

Identity Politics of Hijab in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

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Abstract:

The paper explores critically the textual representation of the Hijab (Islamic veil) in Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* (2006). The paper hypothesizes that the Hijab as a signifier of religious identity operates by politicizing individual identity on a communal level. This would widen the ideological implication of *Minaret* and the genre of Halal fiction to which this novel belongs. The paper uses the tenets of identity politics theory to argue that the Hijab in *Minaret* is constructed as a textual space where Western Hegemonic ideology is contested rather than negotiated. Once in diaspora, Najwa, the Sudanese protagonist of *Minaret*, turns to re-embrace her long abandoned Islamic faith. She puts on the Hijab as the dress of modesty. According to identity politics theory, Najwa's hijab is initially used as a signifier of her own personal identity through difference. But this difference is soon is empowered as resistance to Western cultural hegemony. She resists different forms of diasporic social retribution, such as Islamophobia, to counter the all-inclusive power of Western hegemony. The paper concludes that identity politics of the Hijab is used by Aboulela to explore the complex nature of identity and belonging of the Muslim subject, notably immigrant female Muslims in the twenty first century.

Keywords: Diasporic Fiction, Islam, Identity Politics, Leila Aboulela, Representation

الحجاب وادلجة الهوية في رواية المنارة للكاتبة ليلى ابو ليلى

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المخلص:

يستجلي هذا البحث التمثيل النصي للحجاب الاسلامي في رواية المنارة (٢٠٠٦) للكاتبة البريطانية من اصول سودانية ليلى ابو ليلى. يفترض البحث ان الحجاب كمشير سيميائي للهوية الدينية يعمل من خلال تسييس او ادلجة الهوية الشخصية على المستوى الجمعي. يوظف البحث اركان نظرية ادلجة الهوية ليجادل ان الحجاب في هذه الرواية قد وطف كفضاء نصي لمقارعة أيديولوجيات الهيمنة الثقافية الغربية. فبطلة الرواية نجوى فتاة سودانية قضت طفولتها ومرهقتها في السودان في اجواء علمانية بعيدة عن الدين والتدين. لكن بعد اضطرارها للتغرب مع من بقي من عائلتها الى لندن بدءاً صحوه روحية تمثلت في التدين بعد فقدانها لما تبقى من عائلتها. ان ارتداء نجوى للحجاب الاسلامي في مجتمع علماني يمكن تفسيره في ضوء نظرية ادلجة الهوية على انه يتجاوز كونه تأكيد الهوية الفردية عبر التغيرات الى تمكين هذا التغيرات ليصبح نوعاً من انواع المقارعة لأيديولوجية الهيمنة الثقافية الغربية. ان هذا له معنى واحد الا وهو ادلجة الحجاب لتأكيد الهوية الدينية الثقافية والبحث في الوقت عينه عن انتماء في مجتمع متعدد الثقافات كالمجتمع البريطاني في مطلع القرن الحادي والعشرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (قص الشتات، الاسلام، ادلجة الهوية، ليلى ابو ليلى، التمثيل النصي).

1. Introduction

The Islamic hijab and its varieties is a highly controversial problem at present in Western societies. The ever-increasing number of Muslim women in Western society since the late twentieth century brought this problem to the forefront, especially with the phenomenal rise of Islamophobia after the events of 9\11. Committed immigrant Muslim women are criticized for wearing hijab especially from Western feminism. European and American feminists and policy makers view hijab as a signifier of oppression since it makes women socially invisible. Thus, many regulations and laws were passed in European parliaments, prohibiting the wearing of the Hijab in public. However, Muslim women view the Hijab as a symbol of their faith. It is the dress of modesty that Sharia commanded.

This controversy surrounding Hijab wearing in Western societies received special attention in the novels of contemporary Anglophone immigrant Arab women novelists. Novelists like

Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf made unique perspectives on hijab in Western societies in their novels by drawing on their life experiences as Muslims and migrants in Western societies. These novelists politicized the Hijab in their novels in the cultural context of identity making.

