixing unnecessarily. Al-Daraiseh maintains that, while Aboulela values the "Muslimwoman" identification, it is "not as an essentialising identity marker but as one that provides her female protagonists with a means of individual mobility, empowerment, and agency" (Al-Daraiseh 139). In other words, Al-Daraiseh argues that while Aboulela's protagonists finally adopt a gendered, Islamic faith-based identity; however, that does not mean that

they accept the homogenising and limiting marking that the "Muslimwoman" myth imposes on them. Their occupation of a third space, in which they combine elements of Western culture with aspects of their Sudanese heritage without compromising their religious affiliations, empowers them against the reductionist frames of Muslim women. As Steiner asserts

> What is striking about Aboulela's narratives is that her women characters, who are triply marginalised by being African, Muslim and female, do not succumb to the pressures of assimilation. On the contrary, Aboulela writes revisionist fiction, in which women negotiate migration on their own terms. (8)

This necessarily entails a commitment to fulfilling essential religious obligations, which Sammar displays in her unwavering dedication to performing prayers, fasting, and wearing hijab, despite the challenges she faces. In this regard, Zulfiqar Chaudry asserts that Aboulela's "[…] characters are trying to comprehend the essence of the religious experience in their everyday routine, without any externally enforced *sharia*" (194). Hence, Sammar's commitment to Islam in the absence of societal pressures testifies to her strong faith and refutes the dominant misconception of Islam as inherently repressive.

In addition, Aboulela's works show how the complex identities of migrant Muslim women form and change, displaying attitudes and allegiances shaped by the host country, as well as various levels of attachment to their birth countries. For example, Sammar feels displaced in Scotland because of its secular environment, and so she surrounds her religious practices with secrecy. She misses hearing the *azan* and praying in public, and therefore sleeps most of the time to escape the melancholic atmosphere in which she finds herself. Sammar does not feel at home until she feels an attraction towards Rae, who resembles her own people and who has a sympathy for Islam. This attraction creates a sense of belonging in which she finds refuge. Rae's knowledge of the culture, geography,

and history of her home country also eases Sammar's tension and allows her to feel more relaxed in his company. Her hope of his conversion makes her long for a shared space in which both can practise Islam naturally and spontaneously. She thought "[Rae] was dark enough […] Here with others, he looked to her to be out of place, not only because of his looks but his manners. The same manners which made her able to talk to him, made the world vivid for the first time in years" (6). To add nostalgia, Sammar and Rae's first encounter in the novel takes place in an oriental setting, surrounded by sand and cacti, which seems like home for Sammar. All of these elements highlight the longing for homeland that Brubaker identifies as a key element in diasporic communities.

As the novel unfolds, Sammar's meetings with Rae give her a sensation of belonging, but this feeling is never completely satisfying due to their religious differences. Even when she returns to Sudan and re-experiences the Islamic atmosphere that she has been longing for while in Scotland, Sammar still feels misplaced. Steiner notes that the sensory comfort and familiarity of her old surroundings do not inherently provide a sense of belonging or nourishment for Sammar. Even before she returns home, there are subtle hints suggesting her realisation that true belonging can be found regardless of physical location, as long as one has faith. Hence, it "is in Scotland where cultural barriers become permeable once she falls in love with Rae" (Steiner 21). This demonstrates that both emotional and religious attachments are necessary for her to feel a complete sense of belonging. This feeling that Sammar does not experience till the end of the novel—with Rae's conversion and their eventual unification—exemplifies Aboulela's representation of protagonists whose often surprising actions defy any essentialising notion of the "Muslimwoman". Sammar partially assimilates to Western culture by returning to Scotland and marrying a Scottish convert; however, she maintains boundaries and preserves her identity by not compromising her religious beliefs. She can now pray with Rae without the privacy she once needed in Scotland, and without fearing he will feel alienated from her due to religious differences,

as he now shares her faith and understanding (75). I concur with Al-Daraiseh's argument: "It is only when Sammar connects her emotions with her faith and religion that she is able to reconcile her sense of fully belonging with a satisfying relationship with Rae" (153). This is an instance of Cohen's view regarding the potential for "spiritual affinity" to foster connections among diasporic individuals, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. In short, Sammar's decision to live by herself, her marriage to a Scottish convert, and her eventual migration to Scotland, all attest to her distinctive identity that defies the rigid "Muslimwoman" trope.

On the other hand, Yasmin, Rae's Muslim secretary and Sammar's only friend in Scotland, presents a different image of the Muslim woman. Her identity as a British Muslim of Pakistani origin differs from that of Sudanese Sammar. Even though she has lived all her life in different parts of Britain, she holds hostile attitudes toward the West, and she does not miss any chance to criticise westerners. For example: "She had a habit of making general statements starting with 'we', where 'we' meant the whole of the Third World and its people. So she would say, 'We are not like them', or 'We have close family ties, not like them'" (11). When another Scottish secretary complains about her inability to stick to any diet, Yasmin "[…] was quick to say. 'Our children are dying of hunger while the rich count their calories!'" (12). Yasmin's use of the words "we" and "they" to denote whole cultures demonstrates the effect that preconceptions can have on people's thinking and reminds us how they can hinder intercultural understanding. Yasmin is an example of the Muslim woman who resists assimilation and who holds on to rigid perspectives that blind her to the positive aspects of the host country. When the question of Rae's conversion comes to the surface, she unhesitatingly responds that those who convert for the purpose of marrying a Muslim girl are always the same. According to her, these kinds of conversions are token conversions that non-Muslims go through only to facilitate their marriage to Muslim girls, lacking any genuine sincerity. Hence, when a non-Muslim man converts for

the sake of marrying a Muslim woman, "[…] she might as the years go by pray and fast or she might not, but it has nothing to do with him. Everything in his life is just the same as it was before" (93). Yasmin's inability to relate to the "other" prevents her from imagining any harmonious relationship between people of different cultures and so, she decides: "Mixed couples just don't look right, they irritate everyone" (93). Again, she generalises her negative perception of mixed marriages into an opinion that all people share. In fact, Yasmin's preconception of the West neatly inverts the West's predetermined image of the Orient. Her quick race to judgement and her belief in the authenticity of her own ideas ironically mirror the way in which orientalists draw their own preconceptions of the East as a truth that can be applied to all easterners.

Conversely, Najwa, the protagonist of *Minaret*, displays a different model of the Sudanese Muslim woman. Her narration of the different stages of her life and the changes that she has undergone while in exile illustrate the fluidity of her identity and the effects of migration on her sense of self. Najwa lived a privileged and Western lifestyle while she was in Sudan. After moving to London, her weak attachment to religion makes her prone to temptations and leads her to get involved in a nonmarital relationship with Anwar. Initially, this relationship provides Najwa with a certain sense of belonging, as she shares a sense of exile with Anwar because, for both of them, migration was involuntary. Inside Anwar's flat Najwa regains a sensation of inclusion where she speaks Arabic, discusses the news of Sudan with his friends and shares with them a common attachment to a shared homeland. However, this limited sense of belonging blinds her to Anwar's exploitative behaviour towards her, leaving Najwa's subjectivity during the relationship fragmented and displaced as her relationship with Anwar ultimately fails to compensate for her sense of loss and displacement.

Yet it is when Najwa realises that Ramadan has begun without her even noticing its arrival or fasting its days—and Anwar's oblivion to her distress over this matter—that she comes to the realisation that this is not the way she wants to lead her life. Despite their shared orientation towards their original country, their relationship falters due to her refusal to accept Anwar's repeated reassurances that people in London do not observe fasting. This provides another example of "boundary-maintenance" which is how Brubaker describes a "resistance to assimilation" (Brubaker 6). To make matters worse, Anwar's insistence on remaining in a non-marital relationship causes another rift between them. Najwa, despite her Western upbringing, regards marriage as the only legitimate institution for sexual relationships, as ingrained in her Sudanese Muslim culture. Nevertheless, she does not realise the importance of these Islamic principles for her until she experiences fragmentation and displacement. It is only then that she recognises that these lifestyle factors are what form her identity and give her a solid sense of belonging. Thus, she decides to abandon Anwar and join the group of Muslim women in the mosque, with whom she experiences what she has been missing since her arrival in London. My analysis concurs with Alqahtani's argument here: "Connecting to the past and to the national identity come to nothing in vanquishing the sense of alienation" (256). Instead "Attaching herself to the mosque and experiencing a sense of belonging to it assists Najwa to overcome her sense of deprivation from social and national belonging" (256–257). I add that it is Najwa's failed attempt to connect with a secular national identity in a Western setting—where religion has no place—that opens her eyes to the importance of religion in shaping her identity and helps her realise that a faith-based identity is what will provide her with a genuine sense of belonging, thus echoing Cohen's remark about the role of spiritual affinity in bonding diasporic communities.

