

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

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Title of the Book: *Minaret*

Author: Leila Aboulela.

Publisher: London: Bloomsbury.

Publication Year: 2005.

Pp. 288

ISBN: 0747576262.

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Aboulela's *Minaret*: A New Understanding of Diasporic Muslim Women in the West

Diasporic Muslim women living in the West undergo a series of labels and stereotypes for a long time. The humiliation further developed ever since 9/11 and 7/7 incidents. In literature too, Muslim women are being caricatured and misrepresented by the dominant literary figures that include Muslim writers such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, and so on. Apart from this well-known and dominating group, in the past decade of the current century, a new genus of contemporary British Muslim writers seems to have come into sight with an impressive list of novels. This burgeoning group of writers explores their experiences and choices in a unique manner that was rarely heard before. While living in the sturdily Islamophobic Western society, they uphold religious beliefs and practices in a sharp contrast to the prevailing group of British Muslim writers who arguably participate in the neo-Orientalist venture of distorting and misrepresenting their religion and culture.

It is important to contextualize Leila Aboulela in this milieu of the contemporary British diasporic literary tradition. Her second novel *Minaret* (2005) singles out her as one of the most influential authors of the new wave of British Muslim writers. She refuses to look at the religion of Islam with a western eye, nor does she subscribe to the conventional trendy narrative of representing identity crisis or clash of cultures in Britain. As an alternative narrative, Aboulela expresses experiences of growing up with customs and beliefs in both her native land Sudan and her host country Britain. The novel is a journey of self-exploration and sharing of the inner-self of a Muslim woman whose identity was looked down upon, especially in the post -9/11 and-7/7 era.

The novel begins with Najwa's life in Sudan's capital, Khartoum in 1984-85. In Khartoum, her rich family maintains a Westernized way of life and traveling abroad on holidays has been their regular schedule. Her house is a grand one looked after by six servants. Her father is a high-ranking government official and very close to the president of Sudan. Being a daughter

of upper-class Westernized Sudanese family, Najwa's focus drops on pop music, western clothes, and parties. She studies at the University of Khartoum.

Her parents have brought up her with some social values like charity that includes visiting hospitals and children's home and helping the poor people, but in family basically the servants were the ones who pray regularly. As the 1980s political upheaval emerges, her father is arrested and later executed, while the rest of the family members—her brother and mother—flee the country to escape possible dangers. Coming to London, Najwa faces a series of catastrophes: her brother is arrested and sentenced to a long imprisonment due to drug related offences and stabbing a policeman, and the only remaining link to her past, her mother suffers long sickness and dies.

Her disillusionment extends when she meets her former lover Anwar in London, who is brought to UK by another coup in Sudan. Najwa's rendezvous with Anwar started long ago when they were in Sudan. Anwar has been a diehard critic of her father and the government. While Najwa metamorphoses into a religious person in London, the self-professed left activist Anwar continues to remain a very irreligious person to whom hijab-wearing women are "disgusting" and "depressing". Despite this attitude, she continues to love him. Despite establishing an intimate relationship with Anwar, she realizes that Anwar is not honest and has no intention to marry her. Having understood this, she gets the courage to break up with him. For the first time, she and her brother feel that they are alone and helpless amid crowds of London city, when they get to know that their father is executed and his assets are confiscated. She then re-discovers the beauty of her faith in Islam when she comes in contact with a group of women at the Regent's Park masjid. As time goes, her love and allegiance to Islam increases. She finds peace and solace in her faith in God. In the meantime, she has become a housekeeper for a rich family.

The second part of the novel is about the change Najwa undergoes after embracing Islam. She becomes a practicing Muslim, and starts wearing hijab. The religious space helps her to breathe peacefully with satisfaction, as she says; "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room ...". This is how her faith becomes a rescuer from all her disillusionments and torments of her diasporic life. She does not rely on Western feminist ideas to seek shelter amid the tribulations she faces, rather she discovers an alternative mode of empowerment and contentment in the female area at Regent's Park masjid.

Najwa's interactions with women in the masjid and the practice of wearing hijab can be viewed as a means of recuperating the self from disturbing experiences she faces because of her gender and immigrant status. Islam becomes a way to get rid of these tribulations and provides her with the impetus to start a fresh life ahead. Her life is now a disciplined one because of her newly-found faith what she previously did not follow. Her journey to this new life has not been without catastrophes. Specifically, for wearing hijab, she endures painful experiences as people

around her are “contemptuous” of hijab, and they sense discomfort by the sight of hijab-wearing women. She is attacked on a bus only because of her Muslim identity that is determined by a piece of cloth on her head (hijab). Even the bus driver who notices the attack and humiliation does not attempt to save her and “looks away”.

There is an allegation against hijab by both Muslim and non-Muslim feminists; they claim that hijab is forcefully put on Muslim women’s head, and therefore it violates human rights. On the other hand, here in this novel we see that the protagonist Najwa does not wear hijab in the predominant Muslim society of Khartoum, whereas she starts wearing it when she lives in London which represents a secular way of life. In Khartoum she used to fast only to lose weight. As she states: “Girls like me who didn’t wear tobés or hijab weren’t praying”. In Khartoum, she accepted colonial-modernity and wore “western style clothes” like “short skirts” and “tight blouses”, while she saw the village girls wear “tobés that [cover] their slimness – pure white cotton covering their arms and hair”. Before embracing hijab, Najwa has been in a dilemma for a while to decide whether she should wear it or not. After a lingering thinking process she decides to wear it, and there are no pressure from anywhere, as she states: “I took this step with no pressure from my parents or my husband. It came after years of hesitation, years during which I held back out of fear that I would look ugly in a head scarf and that my progressive friends would make fun of me.”

After wearing hijab for the first time, she re-discovers her identity and feels excited, as she voices out: “I wrapped the tobe [hijab] around me and covered my hair. In the full-length mirror I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than offer”. The same contentment she senses when she goes out wearing hijab: “When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought “not bad, not so bad”. Around me was a new gentleness.” So it is clear that she embraces hijab as a part of her modesty, and chooses it out of her independent will. Thus Aboulela debunks the conventional negative perception of the critics of hijab who claim that Muslim women are forced to wear it. Finally, she defines hijab and hijab-wearing women by giving it a new light of understanding.

Through *Minaret*, Aboulela dismisses the major allegation against Islam regarding the hijab issue. While it is conventionally accepted that Muslim women are pressured to wear hijab and follow the Islamic way of life, Aboulela shows a strong resilience to wearing hijab and Islamic way of life.