This paper explores how Leila Aboulela politicized the representation of hijab in a contemporary British society in her debut novel *Minaret* (2005). The paper explores this politicized representation of hijab from the perspective of identity politics theory because the hijab-oriented identity formation does not arise from difference as much as from resistance.

The connection between hijab and identity in *Minaret* is critically explored in many studies but it is persistently treated in the context of personal rather than communal identity. Almost all the available literature on *Minaret* keeps hammering the idea that hijab is a marker of Najwa's core identity in diaspora via difference. No explanation is offered for the role of the diasporic community and its liberal values in fashioning Najwa's identity as a 'hijabie'. Thus, many of the previous studies fail to recognize the identity politics of hijab in this novel. Salah Bourgby, for instance, sees *Minaret* as a story about the rebirth and discovery of identity in a world that is different from that of the root, the homeland. Najwa, the novel's protagonist, experiences bouts of negative emotions that push her to live in isolation. She has found a way out and become her own by wearing the veil (hijab). where morality is based on monotheistic assumptions and conventions rather than on faith and spirituality (2023).

Ashraf Ibrahim Muhamed Zidan highlights that *Minaret* emphasizes how patriarchy and colonization misinterpret religion and the Mashriq (east), respectively. Aboulela aims to correct certain misconceptions and misrepresentations about Muslims and Africans in *minaret*, such as: hijab (veiling), harem, and the role of masjid in demolishing the old binaries. It also illustrates how Aboulela is in agreement with Islamic feminists, particularly in terms of the term hijab and its connotations (2022).

Pankhuri Aggarwal (2018) concludes that the veil is an evasively constructed object that does not have a 'fixed' meaning, and any literary or cultural discourse that involves a colossal picture of the veil should be questioned. Aboulela focuses on faith, piety, and humanity in *Minaret*, presenting a positive picture of veiling. This version of the veil, according to the protagonist of *minaret*, is different from the rest of the world in that she sees it as a symbol of union, peace, stability, protection, shield, and contentment.

Peter Morey provides important insights into the hijab in *Minaret* in his book *Islamophobia and the Novel* (2018). Morey analyzes Najwa's hijab through Saba Mahmood's politics of piety. According to Mahmood, the "faithful subject is *produced* through the performance of

pious behavior and ritual rather than such behavior and ritual symbolizing an inward state of faith" (234). Hijab here is the core of the identity performance in which Najwa as the pious subject "comes into being through bodily acts such as veiling, avoiding eye contact with men, and scrupulously performing prescribed domestic duties" (335). Such things, in Mahmood's view, "are the critical markers of piety, as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious" (158).

In his book, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (2007), Geoffrey Nash describes *Minaret* as "ground-breaking in its representation of migrants endeavouring to establish a Muslim identity in London" (14). Nash explores the specific ways into which diaspora shapes the religious identity of the Muslim migrant in post-millennial British society. Hijab plays a central role in highlighting Najwa's religious identity as conceptualized by the host community and its prejudices against Islam. It is through hijab, Nash observes, that Najwa "shapes an emerging awareness of [her] difference" (136).

Consequently, investigating the phenomenon of the Hijab in Aboulela's *Minaret* through the lenses of identity politics theory is justifiable on the ground that the hijab never appear in a personal context in this novel. It always figures in a communal context loaded with ideological connotations. This would logically mean that the issue of identity related to Najwa's hijab is personal. It is, ideologically speaking, politicized in the sense that difference as the signifier of personal identity is mobilized, politically speaking, as resistance.

2. Identity Politics

Identity politics is a socio-cultural discourse that is based on "the belief that identity itself - elaboration, expression or affirmation —is and should be a fundamental focus of political Work' (Kauffman 167-80). The term "identity politics" has come to refer to any political activity that is based on the individual's self-interest, or the specific viewpoint, of a particular group in society. This group is socially marginalized or one that has suffered (or continues to suffer) a particular injustice or injustice. Disability, race, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, and religion are among the examples.