Thus, this nuanced account of Najwa's cross-cultural experience and the impact of migration on her identity formation illustrates the fluidity and diversity of Muslim women's identities. My argument supports that of Al-Daraiseh, quoted here:

> Aboulela's own experience which is reflected through the character of Najwa presents an alternative vision where freedom and oppression shift meanings, as hijab, regarded as the sign of female oppression by the western discourse, is seen to be desired by a secular, elite female. This alternative vision highlights the fact that British Muslims are a diverse community including devouts, atheists, seculars and many others in their ranks, and wearing the hijab and embracing Islam was both Aboulela's and Najwa's way of dealing with the trauma of migration, hence filling "the empty space called freedom". (53)

Thus, Najwa's newfound religious identity, her adoption of an Islamic lifestyle, and her refusal to assimilate with the host culture seem to validate an alternative way of living that may challenge the expectations of Western readers. Awad comments: "The novel makes clear that Najwa's religiosity […] is not imposed on her by any religious authority or any oppressive masculine regime; on the contrary, it is a personal choice based on experience and self-fulfilment" ("Cartographies" 168). This evokes Giulia Liberatore and Leslie Fesenmyer's description of young pious Somalis who, similar to other Muslims in Britain, prioritise religion over cultural ties, connecting with a wider transnational community of believers. For them, Islam plays a vital role in their local and global sense of home-making, so their sense of belonging is nurtured within the global religious community of the *umma* (Liberatore and Fesenmyer 236). I also contend that the protagonist's embrace of a religious-based identity (in the absence of patriarchal restrictions) is another example of Aboulela's refutation of the reductive views of Muslim women. Yet, while Al-Daraiseh's analysis focuses only on the characters of Sammar and Najwa, in its commentary on

awakening religious consciousness, in other novels Aboulela reminds us that cross-cultural experiences can weaken or even break the ties connecting Muslim women migrants to their original cultures. Therefore, it would be simplistic to say that spiritual awareness is always the outcome of migration for her characters.

Najwa's observations on second-generation British Muslim women is another example of Aboulela highlighting her Muslim protagonists' diverse identities. Seeing other women in the mosque, Najwa notices that they are "[…] very British, very much at home in London. Some of them wear hijab, some don't. They have individuality and an outspokenness I didn't have when I was their age, but they lack the preciousness and glamour we girls in Khartoum had" (*Minaret* 77). As she thinks about differences in veiling practices, Najwa illustrates the diversity of Muslim women and their individualised ways of practising Islam while living in the West. Again, this description of Muslim women contrasts with the traditional stereotype of the "Muslimwoman" which, according to Badran, primarily defines her as veiled, compliant, and protected by men ("Between" 101). In contrast, some of the second-generation British Muslim women, as observed by Najwa, are unveiled and thereby they express an individuality that does not have to be compliant to societal authority. Nor do these women need to be protected by men. So, with Najwa's observation Aboulela is wanting to illustrate the multifaceted identities of Muslim women and also to demonstrate the various influences of cross-cultural experiences on shaping their sense of self.

Najwa's realisation of the importance of education also draws attention to another aspect of diversity. Najwa states: "I was in university to kill time until I got married and had children. I thought that was why all the girls were there but they surprised me by caring about their education, forging ahead with their jobs and careers" (102). Najwa's privileged upbringing blinds her to the disadvantages of girls from other social classes. With her

comfortable background she develops a dependent attitude and lacks aspirations to achieve. In this regard, Awad points out that the novel highlights the diverse experiences of women within a particular nation. Merely being Sudanese does not imply that Najwa's hopes and worries reflect those of all Sudanese girls in her generation. The characters' perspectives and ambitions are greatly influenced by social disparities, particularly social class ("Cartographies" 163). Najwa's observation about the differences between herself, and other Sudanese girls allows the author to highlight the diversity of the experiences and identities of Muslim women within any nation.

Territorial Cultural Complexities

Unlike *The Translator* and *Minaret*, *Lyrics Alley* departs from the representation of migrations between East and West. The settings of this novel range between Sudan and Egypt, and London to a lesser degree. However, Aboulela's depiction of cross-cultural experience is achieved by recounting the challenges faced by Egyptian women Nabilah and Hanniyah when they move to Sudan, as they struggle to find a sense of belonging despite the similarities between their home country and Sudan. Hannyiah is Ustaz Badr's wife, who has come to Sudan from Egypt on a secondment to teach in a Sudanese school. However, Hannyiah finds it difficult to cope with Sudanese houses and lifestyle in general. Badr compares her with Mahmoud's first wife, Waheeba, who is content with a simple semi-outdoor life in his *saraya*, despite her husband's great wealth. Yet, he complains: "His own Hannyiah had aspirations for a flat in a tall building, for a salon and a balcony… She hated the Sudanese-style house they had been allocated by the school and complained about it day and night" (17). Aboulela here nuances her portrayal of Muslim women by depicting how Hannyiah's Egyptian sense of identity makes her look at life from a different perspective than Sudanese women. Her discomfort with the Sudanese house underlines the different standards and evaluations between the two nations. Nevertheless,

Hannyiah is able to build strong relationships with her Sudanese neighbours, which helps her to overcome her sense of displacement and to ease her homesickness. This is illustrated when she describes to her husband the kindness and friendliness of her neighbour, Salha, who offers Hannyiah help when she delivers her baby (64). Thus, when the time for moving comes, the farewell scene that Badr has predicted takes place and "Hannyiah clung to the neighbourhood women, weeping profusely as if a calamity had fallen or as if they were leaving the entire country forever" (294). Hannyiah's dissatisfaction with her housing conditions does not blind her to the kindness of Sudanese people and she gradually finds herself to be at one with them. However, her dislike of the house remains a constant barrier to her sense of belonging. This is only resolved at the end of the novel, when Mahmoud leases them a flat in his new building and "[…] dear, sweet Hanniyah would have a balcony from where she could sit and look down at the goings-on in the street just like a Cairo lady" (291). Aboulela's portrayal here of a character struggling to adapt to a new culture succeeds by recounting small details of her experience and her multicultural encounters. Her varied depiction of characters' initial discomfort and methods of adjustment does exemplify the many challenges faced by Muslim women transported to foreign settings and multiple cross-cultural encounters.

In contrast to Hanniyah, Nabilah's sense of displacement is reinforced by her prejudice towards Sudanese people. Despite her husband's kindness, wealth, and generosity, she never appears satisfied with her life in Sudan and longs to return to Egypt. To relieve her yearning for Egypt, Nabilah "[…] designed her wing in the *saraya* like a modern, Egyptian home, not a Sudanese one" and she "surrounded herself with the sights, accents and cooking smells of Egypt, closing the door on the heat, dust and sunlight of her husband's untamed land (24–25). In contrast to Hanniyah, Nabilah embodies a complete maintenance of diasporic boundary. However, her attempts to create a setting that mimics her Egyptian home and to surround herself with a limited circle of Egyptian friends is not enough

because she cannot avoid her husband's family (25). Nabilah is unable to even get used to the distinctive smells of Umdurman that the cool breeze wafts across her freshly-mopped floor. The portrayal of Nabilah's sense of superiority and aloofness, in contrast to Hanniyah's easy manners and sociable behaviour, highlights the multiple ways in which Muslim women might react to cross-cultural experiences, even when they come from the same country. Poor Hannyiah and rich and privileged Nabilah both find Sudan's housing conditions worse than their original houses in Egypt, yet one is able to blend in and overcome her homesickness, while the other remains in a state of isolation within her Sudanese surroundings. Again, this underscores the complexities and variations of Muslim women's cultural experiences and identity formation.

The character of the Sudanese Soraya also enriches the novel by representing an attractive model of the modern Sudanese Muslim woman. Soraya stands in contrast to other girls her age as she is eager to learn, despite living in a society where access to knowledge is usually denied to women. Soraya's rebellious spirit and thirst for knowledge is evident from the start of the novel, when she relies on Nur to provide her with books and spectacles. "[Nur] was her link to the outside world, that world that was not for girls" (12). As the narrative unfolds, Soraya expresses her desire to smoke, as it makes her feel more sophisticated. Soraya dreams of living a modern life, with a progressive husband, in contrast to her sisters, and her exposure to different cultures during her vacation in Egypt only intensifies this vision: "Here, husbands and wives linked arms, whereas back home they did not even walk side by side. This was what Soraya wanted for them, to be a modern couple, not to be like Fatma and Nassir each in their separate world" (72). Soraya's ambition to overturn the traditional gender roles in her own life and to change her community's views of modern married life is a stark contrast to the expectations placed on women of her society. Despite facing restrictions imposed by her conservative father, Soraya continues to pursue her

education with the help of her uncle and eventually earns a medical degree. Alqahtani notes that:

> Education nurtures gendered agency for Soraya and many young Sudanese women, whose culture is marked by fluidity and culture-crossing. Soraya is educated at foreign schools, the Catholic Sisters' school administered by Italian nuns in Umdurman and Kitchener`s School of Medicine, and is skilfully able to read and write English and Arabic. British colonialism has left everlasting marks on the identity of Soraya and millions of Sudanese students through education and the rhythm of British life. (296)

Unlike Aboulela's other novels, where the protagonists primarily migrate to the West and explore their Muslim identity in a foreign context, Aboulela takes a different approach in *Lyrics Alley*, exposing her protagonist, Soraya, to cross-cultural experiences through her foreign education. While Alqahtani's analysis underscores how Soraya's foreign education provides young Sudanese women with tools to navigate multiple cultures, my argument emphasises how Aboulela situates Soraya's multicultural encounter within the context of her Western education, particularly through her interactions with Western teachers and peers. These interactions provide Soraya with an opportunity to experience Western culture first-hand and to develop her modern ambitions.

Soraya's agency is further displayed in her insistence on marrying according to her own desires, which means choosing a husband who is open-minded and will not restrict her freedom. As detailed in Chapter Four, Soraya defies the conventional obedient role expected of Muslim women, despite the pressures from her father, sisters, and friends, by delaying her marriage until she finds a partner with whom she can realise her dreams of modernity. This portrayal of an outgoing, ambitious woman in the 1950s, during a period where women's roles were restricted to their households, exemplifies Aboulela's intent to

show the diversity of Muslim women and their experiences, which transcends any specific nation or era. Moreover, Soraya's sense of alienation in her father's house, due to his rigidity, highlights the notion that a person's true sense of belonging may not necessarily be found in their original home. Soraya's story suggests that one's sense of belonging can instead be achieved by realising one's dreams and aspirations. The developing plot is tied to the complexities of Sudanese society during the time of the novel, adding a broader contextual perspective to Soraya's story. By pursuing her education and marrying a progressive husband, who supports her aspirations, Soraya achieves her dreams by the end of the novel, when she achieves a sense of belonging and a home. Soraya's story reinforces the message that the expression of agency by Muslim women cannot be confined by societal expectations or traditional restrictions, and that striving towards one's dreams is a valid way to explore one's identity and also to acquire a sense of belonging.

Assimilation and Lack of Religious Observance

Just as Sammar and Najwa represent a strong adherence to Islam in exile, Natasha portrays a complete disavowal of its doctrines in *The Kindness of Enemies*, a text that explores issues of different identity formations in more depth. The most prominent Muslim characters in the novel, Natasha and Malak, exemplify the complexities of Muslim identities; hence I focus my analysis on them. Natasha, who is born to a Sudanese father and a Russian mother, embodies a hybrid non-practising Muslim woman. Since childhood, Natasha has resented her physical resemblance to her father and has desired to emulate her Russian mother's appearance instead: "I wanted to be her daughter, not his. Yet, I empathised with him" (139). However, Natasha suffers from a feeling of loneliness and bitterness due to her mother's different physical appearance, resulting in a divide between them. She remembers how, as a child, she felt that "Even though I was with her […] I was not like her and might never be […] With my whole hand, I pinched her inner thigh as hard

as I could, until she cried out and dropped the book and scolded me" (138). After her mother's death, Natasha narrates how, after seeing her belongings, she "[…] cried over the wasted time […] time wasted in aching to be white like her and blaming her for the failure as if she were the one barring from entry into a privileged world, as if she were begrudging me a gift she could give" (170). Natasha's dissatisfaction with her appearance causes her to dislike her mother's white doll because it reminds her of how her mother's daughter is supposed to look (173). Her long-standing affinity for European looks and lifestyles has contributed to her detachment from Islam and lack of interest in anything African. As a result, Natasha elects to construct her sense of identity according to Western standards and makes a concerted effort to repress any aspect of herself that reminds her of her father or of Sudan. In showing us Natasha's difficult emotions as a "half-Muslim", Aboulela makes another challenge to the conventional notion of the "Muslimwoman".

Aboulela tells us that the issue of belonging has been persistent and deeply ingrained in Natasha since her childhood. As a person of mixed heritage, she has struggled to reconcile her dual identities and determine where she truly belongs. Prior to her parents' separation, Natasha made attempts to integrate into Sudanese society by occasionally fasting, in accordance with Islamic tradition. However, as she grew older, she increasingly felt the impossibility of fitting into either side of her cultural heritage, resulting in an inner sense of alienation. Her dreams, in which she envisions her body being split vertically into separate human and reptilian parts, reflect her anxiety over her mixed origins and her discomfort with this duality (76). Natasha's struggle with belonging is made worse by her parents' incompatible marriage, which leads her to resent even more the two separate identities that make up her own unique being. This alienation leads her to fear figures that feature two different composites because they remind her of her mixed heritage (40). Therefore, she decides that the best solution is to choose one identity and fully embrace its cultural codes, hoping to fit into and belong to one single group. Natasha symbolically illustrates this

assimilation by adopting a Scottish name and Western codes of behaviour, rejecting anything associated with her Islamic or Arabic heritage. Thus, I argue that in contrast to Aboulela's earlier protagonists, who negotiate a blending of Western and Islamic elements in their cross-cultural experiences, Natasha's story represents a marked departure. Her decision to assimilate to Western culture shows Aboulela telling a very different, more complex story about female identity.

Natasha's migration to Scotland plays a significant role in shaping her identity and grounding her Western identity. Upon her arrival in Scotland, Natasha starts to assimilate into Scottish society by adopting her stepfather's name, Wilson, and discarding her Sudanese name, Natasha Hussein, reflecting her desire to fit in. Her efforts to distance herself from her original identity are further reflected in the loss of her Sudanese passport and in her willingness to report on students vulnerable to radicalisation (212). Despite opposition from colleagues, Natasha decides to report as a means of achieving professional standing and to look like a worthy Scottish citizen—an aim she felt was necessary to detach herself from her Muslim roots (141). Natasha's efforts to distance herself from her original identity are articulated through her musings on her overweight body: "I could now see that there was too much distance between myself and the outskirts of myself, between my core and the edges. Too much distance to travel on my own. Not much fuel either" (218). Here her musings reflect her shattered soul that is divided between the past and the present; the East and the West. It shows the long distance that she has traversed to cut herself off from where she came from. Now she does not have the required spirit or the courage to go back and cross that distance again. Natasha's assimilation exemplifies Gijsbert Oonk's description of many migrants who may choose to cut the connection with their ancestral homeland and its cultural heritage. Over time, they might assimilate or integrate into a new culture within a different environment and create a new sense of belonging with different preferences, opportunities, and perspectives. This process could

result in a loss of their original language proficiency as they adapt to a new language (Oonk 285). Oonk's argument is that "the umbilical cord is not self-evident. It needs to be nurtured and negotiated, and even then it might disappear" (286). Arguably, Aboulela's portrayal of Natasha's full assimilation to Western culture reflects the challenges of identity formation that many Muslim women face after migration. By adopting the cultural codes of the host society and distancing herself from her original heritage, Natasha attempts to overcome the discomfort and alienation caused by her biracial origin and her inability to reconcile her dual identities.

Natasha's experience of living in the West reveals, however, that even when she attempts to fully assimilate, she remains an outsider in the eyes of others. Despite achieving academic success and publishing papers, she is subject to police investigations because of her association with a student exhibiting suspicious behaviour. Though cleared of any charges, Natasha still feels the stigma associated with being under suspicion of crime: "Natasha Wilson denoted a person who was smeared by suspicion, tainted by crime" (310). It is at this moment that Natasha realises that "Every step climbed, every achievement, every recognition—all that hard work—had not taken me far enough, not truly redeemed me, not landed me on the safest shore" (167). Aboulela's depiction of the precariousness of Natasha's position as an assimilated Muslim sheds light on another dimension of the situation of migrant Muslims: their existence in Western countries is constantly scrutinised and often they are seen as a threat. This was remarked on by Pasura in his depiction of the Muslim diaspora, who face attitudes characterised by "[…] hostility to migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. These expert knowledges have shaped everyday understandings of the intersection of religion and diaspora as fixed, natural, and thus affecting processes of developing integration in Western societies" (117). As Natasha's case demonstrates, no amount of assimilation or integration is ever enough to fully dispel this suspicious attitude.

However, just at the same time that Natasha loses hope of belonging to Scottish society, she rediscovers the other part of her national identity. She realises her efforts to suppress her Sudanese identity are in vain because she finds that the Sudanese part of her remains unconquerable, even if she had concealed it. After receiving news of her father's death, Natasha recognises she has a deep desire to see him and reconnect with her Sudanese heritage (246). This longing becomes even more apparent in her joyful union with her half-brother in Sudan and the sense of comfort and connectedness that she feels from their physical similarity. Natasha realises the significance of shared cultural identity and common ancestry in her quest for belonging and acceptance (251). In addition, she describes feeling a sense of relaxation and ease when sitting in a café in Sudan, surrounded by people who share her cultural background and appearance. She feels integrated and harmonised with her surroundings (283). As a consequence, Natasha's fight for her inheritance in court becomes a means of affirming her Sudanese identity and sense of belonging, reflected in her statement that "I came so that I would not be an outcast, so that I would, even in a small way, faintly, marginally, tentatively, belong" (290). When she wins the case, she gives the money to her brother because the money is not her primary goal. I believe that Aboulela's depiction of Natasha's gradual reconciliation with her Sudanese roots illustrates that one's original roots remain a constant and inalienable part of one's identity. This buried part might at some point be exposed to an outside stimulus that will stir it to rise up. In this way, Aboulela's novel offers a nuanced portrayal of the complex relationships between assimilation, integration, and maintaining one's original roots.

Natasha's visit to Sudan marks a turning point for her, as it allows her to reconnect with her roots and rediscover her sense of identity. Despite arriving too late to see her father, Natasha feels a sense of comfort and belonging in Sudan that she had not experienced in Scotland. Her reunion with childhood friend Yasha, a fellow biracial Sudanese-Russian, is

a reminder of the one romantic attachment she feels to be genuine in her life. Their shared ancestry and past experiences bring them closer, allowing her to see the world from a Sudanese or a Russian perspective without fear of being misunderstood or needing to explain herself. She sums up her realisation: “So this was the tribe I belonged to, here were my species” (287). Natasha experiences a sense of relief and ease during her meetings with Grusha, Yasha’s mother, and eventually stays in contact with Yasha and her brother, Mekki, after returning to Scotland. She explains that she can relax and be herself around those who understand and accept her hybrid identity: “I relaxed without the need to prove, explain or distinguish myself. Nor squeeze to fit in, nor watch out of the corner of my eye the threats that my existence could provoke in the wrong place in the wrong time among the wrong crowd” (310). Oonk notes: “The reconnection with the mother country is one of the key elements in the diaspora literature. It obviously refers to a strong feeling of embeddedness, cosiness, cordiality and the affection of family, friends and like-minded people” (287). Hence, this journey serves as a catalyst for Natasha to embrace her Sudanese identity while also accepting her hybrid self, which is shown in her relief in meeting Yasha. That reunion makes her realise that she can be both, rather than having to choose. Her experience highlights the significance of cultural congruity and familial ties in shaping one’s sense of self and belonging.