A good example of this process is the present-day practices of the Islamic hijab. Muslim's head covering has become a vital mark of religious identity, piety of women, modesty, and—reliant on the audience—their subservience and obedience. Amer Sahar argued that "because of this powerful symbolic role, Muslim head-covering practices have provoked heated and emotional debates in both Muslim majority and Muslim minority states" (Amer 2014,19). By means of their symbolic, religious, and contextually relevant types, most clothing styles can "create boundaries between individuals and shape collective identities". As a result, Islamic head coverings "have become a particularly powerful symbolic boundary marker in the last few decades"(Shaheed 2008,294).

This conception of identity politics in relation to religious identity is based on what can be termed as identity performance. Collective identity has to do with people's perception of their group affiliations, according to the majority of social psychologists. The importance is on the subjective features, such as cognitive significance, importance, and private concern. Collective identities, on the other hand, are not like individual convictions or ideals that could be maintained without appearance or social credit. Anthropologists, sociologists, and discourse researchers have persuasively demonstrated that individual identities are largely dependent on recognition by others. In a real sense, French Muslim identity like Moroccan suggests, for instance, that one can assert desired images, situations, and self-understandings in a diversity of contexts, particularly in public places. To be a Muslim is often a more "problematic" or responsible issue in public rather than in private lifecycle. A headscarf is laden in all sorts of symbolic and greatly contested senses. Different ethnic and religious groups require that their own identity be uttered and acknowledged, and identity appearance has a variety of instrumental and political meanings. People are involved in activities that represent and promote their religious identity.

It might be argued that these "form behaviors relevant to the norms and values that are conventionally associated with their religion and this identity performance can serve to consolidate one's religious identity and to mobilize others" (Klein et al. 28-45). The Identity of performance can be takings a variety of formulae and be used not the same purposes. Some critics differentiate between two purposes of in-group bias. A difference can be made between an identity consolidation function and an instrumental function.. First and foremost, "doing religion" approves one's religious identity by articulating the amount of the group characteristically. Religious beliefs reveal one's characteristic identity: they show others who you are, to which religious sect you fit, and what this membership resources to you. A headscarf reveals what sort of Muslim you reflect yourself to be and how your requirements to be realized and appreciated by other people. In addition, the formal look of a headscarf reveals delicate distinctions in terms. Thus, Tajfel & Turner argued that "identity performance can serve to value or affirm the group symbolically and thereby contributes to people's need for a distinctive and positive social identity" (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Thus, when the wearing of a headscarf is forbidden in everyday life, the ability to express one's religion in one's unique method is limited. In addition, vocabularies and experiences that promote one's religious identity make people more confident about themselves (and about their religious group association in particular).

3. Identity Politics of Hijab in *Minaret*

The idea of identity politics is that individual identity is formed through differences, but when these differences are used to resist social or cultural ideologies, it becomes identity politics. This is often seen in diaspora societies, where immigrants, especially committed Muslims, practice their faith as a form of resistance against the dominant culture. In the UK, Najwa's reinvention of her Islamic identity can be seen as an act of identity politics operating within these boundaries. In other words, Najwa is undergoing a shift in identity due to growing up, migrating to a new homeland, and generational transitions. Her new identity had given her power, and she was now capable of expressing her wishes and desires confidently. The novelist depicts the life of her heroes as a reflection of her own experience as a member of the diaspora. Her work deals with the struggles faced by diasporas as they try to express their religious identity, particularly in a foreign land like Najwa. These diasporas encounter different religious, political, lifestyle, and clothing practices in these foreign countries, which makes it difficult for them to adapt. As a result, they use hijab as a symbol of Islam, wearing it as a reminder to non-Muslims that they represent Islam through the hijab or veil. This religious identity allows them to express themselves in a secularized society, where they may feel like outsiders and the hijab empowers them to create a new form of resistance to Western policies that they may not agree with.