In contrast to Natasha, Malak exhibits a steadfast commitment to her faith and spiritual beliefs. I bring up Malak here to contrast her with Natasha and to stress the narrowness of the “Muslimwoman” hijab-wearing stereotype. The fact that, even though she is religious, Malak does not wear hijab makes the point that wearing hijab cannot be considered as the only standard with which to classify Muslim women. Despite her choice not to wear hijab, Malak believes in the importance of religious teaching in raising children and maintaining faith in a changing world:

> It is the biggest loss to become religiously illiterate, to be left without a choice. This is why my side of the family packed up and left. To spare themselves all this […] My mother didn't wear hijab, for example. But their faith mattered to them. I was the one who was the rebel. I ran away from home because I wanted to become an actor. I broke their hearts because I had grand ambitions. (71–72)

Malak's rebelliousness as an aspiring actor does not detract from her religiosity, as she continues to maintain her practice of faith despite her "disreputable" career. The novel depicts Malak attending several *zikr* groups and embarking on a pilgrimage, where she reads a section of the Qur'an every day in a different place. Liberatore and Fesenmyer observe: "[…] religious practices, discourses and idioms are transformed 'in motion'. Rituals are adapted, institutions are transformed, and individuals seek to adapt dynamic religious practices and ideas to new settings and circumstances" (238). Malak, practising her religion in a secular environment, demonstrates this dynamic response by employing innovative adaptations to her religious observances. Notably, her attendance at contemporary *zikr* groups takes place outside typical religious settings, instead occurring in communal spaces like dance studios and beaches. Through these scenes, Aboulela offers a portrayal of a Muslim woman whose identity and faith extend beyond the narrow confines of any single marker or paradigm.

In the short story "The Boy from the Kebab Shop", Aboulela portrays another facet of the complexity of Muslim women's experiences with migration and identity. The character of Shushu serves as a foil to characters like Sammar and Najwa, who find solace in their religious beliefs. Unlike these characters, Shushu marries a non-Muslim Scottish man against her family's wishes and is subsequently disowned and cut out of her mother's inheritance. After arriving in Scotland, Shushu finds herself feeling homesick and disillusioned by her husband; she turns to excessive drinking and watching Egyptian films

to relieve her homesickness. Unlike other characters in Aboulela's works who rely on religion to cope with the challenges of migration, Shushu rejects Islam completely, instead seeking solace in other means. This portrayal of Shushu's approach to handling the challenges of migration is another example of the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's experiences, Aboulela offers here another nuanced depiction of the intersecting factors that contribute to Muslim women's identity formation. The fact that Shushu's response deviates from those of Aboulela's other characters highlights the message that cross-cultural experiences vary widely and can have unexpected outcomes.

Hybridity and Ambivalence

In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela offers a nuanced depiction of Muslim women's experiences with migration, rather than offering the reader a simplified view of either pious religious adherence or complete abandonment of one's cultural heritage. Instead, Aboulela portrays the complex and often conflicted ways in which female Muslim migrants navigate intersecting cultural influences. They display varying levels of adaptation to their host culture, resulting in multifaceted hybrid identities, as described by Bhabha. The three Muslim women represented in the novel, although all living in Scotland, each have their own unique experiences and approaches to their mixed identities. This diversity of experiences further demonstrates the richness and multiplicity of Muslim women. By portraying her Muslim female characters in a nuanced and complex light, Aboulela offers a more accurate and holistic representation of the complex experiences of Muslim women living in a foreign culture.

The character of the Egyptian Salma provides another portrayal of Muslim womanhood in a transcultural context. Salma, an Egyptian woman married to a white Scottish convert, tries hard to westernise herself and to immerse herself in her husband's culture, while still maintaining her religious identity. Despite her efforts, her marriage to a Scottish man and

the birth of her Scottish children, Salma feels like an outsider in Scottish society, and recognises that "Digging deeper all the time, craving connections, self-conscious that her roots, despite the children, might not be strong enough" (41). This sense of disconnection is compounded as her children grow up, and she struggles to understand their conversations with her Scottish husband. It alienates her when "[…] she would walk into a room to find them with David and she would have no clue what they were saying even though she could understand every single word" (41). Salma no longer regards herself as a role model for her children because she feels they are embarrassed about her accent, culture and different racial origin. This feeling is amplified when Salma is called into her daughter's school to explain a bruise she (Salma) caused when disciplining her. This experience leaves her feeling humiliated and embarrassed, fearing that her husband will be ashamed of her: "Salma felt that she was embarrassing David in front of his own people, though he never reproached her […] She didn't want him to be ashamed of her, to feel that he had picked her up from the back of beyond, and so she became more careful, often not at ease" (42). In other sections of the novel, Salma is represented as an assertive and determined character. The novel begins with her insistence on visiting Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave, despite opposition from members of the Arabic Speaking Muslim Women's Group, who were angry about the damaged headstone and the defaced plaque inscribed with a Qur'anic verse. The narrator points out that "Salma's refusal to abandon her much-diminished trip stemmed from her insistence not to be stopped or cowed by the Arabic Speaking Muslim Women's Group and her assumption that a true leader forged ahead without need of followers" (3). The determination and perseverance of this dynamic woman are clear throughout the story. Certainly, Salma, who exhibits her flexibility in becoming westernised without compromising her religious beliefs, confounds simplistic assumptions about the passivity of so-called subservient Muslim women.

On the other hand, the character of Iman, Salma's Syrian friend and assistant, initially appears as passive and deferential, with a limited capacity for independent thinking. Because of Iman "Growing up in a family in which her opinion never mattered, she found that her thoughts only developed up to a certain point before the argument aborted or disintegrated" (31). This passivity seems to class Iman with the typical stereotypical view of Muslim women. However, as the novel progresses, Iman undergoes a transformation and begins to assert her independence and push back against external constraints. This transformation involves a decision to remove her hijab, one of the many things dictated to her. Nevertheless, Iman continues to practise her faith through prayer, exhibiting a form of hybridity, in which she blends into the host culture by ignoring a visible marker of religiosity while continuing to perform some Islamic duties. Her decision mirrors those of other Muslim women who feel pressure to give up their hijab in Western societies, as described by Moni: "'It happens,' said Moni. 'Friends on social media. Suddenly there's an updated photo and they're not wearing it anymore. The pressure, I guess, especially in the US or France'" (196–97). Iman's character development, in which she gains a newfound sense of agency after experiencing the upheaval of two divorces in a state of exile, provides further evidence to counter popular assumptions about the homogeneity of Muslim women's experiences.

Aboulela presents another example of hybridity through the character of Moni, an assertively religious woman. The narrator highlights that Moni became deeply religious only after giving birth, suggesting that her religiosity is a conscious and deliberate choice made within a secular society and not enforced (20). Despite her upbringing in a liberal environment and her previous job at a bank, Moni remains conventional in many ways and resists assimilation, preserving her Sudanese lifestyle and clothing that she believes constitute part of her identity. For example, shortly after arriving at the loch, she changes into a traditional *jellabiya*, an ankle-length garment worn by men and women in various

parts of the Middle East and North Africa. Moni's ambivalent attitude towards Western cultures reflects both admiration and alienation as she contemplates Salma's process of westernisation, which is making her different from herself (102). I argue that Aboulela's representation of Moni's views highlights the complexities of Muslim women's experiences with westernisation and the varied ways in which they are influenced by the cultures of their host countries. As a woman who is religiously devout and resistant to fully assimilating into Western culture, Moni defies binary portrayals of Muslim women as either passive or rebellious. Her ambivalence towards Western cultures, which she admires yet also keeps at a distance, paints a picture of a woman navigating and resisting the dominant culture in her own way.

In a similar manner, the collection *Coloured Lights* explores multiple stories of Muslim women who struggle with intercultural influences in various ways. For instance, the short story "Majed" offers a unique representation of a western Muslim female convert who is depicted as a better Muslim than her Sudanese Muslim husband. This portrayal of Ruqiyyah expresses Aboulela's view of Muslim converts, who often practise Islam in a way that adheres more closely to the religion's original tenets, free from cultural distortions that may be present in certain societies. The distinctive practice of Islam by Muslim women converts highlights the diversity of Muslim women and presents a different perspective on the religion of Islam. For example, when Ruqiyyah discovers her husband secretly drinking alcohol in their home, she responds sternly by disposing of all the bottles. Her adherence to Islamic principles leaves her husband in awe: "[…] who would have ever thought that he, Hamid, born and bred on the banks of the Blue Nile, would end up here with a Scottish wife, who was a better Muslim than he was" (110). Ruqiyyah takes Islam seriously and performs all the prescribed duties of a Muslim in a way that makes her husband think: "This seriousness that he didn't have, baffled him. Something Scottish she brought with her when she stepped into Islam" (113). Ruqiyya's

character is intriguing as it shows the character of a Western convert who has a different perspective on Islam—something that is rarely depicted in Muslim literature. Her story challenges stereotypes about Muslim women by illuminating the varied experiences and practices of converts to Islam.