Seen from the perspective of identity politics, Najwa's decision to wear the Hijab is not a personal decision of clothing style. Her decision is motivated by the mosque community as a gesture of confirming her belonging and ethnic identity. But since this mosque community is an ethnic minority in a completely secularized Western society, that of London, her decision to wear the Hijab involves her in the ideological clash between Islam and the West. So, what started as a marker of her identity and belonging turns into a tool of resistance to the secular ideologies of the Western hegemony. This can be seen in her subordinate resistance to the Western Islamophobia that she used to meet on the streets of London: "laughter from behind me... I hear footsteps come up behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, Your Muslim scum', then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends – they are laughing. My chest hurts and I wipe my eyes." (*Minaret* 126). Her Hijab is read by Westerners as a signifier of threat and danger. It is identified as the Other. Thus, their Islamophobic reaction to Najwa's Hijab is fashioned as an identity politics because it is communally promoted as a collective hysterical resistance to ideological difference.

Minaret, as such, performs as a critical market for interpreting the Muslim writer, which earnings its cue from current orthodoxies it stands for how secular modernity is the defining characteristic of a West that has exceeded the irrational comforts of religion. Aboulela is cleverly aware of the dominant critical paradigms—post-colonialist theory and cultural politics that will likely shape how her work is interpreted and assessed. Geoffrey Nash cites an interview from 2007 when Aboulela said “in a secular climate, faith is seen as either part

of culture/tradition or it is seen as political [...] Muslims need, for practical purposes, to talk in this [...] language” (Nash 2007,120). In Nash’s opinion, Aboulela adopts a subtle rebellious discourse that engages with Orientalist and postcolonial motifs to project herself as a representation of Islam, rather than adhering to the stale Orientalist discourse of much Western writing on Islam, whether it be fictional or not. (Nash 2007, 45)

In Aboulela’s novels, Islam is seen as in Sadia Abbas words functions as a “socio-psychic tranquilizer” (Abbas,430-461). The heroine's desire for peace, which is presented as religiously feminine, and the apparent ability of religion to bring about this peace, are portrayed as an antidote to a world in social change. Aboulela's novels recast religion as a social practice, as psychological comfort and concentration, as a divine design (replacing the represented God). Providence can only be offered as an explanation through earthly cause-and-effect figures, but in Aboulela's novels, she explores the most shocking impact of religion on the world. Najwa's decision to abandon secular pleasures and material independence in favor of subordination to religious norms is not only a choice that favors willed action in the world; it is also dismissive of other modes of control, such as feminism and Marxism, whose materialist focus renders them unsatisfactory to the woman. *Minaret* exposes the difficulty of struggling to move the secular individualist form of the novel back to its spiritual roots: to fill an art form etched by 300 years of secular individualism with a sense of God as a real presence. It’s a difficult task reflected throughout the novels’ interpretative disasters and challenges, and in the crash between its spiritual agenda and the banality of its chosen form (Morey 2007). Aboulela to sidestep a larger reckoning with the presence, or absence, of God in the world. But by choosing the realist form, Aboulela commits herself to engagement with the world and religion’s presence in it. So the narrowness of her novels’ focus allows her to evade the examination of religion’s social effects that a more expansive realism might yield. Religious and secular concepts become muddled within the very form of the novel. Najwa's decision to wear the hijab symbolizes her newly acquired identity. This shift follows family crises both at home and in the diaspora, as well as the end of her romantic relationship with Anwar. It represents a radical change in her life, leading her away from the secular lifestyle she once pursued. The novel provides vivid details about this transformation, depicting it as a form of self-reinvention. As an immigrant in London, Najwa rediscovers Islam. Her family's privileged status in Sudan caused her to be cut off from Islam, a traditional aspect of the country's culture, even though she was raised in an Islamic nation. Instead of a return to traditional religion, Najwa replaces a Westernized lifestyle with a personal Muslim faith that places the individual at the center of a religiosity that is apart from ethnicity and culture. This is known according to Roy Olivier "the self and hence the individual is at the core of religiosity."(Roy 2004)

Najwa has undergone, if not yet completed, a dramatic transformation from a secular Muslim to a committed hijab by the time the novel opens. She cultivates a new self-understanding based on her faith in Regent's Park, excited to find her feet in the mosque community of women. Najwa's developing ties with Islam compel bodily shifts, such as the wearing of the hijab, which embodies her new piety. She hurriedly adapts to her new mirror image, though she is initially skeptical, as there is no association between her sense of self and the mirror's likeness, despite her occasional consciousness of her ego. "shitty-colored skin" next to the paleness of the English (*Minaret* 81). Her body image does not disintegrate when she studies herself in different mirrors. On the contrary, she feels that each of them treats her with compassion (*Minaret* 100).

At last, Najwa tries her hand at wearing a scarf. First, the protagonist is not deterred by a failed trial. She resists her will and her hair. She said:

I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material squashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears. I pushed them back and turned my head sideways to look at the back and it was an angular hump, a hush barely covered with cloth. The cotton scarf was almost threadbare. It was an old one that my mother used to wear when she oil-treated her hair. Now it flopped at a defeated angle over my forehead. (*Minaret* 232)

Anna Ball summarizes that the main character's decision to wear a hijab was "a gesture towards modesty and a marker of her femininity" (Anna 2010,81). But it demonstrates a deeper point. As Kate Zebiri quotes after Myfanwy Franks, "To wear Islamic dress in Britain today, [women] have to be bold and intrepid"(Franks 2008,81). In light of this, the woman shows bravery and her desire for security and comfort despite her experience with physical displacement. When Najwa is ready to put on. She tries on a scarf, the hijab. After putting the cloth on her hair, she questions whether the image she sees in the mirror is of herself. , "I did 't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined, restrained; something was deflated. And was this real me?" (*Minaret* 245). Najwa is trying on one of her mother's old tobies on the following page, and she describes wearing it like this: "I tied my hair back with an elastic band, patted the curls down with pins. I wrapped the tobe around me and covered my hair (*Minaret* 146).

One mirror, Najwa tells us, "shows a woman in a white headscarf and beige shapeless coat. Eyes too bright and lashes too long" but still "homely and reliable" (*Minaret* 9). Another time, she notes in amazement as she looks at her veiled self in a full-length mirror and finds herself to be admirable. She says that no one is forcing her to wear it, but she hesitates for a while before making the decision. But eventually, this hesitancy will give way to strength. She states :

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

None of these idealized reflections reveals a fractured self. In her mirror image, Najwa is not depressed. She finds her Islamic outfit attractive precisely because it is an expression of her Muslim identity, and she refuses to let white beauty ideals dominate what she considers to be appropriate for a devout Muslim woman. Najwa was content this time and embraced the way she looked. That marked the conclusion of her hard and painful travel toward her rediscovered peace. She turned to Islam and her new veiled persona to escape the corrupt and seductive society.

For Najwa, women wear the hijab as more than just a symbol of piety. It is how piety is developed. Instead of suggesting that there is a one-way relationship between the outside and the inside, anthropologist Saba Mahmood sustains in her study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt that veiling is the "ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious. Although wearing the veil serves at first as a means to tutor oneself in the attribute of shyness, it is also simultaneously integral to the practice of shyness" (Saba 2005 ,316-319). The Qur'an found a comparable connection between veiling and the cultivation of piety. It rebukes believing women not "to display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers," and other male kin (Qur'an 2001,24:31).