Another aspect of migration is explored in the short story "Summer Maze", featured in the *Elsewhere, Home* collection, which highlights the perspective of a second-generation Muslim woman immigrant, Nadia. Aboulela's portrayal of Nadia illustrates the differences between immigrant parents, who are exposed to Western values later in life, and their children, who grow up experiencing Western morals and ideals from an early age. These differences create tensions between generations, adding multiple variations to the subjectivities of people from the same family, ultimately underlining the diversity of Muslim women. The story narrates the complex relationship between Nadia and her mother, Lateefa, who holds onto her cultural values and traditions, while Nadia wishes to belong to British society. It unfolds in two parts, with the first narrated by a third-person narrator and the second by Lateefa. The first part of the narrative focuses on Nadia's feelings of shame because of her mother's accent, style, and behaviour, which she finds embarrassing because they do not conform to British custom. Over time, internal struggles ensue, as Nadia tries to balance her desire to assimilate into British society and her obligation to preserve her Egyptian heritage and cultural identity. Nadia's complex relationship with her mother is further illustrated through the loss of her Arabic language, a form of rebellion against her traditional upbringing and also an attempt to distance herself from her heritage. Nadiah recalls: "[…] there remained within her a faint memory of a complete closeness with Lateefa, a time of unqualified approval that was somehow lost with her ability to speak her mother's tongue" (3). Nadia struggles internally and envies her British friends for the ease between them and their parents, who, for example, help them to dress up for Halloween. However, Nadia feels that she has a double lens through

which she can look at the world. She reflects on how she "[…] could see things in the 'normal' way, the same way that her friends did, untainted by Lateefa's judgments. But she could also change the lenses and see what her mother saw" (4). Ironically, Lateefa's deep wish to protect her daughter, by inculcating her old-fashioned and extremely traditionalist views, alienates Nadia, resulting in even more distancing from her Egyptian heritage.

Nadia's visits to Egypt with her mother are always characterised by a state of alienation and displacement: "She could not really think of herself as Egyptian, nor did she want to" (3). However, the introduction of Reem, the fiancée of Nadia's cousin, presents Nadia with a new perspective on Egypt that resonates with her lived experience. With a childhood spent in Oklahoma, and education received in foreign schools, Reem embodies a hybrid identity that reconciles Western modernity with Egyptian cultural traditions. Nadia's exposure to Reem's hybridity and cultural diversity challenges her previous understanding of Egypt and enables her to see her mother's culture in a new light. Reem's English language proficiency and modern style attract Nadia, and she becomes motivated to explore Egyptian literature and language. For example, Nadia notices that "While scarves and long sleeves looked drab and old-fashioned on Lateefa, on Reem they looked fashionable" (9). Despite Lateefa's disapproval of Reem, she actually becomes the portal that attracts Nadia into the world of Egypt and motivates her to learn its language and culture. Through Reem, Nadia becomes acquainted with English translations of Egyptian literature, and becomes encouraged to spend her gap year learning Arabic so she can read Arabic literature in the original. I argue that Aboulela's depiction of Reem represents a solution for immigrant parents whose traditional and rigid outlook often makes it difficult for their children to live balanced and peaceful lives. Reem's hybridity and ability to balance between Western modernity and Egyptian culture inspires Nadia to reconsider her attitude towards her mother's culture and heritage and helps her to reconcile her dual identity and mixed cultural traditions.

The second part of "Summer Maze" highlights the inner struggles of Lateefa, who is caught between her desire to preserve her cultural identity and traditions and her fear of the Western world's negative influences on her family. Aboulela gives Lateefa the opportunity to voice her concerns and fears about her daughter's exposure to the liberal Western lifestyle, which causes tension within their relationship. Reem's comment that "'An immigrant is a parent who finds out too late that she's given up her child for adoption'" (14) reflects the deep-rooted anxieties and fears influencing Lateefa's parental attitude towards Nadia. Despite having migrated to a first-world country, Lateefa presents a paradoxical figure who appears to be lagging behind, failing to integrate into British society. Her sister's observation that "'It is as if, by being away, time stood still for you!'" (18) suggests her reluctance to adapt to the changing cultural landscape and her persistent attachment to traditional values. Oonk notes that individuals in diaspora often have a strong connection with their homeland, but upon reuniting with it, they often experience mixed emotions. While it may be welcoming, the reality of their homeland may not match their expectations. This ambivalence is felt not only by the returnees, but also by those who were left behind (Oonk 285). This ambivalence is particularly evident in the case of Lateefa, whose prolonged absence from her home country makes it difficult for her to grasp the extent of the changes that have taken place there. Meanwhile, her sister finds it perplexing that Lateefa cannot comprehend these transformations, further highlighting the complexity of these ambivalent emotions.

Lateefa's wish to shield her family from the "corrupting" influence of British liberalism reinforces her rigid attitudes towards child-rearing, preventing her from progressing in her role as a mother, even in comparison to her relatives in Egypt. She laments, "I feed on my fear as if it will protect me from what I dread most. In London I pass laments back and forth with other mothers. Flailing around in a maze, we swap stories of dead-ends" (19). Lateefa justifies her firmness by saying that "I have to bring Nadia up and keep her

protected and warm like a plant in a glass house, seeing the grey world outside the transparent panes without being thrashed by hail and cut by frost. Growing up untouched by sin and chaos, but not hidden from it" (17–18). This emotion is noted by Oonk, who remarks that parents in diaspora desire their children to succeed in their new countries, yet simultaneously wish them to embrace familial values, marriage customs, and adhere to their shared cultural heritage. On the whole, she notes, individuals living in diaspora tend to strive to preserve and perpetuate their culture, values, language, and religion as much as circumstances allow (285). Although Lateefa's strictness and discipline are grounded in her love and concern for her daughter's protection from the negative influence of Western society, the consequences of her attitude on Nadia's psychological wellbeing and perception of her heritage are serious. Her fear of sin and her insistence on her daughter's "untouched" growth in opposition to social norms and the changing cultural landscape reveal a conservative mindset out of step with the time and place. Lateefa's attitude thus exemplifies the challenges that Muslim women face in navigating their new cultural environment while preserving their cultural identity.

This chapter highlights Aboulela's representation of the diverse identities of Muslim women who are exposed to foreign influences, whether in their home countries or in the West. The varied impact that these experiences have on the construction of their identities illustrates their diversity and multiplicity. Oonk asserts that "Nowadays, scholars acknowledge that there are major differences and variations in migrants' adjustment. They may remain loyal to their homelands, they may adjust to their host societies, or they may evolve in a hybrid set of attachments" (286). Aboulela's fiction supports this perspective: Armstrong argues that "Aboulela's novels confirm that there is no blanket migration narrative, no homogeneous African migration narrative, since migration stories differ" (237). Furthermore, Aboulela's characters exemplify the significance of belonging in shaping identity, presenting a spectrum of attitudes ranging from complete immersion in

Western lifestyles to outright rejection of their behavioural norms. Importantly, her characterisation of Muslim women transcends limiting stereotypes, offering a nuanced and pluralistic view uncommon in mainstream literature. Moreover, Aboulela's depiction of diasporic characters with wide variations in homeland orientation and boundary-maintenance (as per Brubaker's criteria), reflects her efforts to normalise the Muslim experience and convey the shared characteristics of migrants of different faiths. In conclusion, Hall's observation proves essential in understanding diasporic experiences, including those conveyed by Aboulela. Hall argues the diasporic experience is defined:

> […] not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (138)

Aboulela's work aligns with this understanding, as it showcases the ongoing formation and reconfiguration of multiple identities, portraying Muslim diasporic experiences with authenticity and complexity.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have undertaken a comprehensive study of Aboulela's body of work, with the exception of her most recent novel, *River Spirit*, which was published a few months prior to the submission of my work. This investigation therefore encompasses her first five novels, *The Translator*, *Minaret*, *Lyrics Alley*, *The Kindness of Enemies*, and *Bird Summons*, as well as her two collections of short stories, namely *Coloured Lights* and *Elsewhere, Home*. The central focus has been on Aboulela's portrayal of the complexities of her Muslim female characters as they navigate cross-cultural experiences. After migrating herself, and negotiating between her original culture and a foreign culture to shape her subjectivity, Aboulela finds respite in structuring her narratives around the lived experiences of Muslim women who live in the West or who encounter Western values and influences at home. As Aboulela attests:

> And it was in fiction that I found a language to express my anxieties, my misgivings and my reactions to all that was new and surprising […] I was obsessed with the need to express my homesickness and document the daily incidences of cultural difference that I was experiencing. I was anxious about the future of second-generation Sudanese and Muslim immigrants in the West—both from a personal and from a general perspective […] As I kept my speculations and anxieties to myself, they floated down to my subconscious mind, fuelled fictions of culture clashes, loss of identity, wishful dreams. ("Cold" ix–x)

Her narratives, which she addresses primarily to Western readers, often represent the devout Muslim woman who purposefully embraces the values of her religion and practises them with full conviction. Aboulela's choice to often situate her characters in Western settings allows her to represent Muslim women whose embrace of Islam results from an inner faith free from patriarchal pressure, while also reflecting some of her own lived

experiences and powerfully expressing the challenges of her encounter with Western values and perspectives.

As an English-speaking Muslim woman and an English literature scholar, I have observed with disappointment the recurring stereotypes of Muslim women in mainstream English literature and media, which often portray such women as either escapees or terrorists. This frustration was exacerbated by the proliferation of Arab anglophone literature that perpetuates popular orientalist notions. While acknowledging the validity of many of these representations, I also wondered about the absence of perspectives of Muslims holding moderate views. My curiosity was further piqued during my temporary relocation to Australia for my studies, whenever I conversed with Australians and permanent residents from various parts of the world. I found that while many of their perceptions about Muslims had been shaped by stereotypical representations, their interest in learning more about what lies behind the veils of Muslim women was evident and genuine. Given this context, I started to feel a sense of responsibility to represent the often overlooked and under-represented experiences of Muslim women through my analysis of Muslim writers. My choice of Aboulela as my prime subject was motivated by her creation of Islamic fiction that portrays the experiences of Muslim women with whom I can personally connect. Through her narratives, Aboulela challenges Western stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and evokes readers' empathy and understanding of the complexity of identity formation in the Muslim diaspora community. By critically engaging with Aboulela's works, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of Muslim women's experiences, thereby challenging and dismantling the pervasive stereotypes that undermine their voices and agency.

I began this thesis by contextualising my analysis of Aboulela's fiction with a brief overview of the historical representations of Muslim women in Western literature. The

analysis traces the negative shifts that these representations have undergone, which often present Muslim women as either passive and oppressed figures or as active agents of terrorism. This prevailing narrative has marginalised and silenced the voices of Muslim women, further perpetuating stereotypes and stigmatisation. I situate Aboulela's works within this broader context and illustrate the ways in which her narratives challenge and subvert these dominant discourses. Moreover, I draw attention to the most pressing issues facing contemporary Muslim women scholars and activists, many of which are reflected in Aboulela's fiction; these include discrimination against Muslim women in the West as well as entrenched sexism within certain Muslim societies, both of which constrain women's agency and autonomy. The concluding section of this contextualisation highlights the call for an intersectional approach to feminism that accounts for the experiences of Muslim women and foregrounds the significance of Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. I elaborate on how this concept can be applied to the field of Islamic feminism, a movement that call for consideration of the full sociocultural, economic, and political dimensions of Muslim women's experiences in the formation of their identity. By employing an intersectional framework, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges facing Muslim women, thereby contributing to efforts to promote understanding and justice across cultural and religious boundaries.

In addition, this thesis adopts Cooke's neologism of the "Muslimwoman" as a grounding concept for the Western stereotyping of Muslim women and reiterates the limitations and inaccuracies of that characterisation. My examination of Aboulela's works reveals that she creates fictional female characters that regularly challenge these stereotypes, exhibiting independence and agency that transform readers' expectations.

Part of this investigation of Aboulela's fiction examines the dynamics of female-to-female relationships. This highlights how Aboulela dislocates the dominant male–female narrative

of Muslim oppressive patriarchy by focusing her discourse on the complexities of female relations that can be either conflicted or supportive. This analysis leads to an exploration of Islamic feminism and explodes the "Muslimwoman" stereotype. Another critical aspect of Aboulela's fiction is to assert the centrality of marriage to Muslim societies and its role in shaping relationships between genders. This leads me to explore how she represents marital and non-marital relationships and the religious and cultural complexities that govern them. Male-female relationships are carefully set against the dominant Western caricature of the "Muslimwoman". Aboulela's portrayal of marital complications exposes the prevalence of oppressive patriarchy and unjust traditions in Muslim societies, which in Aboulela's words "[…] are rooted in a culture that can evolve, rather than in timeless religious values" ("Restraint" 2). Aboulela has said in an interview that while "terrible things" do happen in Muslim communities, "[…] it is fair to separate what Islam teaches from what Muslims actually do" ("Interview" 7). I concur that her portrayal of the double standards that govern male and female relationships speaks of her rejection of outdated patriarchal attitudes and practices that are often unfairly associated with Islam.

Moreover, this study examines in detail the nature of religion, as depicted in Aboulela's fiction, which distinguishes her works from many other Arab anglophone writings. Aboulela portrays Islam in a unique way; she stresses its centrality in the lives of her characters and often focuses on its spiritual aspects. Unusually, she is writing (in English) for a dual readership in her depiction of Islamic practices, and I have analysed how different groups of her readership might perceive her message. In other words, I apply Wall's notion of "double address" in children's literature to consider how Western readers, as well as English-speaking Muslim readers, might receive Aboulela's portrayal of the Muslim experience. My view is that Aboulela intends to normalise Islamic practices and strip them from their exoticism for Western readers, while at the same time her detailed depiction of them defamiliarises those practices to her Muslim readers. Olson's notion of

the ordinary, as well as the Russian formalist *Ostranenie* are both referred to in analysing this double effect. By employing the concept of "double address" as a framework, this study highlights how Aboulela's fiction caters to various readerships through its concurrent normalisation and de-familiarisation of Islamic practices. My reading demonstrates that Aboulela's portrayal of Islamic practices, stripped of the exoticism and clichéd stereotypes usually associated with them, contributes to her aim to bridge the cultural divide and provide a more accurate understanding of Islam. Simultaneously, the de-familiarisation of Islamic practices for Muslim readers serves to reawaken their appreciation of traditional practices that they might have taken for granted. My contention is that this double-address approach enables Aboulela to reach a broader and more inclusive readership, while educating those readers about the richness and diversity of Islamic traditions.

Additionally, I have examined how, in her plot construction, Aboulela uses an Islamic logic of cause-and-effect, where events are attributed to the will of God. For example, Aboulela believes that conversion to Islam is subject to divine will, rather than didacticism or knowledge, thereby precluding any claim of proselytisation. I contend that Aboulela skilfully avoids this potential accusation by drawing a connection between Islam and Christianity. This leads her to critique the growing prevalence of secularism and the absence of worship in Western society. Aboulela's references to Christianity, spirituality, and religious diversity as positive social elements serves not only to highlight the commonalities between two great religions but also to promote intercultural understanding and tolerance. By presenting religious divergence in terms of worship, rather than as a clash of civilisations, she seeks to foster a sense of connection and shared humanity that transcends cultural and religious divides.

Furthermore, I argue that Aboulela portrays Muslim female characters whose experiences of cross-cultural encounters vary significantly, reflecting their unique individual

experiences. I contend that in depicting characters who react differently to the experience of immigration, revealing their weaknesses and imperfections, Aboulela moves beyond representing Muslim women as a homogenous group and portrays them as individuals with distinct stories and circumstances. By normalising her protagonists through their humanity and relatability, Aboulela challenges the essentialist and reductionist representations of Muslim women that are prevalent in Western media and literature. This approach enables readers to empathise with the complexities of identity formation and cultural navigation experienced by Muslim women, thereby fostering a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the Muslim diaspora experience.

This study is comprehensive in the sense that it analyses most of Aboulela's literary output, tracing her artistic development over time. This inclusive approach highlights the author's shift away from the somewhat idealistic representation of her characters' religiosity that characterised her earlier works; it enables a more nuanced understanding of Aboulela's evolving perspective and aesthetic choices, contributing to a holistic review of her literary journey. The study's inclusivity also provides breadth to the analysis, showcasing many different representations of Muslim women and the ways in which they navigate cross-cultural encounters. This illustrates the great diversity within the Muslim diaspora experience and underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of female identity formation. Also, the thesis makes an original contribution by giving a detailed analysis of Aboulela's novel, *Bird Summons*, which has so far received limited scholarly attention. That analysis sheds light on the novel's thematic preoccupations and aesthetic choices and provides a deeper understanding of Aboulela's evolving literary strategies and themes.

It is worth mentioning that despite my personal identification with Aboulela's representations of Muslim women's experiences, I do not claim, by any means, that this is

the only valid response possible. Undoubtedly, some Muslim societies, like any other given society, include subjugated and abused women, waiting for a chance to escape. There are both extremists and liberals in all Muslim societies. Yet, these figures (of subjugated women) have dominated Western representations for a long time. The image of the devout Muslim woman who embraces her religion with full devotion and happiness has only recently appeared in Western literature. Therefore, this thesis emphasises the importance of offering a counterbalance to the prevalent stereotypical representations of Muslim women that have so dominated Western discourse. By showcasing one novelist's depiction of the diversity and complexity of Muslim women and their experiences, this study highlights the importance of listening to new voices and perspectives. It challenges essentialising and reductionist accounts, fosters empathy and understanding, and promotes respect and inclusivity. In conclusion, this study calls for further critiques of these emerging depictions of Muslim women in Western culture, highlighting the significance of engaging with and valuing diverse perspectives.

My study acknowledges its limitations and opens the field to more scholarly studies of Aboulela's works. First, an analysis of the representation of Muslim men in Aboulela's fiction would further our understanding of her work. Second, due to the nature of the topics covered in this study, this analysis was limited to the examination of character development and plot, thereby overlooking other important literary elements, such as narrative voice, tone, and diction. Third, the decision to include most of Aboulela's fictional works within the scope of this study precluded opportunities for comparing her work with that of other Muslim authors of fiction. Future studies may choose to make comparative analyses of literary production within the Muslim diaspora and examine how Aboulela's work is situated within such broader discussions. Such research could offer valuable insights into the thematic, aesthetic, and ideological features of literature

emerging from the Muslim diaspora and provide different perspectives on the cultural and literary contexts in which Aboulela's works are situated.

Finally, I hope, as I complete this thesis, that I have contributed knowledge about Islam and Muslim women and that my analysis has helped to reduce the many dominant misconceptions about them. Certainly, incorporating more contemporary Muslim literature within the global field of literary criticism will help to create more understanding and will help to dispel the climate of suspicion that Muslims in diaspora usually encounter.

Works Cited

Abbas, Sadia. *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

Abdel Wahab, Ahmed Gamal. "Counter-Orientalism: Retranslating the "Invisible Arab" in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Lyrics Alley*." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36.3 (2014): 220–241.

Abdul Majid, Amrah. *The practice of faith and personal growth in three novels by Muslim women writers in the Western diaspora*. Dissertation. Monash University, 2016.

Abdullah, Muhammad. "*Minaret*: Islam and Feminism at Crossroads." *Femeris* 2.2 (2017): 154–165.

Aboulela, Leila. "And My Fate Was Scotland" in *Wish I Was Here*. ed. by Kevin MacNeil, and Alec Finlay. Edinburgh: Pocketbooks: National Galleries of Scotland, 2000.

– – –. "Back to Khartoum: Leila Aboulela Returns to the Land of Her Fathers" *Independent Newspaper*. London: Independent Print Limited, 2010.