Najwa's decision to wear the hijab symbolizes her newly acquired identity. This shift follows family crises both at home and in the diaspora, as well as the end of her romantic relationship with Anwar. It represents a radical change in her life, leading her away from the secular lifestyle she once pursued. The novel provides vivid details about this transformation, depicting it as a form of self-reinvention. Roy Olivier argued "Najwa finds in the multi-ethnic Muslim community centered on the Regents Park Mosque in London a 'community of spiritual affinity'" (Roy 2004). Najwa uses her headscarf and interactions with other women in the masjid as a way to heal herself from upsetting events brought on by her gender and immigration status. The community of women at the mosque provides warmth and safety that are otherwise impossible in the solitary West. Islam provides safety, family, and access to identity. The novel employs the standard elements of domestic immigrant fiction, such as the problem of welcoming female desire in the face of Western hostility and the demands of cultural codes of belonging, allegiance management, and accusations of cultural treason, which are everywhere in migrant fiction and second-

generation young immigrant lives, to create a context in which Islam is the only category of belonging that matters. They suggest alternatives for the left-liberal, anti-imperialist discourse that address the issue raised by the Muslim woman. Aboulela presents very intelligent depictions of Muslim women who wish for their subjugation, which simplifies and purifies opposition to colonial fantasies of female resurgence. That means that if Laura Bush, thankfully unaware of her situation, could use the image of women suffering under, say, the Taliban to justify war, then anti-imperialists could, if they so choose, point to Islamist women who detest modernity and long for a bygone era, whose assent to subjugation is the expression of "agency."

Najwa can now go around freely without being bothered and recognized thanks to veils. She accepts the hijab as a component of her new Islamic identity as a result. Aboulela thus reveals the stolid viewpoint of those who criticize the hijab, claiming that Muslim women are compelled to wear it. Lastly, she offers a fresh perspective on women who wear headscarves, helping to define them. *Minaret* demonstrates how the hijab's significance varies depending on the society, serving only as a diversionary tool. For example, although the West may view the headscarf as oppressive, the *Minaret* depicts a different perspective in which the covered body may feel emancipated from the veil.

Anwar usually responded by saying, "These people are trying to manipulate you. You shouldn't feel bad about it." She was unaware of what Najwa, being a Muslim woman, truly desired. Tariq Ramadan debates that the media portrayals of Islam and Muslims as evil often increase the general fear among the wider community about the presence of Muslims in their countries (Tariq 2002, 223). Anwar holds a negative view towards observant Muslims, believing them to be evil and detrimental to society. Unfortunately, this portrayal is often perpetuated by the news media, which frequently warns non-Muslims about the perceived danger posed by Muslims, often depicting them as barbaric and uncivilized. He seemed to be discussing a different topic as if he wasn't speaking directly to me. He was aware of how his words could be hurtful to me. What makes Najwa finally leave is that to confront her about her increasing religiosity, Najwa converts to Islam after leaving Anwar to cope with her guilt and find solace; she puts on the headscarf and becomes devout. Without family support. Anwar asks a doctrinal question: And he knew how to hurt me. "If everything you hear in the mosque is correct, your beloved Auntie Eva will go to Hell because she's not a Muslim. He tried but he couldn't stop himself from laughing" (*Minaret* 231). After a few days, Anwar came to her place and rang the bell. Instead of buzzing him in, she said, Wait, I'll come down instead:

I put on my new ankle-length skirt and my long-sleeved blouse. I put on my headscarf. It was like the day in Selfridges when I had tried on that skimpy black dress and walked out of the changing room to twirl in front of him. There was still

laughter in me, the desire to tease him one last time. I tied my headscarf with a pin. I slowly walked down the stairs to the shock on his face. (*Minaret* 234)

Anwar has strong opinions against the hijab. For him, women should stop wearing Islamic clothing if they want to see advancements in society and the economy. Women wearing black chadors serve as a constant reminder to Randa and Anwar of the threat posed by intolerant, uncivilized, puritan sides. Gazing at magazine covers with Muslim ladies dressed in black chadors, Randa inquires about Najwa's veil. "How can a woman work dressed like that?" (*Minaret* 29). Elsewhere, Anwar, echoing Randa's words condemns those veiled women saying "We have to go forward not back" (*Minaret* 34). Thus, through a dialog in which these attitudes of the two characters are exposed, veiling is seen as a barrier to advancement. Gole Nilufer argued "veiling is received as a force of „obscurantism“ and is often identified with women's subservience; [...] as an affront to contemporary notions of „gender emancipation“ and „universal progress“ (Gole 2002).

As a predicted outcome of this point of view, some authors argued that "liberating Muslim women as part of the civilizing mission" (Jawad and Benn 2006,12) was a popular theme in works of literature written from an Orientalist perspective. This point of view is shown in *Minaret* by characters who are unable to accept the sight of veiled women, such as Randa and Anwar. The work exposes the negative image of the hijab, criticizing those who link veiling with being backward. Najwa informs the reader right away that she disagrees with Randa's remarks about women who wear headscarves, even if she is unable to say it out loud. She sidesteps Randa's fascinating inquiries with an honest "I don't know" (*Minaret* 29). The reader then frequently comes across Najwa's confessions in the narrative's latter sections, where she talks about how she envies university females who wear headscarves for an unidentified reason. In contrast to Randa, who finds it unbearable to see students at Edinburgh University wearing headscarves, Najwa is never bothered by their presence, she said :

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

Yet, her journey as a committed Muslim isn't as smooth as it seems, as a result of the Islamophobia prevalent in British society, she is mocked for her physical appearance when she starts wearing the hijab. She goes through terrible situations because of her hijab since it is seen as a mark of Islam and some around her find it "critical and judgmental" and find it uncomfortable to see ladies wearing it. She is attacked on a bus due to her Muslim identity since some mistook her head covering for an item of religious clothing. At last, the bus driver who had been witnessing the incident turned to look away without making an effort to spare her from embarrassment. Both Muslim and non-Muslim feminists have made claims against the hijab, claiming that it is a strongly Muslim garment. But she saves praying in the bus till she selects to leave the bus but Allah has given her a greater sense of comfort and safety.

Asad Talal indicates that agency has historically and culturally different meanings. When the West looks at the Muslim woman often veiled and subservient it is as a passive victim against which the assertive, public Western woman can be juxtaposed. He mentions that "the right of the individual to the pursuit of happiness and self-creation, a doctrine easily assailable by secular nationalist thought, is countered by Islamists (as in classical Islamic theology) by the duty of the Muslim to worship God as laid down in the sharia"(Asad 2003,198). In *Minaret*, furthermore to donning the hijab and charming more consistent in her prayers and mosque attendance. , indulging Najwa in elaborate fantasies of submissive males, even wishing herself a concubine in an Arabian nights-type world, "with lifelong security and a sense of belonging" (*Minaret* 215). but the catalyst of change is different: good religious observance and submission, rather than surviving life's vicissitudes and making it to a new place in the world. This existential shift is more apparent in the mosque, which serves as a place of comfort and respite in Najwa than anywhere else.

Najwa's Islamic clothing styles can shape collective identities and create boundaries due to their symbolic, religious, and contextual roles. However, Shaheed Aisha argues that "Islamic head coverings have become a particularly powerful symbolic boundary marker in the last few decades"(Shaheed 2008,294). She said I was reaching out for spiritual pleasure, and she realized that this is what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This is what I had envied in our gardener who recited the Qur'an and our servants who woke up at dawn. "Now when I heard the Qur'an recited, there wasn't a bleakness in me or a numbness, instead I listened and I was alert"(*Minaret* 230)

In Najwa`s bed, she laid her hijab, which I had thrown there. She hadn't prepared herself for this step yet. It was an old scarf, it was her mother`s hair oil. Later on, she went with Wafaa to buy a new scarf and suitable clothes, she wrapped a towel around herself and covered her hair. When she looked at herself in the full-length mirror, she saw another version of herself – noble like her mother, when she came back to her home after shopping she said:

The same sense of satisfaction she gets from wearing a headscarf. She said 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 had, not so had'. Around me was a new gentleness . (*Minaret* 233)

She said that the builders who had been leering down at me from the scaffoldings were unable to see me anymore. She became invisible, and they fell silent. All the excitement and energy that had been present dissipated. Everything became calm, and I thought to myself, 'So, this is what it was all about. The more she learned, the more she regretted, and yet, the more hopeful she became. When you truly grasp the concept of Allah's mercy and experience it firsthand, it can bring tears to your eyes. She felt a burning sensation in her chest and on her skin and even broke out in a sweat from the intensity of the moment. After all that Najwa has experienced in her life, we now see a more mature and powerful version of her. She is happy, comfortable, and has a pure soul.