– – –. *Bird Summons*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2019.

– – –. "A Cold but Fertile Ground." in *Islam and the West: A Love Story?* ed. by Sumita Mukherjee and Sadia Zulfiqar. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. viii–xiii.

– – –. *Coloured Lights*. Edinburgh: Polygon-Birlinn, 2001.

– – –. *Elsewhere, Home*. London: Telegram, 2018.

– – –. “An Interview with Leila Aboulela.” Interview by Claire Chambers. *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 3.1 (2009): 86–102.

– – –. “Interview with Leila Aboulela.” Interview by Peter Cherry. Seminar in series “Representing Muslims in Scotland and the North East” *University of Edinburgh* (2013).

– – –. “Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative.” Interview by C. E. Rashid *Interventions* 14.4 (2012): 613–624.

– – –. *The Kindness of Enemies*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2015.

– – –. *Lyrics Alley*. London: Phoenix-Orion Books Ltd, 2010.

– – –. “Leila Aboulela.” Interview by Claire Chambers. *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. pp. 97–114.

– – –. *Minaret*. New York: Black Cat-Grove/Atlantic, 2005.

– – –. “Moving Away from Accuracy.” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. 22 (2002): 198–99.

– – –. “Restraint? Sure. Opression? Hardly”. *Washington Post* 22/07/2007.

– – –. *The Translator*. New York: Black Cat-Grove/Atlantic, 1999.

Ahmed, Afia. “The Clothes of My Faith.” in *It’s Not About the Burqa*. ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019. pp. 65–78.

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Ismail. *Sahih Al-Bukhari: The Translation of Bukhari's Authentic Hadiths.* Trans. Khan., Muhammad Muhsin. Vol. 8. Book 78. Hadith 2. 9 vols. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam, 1997.

Al-Daraiseh, Banan. "The Journey Narrative: The Trope of Women's Mobility and Travel in Contemporary Arab Women's Literary Narratives." Dissertation. University of Arkansas, 2012.

Al-Munajjid, Mohammad Saalih. "She Is Asking for Separate Accommodation; Is That Regarded as Causing Separation between Her Husband and His Family?" *Islam Question and Answer*. 2007. https://islamqa.info/en/answers/94965/she-is-asking-for-separate-accommodation-is-that-regarded-as-causing-separation-between-her-husband-and-his-family. Accessed 14/10/2020.

Al-Tabrizi, Al-Khatib, and M. N. Al-Albani. *Mishkat al-masabih*. Vol. 22. Trans. by James Robson. Calcutta, India: Scholar Printing Works, 1939.

Aladylah, Majed. "Dislocating Narrativity: Hybridity, Culture and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*." *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University* 46. October-December (2018): 478–486.

Alahmad, Asma. "حقيقة القربان والوَاد في شمال وجنوب الجزيرة العربية" [The Reality of *Al-Qurban* (Sacrifice) and *Al-Wu'ad* (Female Infanticide) in the North and South of the Arabian Peninsula]. *Ain Shams Periodical* 49.3 (2021): 1–19.

Alghafli, Zahra, Trevan Hatch, and Loren Marks. "Religion and relationships in Muslim families: A qualitative examination of devout married Muslim couples." *Religions* 5.3 (2014): 814–33.

Alghamdi, Alaa. “Translating silence transmitting faith: personal and cultural understanding in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*.” *International Journal of English and Literature* 5.1 (2014): 23–33.

Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2006.

Almaeen, Mona. “Spirituality and Islamic Feminism: A Critical Analysis of Religious Agency in Selected Literary and Cinematic Works.” Dissertation. University of Kent, 2018.

Alqahtani, Norah. “Muslim Feminisms and Fictions in a Postcolonial Frame: Case Studies of Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Aboulela.” Dissertation. University of Kent, 2017.

Ameri, Firouzeh. “Veiled Experiences: Rewriting Women’s Identities and Experiences in Contemporary Muslim Fiction in English.” Dissertation. Murdoch University, 2012.

Annawawi, Sharaf, and Bin Imam Abu Zakariya Yahya. “Riyadh-us-Saliheen” Vol. I. Karachi, Pakistan: International Islamic Publisher Ltd, 1983.

Arkhagha, Leen, and Yousef Awad. “Faith, Identity and Magical Realism in Leila Aboulela’s *Bird Summons*.” *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 12.4 (2021): 115–127.

Armstrong, Andrew. “Mapping ‘Sacred’Space in Leila Aboulela’s *the Translator* and *Minaret*.” *African Migration Narratives: Politics, Race, and Space* (2018): 222–238.

Ashraf, Saimah. “Shattering Illusions-Western Conceptions of Muslim Women.” *Islamfortoday.com* (1998).

At-Tirmidhi Muhammad lbn ‘Eisa, ed. *Jami’ at-Tirmidhi*. 6 vols. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007.

Awad, Yousef. *Cartographies of identities: Resistance, diaspora, and trans-cultural dialogue in the works of Arab British and Arab American women writers*. Dissertation. The University of Manchester, 2011.

– – –. “Fiction in contest with history? Faith, resilience and the war on terror in Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*.” *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 18.1 (2018): 71–90.

Badran, Margot. “Between Muslim Women and the Muslimwoman.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24.1 (2008): 101–106.

– – –. “Islamic feminism revisited.” *Countercurrents.org.* 17 (2006). [online]. Accessed 10 February 2023.

– – –. “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” *Al-AhramWeekly* [online] 17–23 January 2002.

Badri, Amna, and Lee Burchinal. “The Ahfad University for Women: A Sudanese Educational Experiment: Women and Change.” *The Ahfad Journal* 21.2 (2004): 16–30.

Bakkar, Nafisa. “On the Representation of Muslims: Terms and Conditions Apply.” in *It’s not about the burqa.”* ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019. pp. 45–64.

Batisai, Kezia. “Transnational Labour Migration, Intimacy and Relationships: How Zimbabwean Women Navigate the Diaspora.” *Diaspora Studies* 9.2 (2016): 165–78.

Bechtold, Peter K. “The Society and Its Environment.” in *Sudan: A country study*. ed. by La Verle Berry. Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2015.

Behdad, Ali. “Orientalism and Middle East Travel Writing.” *Orientalism and Literature*. ed. by Geoffrey Nash. Cambridge University Press, 2019. pp. 185–201.

Behloul, Samuel M. “Religion and the (De-)Construction of Diaspora.” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 5.1 (2016): 65–86.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2012.

bin Ash’ath, Imâm Hâfiz Abu Dawud Sulaiman, eds. *Sunan Abu Dawud*. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2008.

(*The) Bodyguard* [TV series] directed by John Strickland and Thomas Vincent. Netflix, 2018.

Bouattia, Malia. “Between Submission and Threat: The British State’s Contradictory Relationship with Muslim Women.” in *It’s Not About the Burqa*. ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019. pp. 209–222.

Bouma, Gary D, Joan Daw, and Riffat Munawar. “Muslims Managing Religious Diversity.” in *Muslim Communities in Australia*. ed. by Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001. pp. 53–72.

Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. 4th edn. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.

Brubaker, Rogers. "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28.1 (2005): 1–19.

Butt, Nadia. "Negotiating Untranslatability and Islam in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*." *Matatu* 36.1 (2009): 167–79.

Carastathis, Anna. "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory." *Philosophy Compass* 9.5 (2014): 304–14.

Carbado, Devon W., et al. "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10.2 (2014): 303–312.

Carland, Susan. *Fighting Hislam*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Taylor and Francis, 1997.

Cooke, Miriam. "Deploying the Muslimwoman." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24.1 (2008): 91–99.

– – –. "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1 (2000): 91–110.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140.1 (1989): 139–67.

Dimitriu, Ileana. "'Crossing and Dwelling': Home as a State of Mind in Aboulela's *Minaret* and Gordimer's *The Pickup*." *Scrutiny 2.* 19.1 (2014): 119–134.

Dr. Ateeq, Madeehah. .الكتابه بلغة الآخر *[Writing in the Other's Language]*. Amman: Yazouri Group for Publication and Distribution, 2018.

Edwin, Shirin. "(Un)Holy Alliances: Marriage, Faith, and Politics in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9.2 (2013): 58–79.

Elmarsafy, Ziad, and Anna Bernard. "Orientalism: Legacies of a performance." in *Debating Orientalism*. ed. by Ziad Elmarsafy, Anna Bernard and David Attwell, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. pp.1–17.

Eltahawy, Mona. "Too Loud, Swears Too Much and Goes Too Far." in *It's Not About the Burqa*. ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019. pp. 3–10.

Essien, Essien D. "The Interplay between Conflict and Solidarity in Co-Wife Family Relationship: Experience from Africa." *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 7.4 (2018): 1544–1563.

Eyadat, Zaid. "Islamic Feminism: Roots, Development and Policies." *Global Policy* 4.4 (2013): 359–368.

Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn, and Lois Bardsley-Sirois. "Obedience (Ta'a) in Muslim Marriage: Religious Interpretation and Applied Law in Egypt." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 21.1 (1990): 39–53.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Religion, Intersectionality, and Queer/Feminist Narrative Theory: The Bildungsromane of Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, and Randa Jarrar." in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*. ed. by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2016. pp. 101–122.

Gamal, Ahmed. "تمثيل الهوية والنوع في روايتي ليلى ابو العلا" [Retranslating Identity and Gender in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Lyrics Alley*]. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. 35 (2015): 131–51.

Gana, Nouri. *Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd edn. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Gidaris, Constantine. "Victims, Terrorists, Scapegoats: Veiled Muslim Women and the Embodied Threat of Terror." *Postcolonial Text 13.1* (2018).

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, and Jane I. Smith. "Adjusting the Tie That Binds: Challenges Facing Muslim Women in America." in *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. ed. by Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn. Leiden: Brill, 2003. pp. 39–64.

Haidrani, Salma. "Eight Notifications." in *It's Not About the Burqa*. ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019. pp. 127–143

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." in *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*. ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. pp. 392–403.

Hasan, Md. Mahmudul "Seeking Freedom in the 'Third Space' of Diaspora: Muslim Women's Identity in Aboulela's *Minaret* and Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 35.1 (2015): 1–17.

Hassan, Riffat. “Feminist Theology: The Challenges for Muslim Women.” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 5.9 (1996): 53–65.

Hassan, Waïl S. *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Herath, Thiloththama. “Women and Orientalism: 19th Century Representations of the Harem by European Female Travellers and Ottoman Women.” *Constellations* 7 (2016): 10.

Hoel, Nina, and Sa’diyya Shaikh. “Sex as Ibadah: Religion, Gender, and Subjectivity among South African Muslim Women.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29.1 (2013): 69–91.

Hughes, Laura. “David Cameron: More Muslim Women Should ‘Learn English’ to Help Tackle Extremism” *The Telegraph*, 17 Jan 2016.

Hussein, Shakira. “From Rescue Missions to Discipline: Post-9/11 Western Political Discourse on Muslim Women.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 28.76 (2013): 144–154.

Ibrahim, Jamal Mohammed. “أدب سوداني عربي بلسان إنجليزي” [Sudanese Arabic Literature in an English Tongue]. الشرق الأوسط *[Asharq Al-Awsat]* 25 December 2002.

Inge, Anabel. *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Jawad, Haifaa. “Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of Muslim Women Living in the West.” *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. ed. by Jawad, Haifaa and Tansin Benn. Leiden: Brill, 2003. pp. 1–17.

– – –. “Women and the Question of Polygamy in Islam.” *Islamic Quarterly* 35.3 (1991): 181–190.

Jones, Rachel Bailey. *Postcolonial Representations of Women: Critical Issues for Education*. vol. 18. Springer Dordrecht, 2011.

Juergensmeyer, Mark, and Wade Roof, eds. *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAG. 2012. Web.

Kahf, Mohja. *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Kanani, Iman, et al. “The Relationship of Muslims with Non-Muslims Based on the Concept of *Muwālāt* (Loyalty) in the Qurʾān: A Contextual Analytical Study.” *Humanomics* 33.3 (2017): 258–273.

Khalifa, Mahmoud. *Muslim Women Write Back: Hybridity, Islam and the Quest for Identity*. Dissertation. Cairo University, 2011.

Khan, Mariam. “Feminism Needs to Die.” in *It’s Not About the Burqa*. ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019. pp. 105–114.

Kuzhiyan, Muneer Aram. “The Many Riches of Human Flourishing: On the *Veiled* Agent in *Veil* Narratives.” *Transnational Literature* 6.2 (2014): 1–12

Lamrabet, Asma. *Women and Men in the Qur’ān*. trans. by Muneera Salem-Murdock. Cham. Springer, 2018.

Landry, Donna. “Said before Said.” in *Debating Orientalism*. ed. by Ziad Elmarsafy, Anna Bernard and David Attwell. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. pp. 55–72.

Lazarus, Neil. *Post Colonial Literary Studies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Lewis, Reina. *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Liberatore, Giulia, and Leslie Fesenmyer. “Diaspora and Religion.” in *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2018. pp. 233–340.

Marcotte, Roxanne D. “Muslim Women in Canada: Autonomy and Empowerment.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30.3 (2010): 357–373.

Mehdid, Malika. “A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The ‘Oriental’ Female.” in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation*. ed. by Haleh Afshar, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1993. pp. 18–58.

Melman, Billie. *Women’s Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work*. London: Macmillan, 1992.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. London: Electric Book Co., 2000.

Moorehead, Alan. *The White Nile*. Harper Collins, 1960.

Morey, Peter. “Applications of Neo-Orientalism and Islamophobia in Recent Writing.” in *Orientalism and Literature*. ed by Geoffrey Nash, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. pp. 269–85.

Mutman, Mahmut. “From Orientalism to Islamophobia.” in *Orientalism and Literature*. ed by Geoffrey Nash, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. pp. 255–68.

Nash, Geoffrey. “Re-Siting Religion and Creating Feminised Space in the Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela.” *Wasafiri* 17.35 (2002): 28–31.

Nganase, Tebogo Rosina, and Wilna Basson. “Mother- and Daughter-in-Law Relationship within a South African Context: Influence of Family Systems.” *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 27.6 (2017): 537–40.

Ofcansky, Thomas P. “Historical Setting.” in *Sudan: a Country Study*. ed. by LaVerle Berry. 5th edn. Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2015. p. 426.

Olson, Liesl. *Modernism and the Ordinary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Oonk, Gijsbert. “Disconnecting from Home: Contesting the Salience of the Diaspora.” *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*. ed. by Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer, London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2018. pp. 284–290.

Öztürk, Cemal. “Revisiting the Islam-Patriarchy Nexus: Is Religious Fundamentalism the Central Cultural Barrier to Gender Equality?” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* (2022): 173–206.

Pasura, Dominic. “Multi-Religious Diasporas.” *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*. ed. by Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer, London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2019. pp. 113–119.

Phillips, Christina. “Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*: Reading Islam in the West.” *Wasafiri* 27.1 (2012): 66–72.

Rabho, Laila Abed. "'My Mother-in-Law Ruined My Life': the Jealous Mother-in-Law and the Empowerment of Palestinian Women." *Contemporary Islam* 9 (2015): 455–470.

Rashad, Hoda, Magued Osman, and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi. "Marriage in the Arab World." *Population Reference Bureau* (2005).

Rittenour, Christine. "Daughter-in-Law Standards for Mother-in-Law Communication: Associations with Daughter-in-Law Perceptions of Relational Satisfaction and Shared Family Identity." *Journal of Family Communication* 12.2 (2012): 93–110.

Riyani, Irma. *The Silent Desire: Islam, Women's Sexuality and the Politics of Patriarchy in Indonesia*. Dissertation. The University of Western Australia, 2016.

Rizzo, Helen, Abdel-Hamid Abdel-Latif, and Katherine Meyer. "The Relationship between Gender Equality and Democracy: A Comparison of Arab Versus Non-Arab Muslim Societies." *Sociology* 41.6 (2007): 1151–1170.

Ruby, Tabassum F. "Listening to the Voices of Hijab." *Women's Studies International Forum* 29.1 (2006): 54–66.

Saeed, Abdullah. *Islam in Australia*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003.

———, and Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Searching for Identity: Muslims in Australia." *Muslim Communities in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001.

Saeidi, Masumeh, et al. "Rights of Children and Parents in Holy Quran." *International Journal of Pediatrics (Mashhad)* 2.3.2 (2014): 103–113.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1995 (1978).

Saleem, Amna. “Shame, Shame, It Knows Your Name.” in *It’s Not About the Burqa*. ed. by Mariam Khan, London: Picador, 2019.

Sarnou, Dalal “Narratives of Arab Anglophone Women and the Articulation of a Major Discuorse in a Minor Literature.” *International Studies Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 16.1 (2014): 65–81.

Sayadi, Wajidi, et al. “Theology of Jiḥād Based on the Ḥadīth: Ṣaḥīh Bukhāri’s Perspective.” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 76.4 (2020): 1–8.

Shklovsky, Victor. “Art as Technique.” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. by Lee T.Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Loncoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

Spaulding, Jay L. et al. “Sudan.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2020. Web. (Accessed March 2020).

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 171–219.

Steiner, Tina. “Strategic Nostalgia, Islam and Cultural Translation in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* and *Coloured Lights*.” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 20.2 (2008): 7–25.

Steinitz, Tamar. “Back Home: Translation, Conversion and Domestication in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*.” *Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. 15.3 (2013): 365–382.

Taha, Nagla Babelkheir Ibrahim. “Girls’ Educational Aspirations and Gender Inequalities in Education among Disadvantaged Groups in Sudan: Women and Change.” *The Ahfad Journal* 38.2 (2021): 3–10.

Tapper, Richard, and Nancy Tapper. “Marriage, Honour and Responsibility: Islamic and Local Models in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.” *Cambridge anthropology* 16.2 (1992): 3–21.

Tarazi, Norma. *The Child in Islam*. American Trust Publications, 1995.

Tonnessen, Liv. “Is Islam a Threshold for Escape or an Insurmountable Barrier? Women Bargaining with Patriarchy in Post-Islamist Sudan.” *Comparative studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30.3 (2010): 583–394.

Toossi, Katayoun. “Dislodging (New) Orientalist Frames of Reference: Muslim Women in Diasporic and Immigrant Muslim Anglophone Narratives.” Dissertation. University of Alberta, 2012.

Wall, Barbara. *The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991.

Wesselhoeft, Kirsten. “The Constraints of Choice: Secular Sensibilities, Pious Critique, and an Islamic Ethic of Sisterhood in France.” *Sociology of Islam* 7.4 (2019): 226–244.

Yegenoglu, Meyda. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Zannoun, Ghadir. “Postmodern Subjects and the Nation: Contemporary Arab Women Writers’ Reconfigurations of Home and Belonging.” Dissertation. University of Arkansas, 2011.

Zine, Jasmin. “Lost in Translation: Writing Back from the Margins.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24.1 (2008): 110–116.

Zulfiqar Chaudhry, Sadia. “African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender.” Dissertation. University of Glasgow, 2014.