Aboulela presents a scenario in which the female character wants to wear a headscarf, and the exact invisibility that the counter-discourses criticize ends up becoming the fundamental identity tenet around which Najwa constructs herself. The passage that follows shows her happiness when she realizes the builders are unable to see her. She said “I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, „Oh, so this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual.” (*Minaret* 234). Najwa found it hard to fit in with Britain because of her appearance. She claimed to have felt uneasy wearing what she called "tight blouses and short skirts" before embracing the hijab. She wants to escape the male attention she draws to herself because it worries her. She believes that wearing a headscarf restores her dignity in addition to hiding her body.

She is not only faced with this in the workplace, but her boss, Lamya, underestimates her and treats her as a subordinate. , “Now I know that she will never do that. She will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, and my skin color, which is a shade darker than hers. She will see these things and these things only; she will never look beyond them” (*Minaret* 68). Najwa discovers this fact when Lamya loses her necklaces and charges Najwa for stealing them in an indirect way when her voice tone is aggressive while asking Najwa about the missing necklaces, Najwa explains: “When she speaks to me. `Where's my pearl necklace? I left it in the morning with the rest of my jewelry, I stand up. She is not asking. She is accusing” (*Minaret* 66) In the face of the fact that Lamya is a Muslim, her life is westernized, as has been Najwa in the past. It also depicts Najwa's previous life, in which she lived in Khartoum, but now she is a devout maid.

Lamya is the employer of Najwa. Her party is a masquerade or dress-up party. When the doorbell rang, one of Lamya's friends arrived masquerading as a hijabi to mock Islam just like Najwa's dress. Lamya change it to Chicago style never protests and everybody is laughing. Najwa did not understand why everyone was laughing. This is an instance of Islam phobia. Masquerade as a hijabi reflects something about the Western social psyche and its stereotyping of Muslim women as slaves. Since the girl started taking off her coat and headscarf, revealing her curly hair, she began dancing theatrically to the music, leaving everyone surprised. They clap for her, in time with the music. She is now wearing a black sleeveless dress that is silky like a negligee. A red sash is thrown towards her, which she ties around her hips and then dances across the room, feeling triumphant. This moment will be remembered for years to come. Lamya is filled with joy and laughter, and she leans towards the Duchess of York. `We don't make fun of our religion, but just today, just once today. Lamya said. This is a good example of the identity politics of the Hijab.

The mocking of the Hijab in this party is an act of mimicry. This is a concept by Bhabha. It is associated with identity politics. Lamya, who lives in the West and has her own culture, customs, and thinking, sees Najwa as uneducated, inferior, and weak because of her modesty and wearing the hijab. In other words, Lamia represents the West's view of Arabs. So, during her birthday party, she tried to diminish Najwa's value and humiliate her by bringing a friend who wore the same clothes as Najwa and then proceeded to take off her friend's clothes one by one until they dressed similarly to Lamia and her friends. This act was meant to belittle Najwa and make her feel inferior. Being a Muslim can sometimes be more problematic in public than in private life. Lamya intentionally causes problems for Najwa because Najwa wears a headscarf that carries various symbolic and highly opposed meanings in different ethnic and religious groups. These groups require that their own identity be expressed and acknowledged, and the expression of identity has many instrumental and political implications. Najwa participates in activities that represent and promote their religious identity. She exhibits behaviors that are consistent with commonly held values and assumptions.

However, Najwa resists and challenges the foreign country's culture and ways of living by using her religion, culture, and clothing style, including wearing a hijab. For her, the hijab gives her power and a unique identity. Muslims, like Najwa, believe their identity differs significantly from that of the Western country they live in. However, a significant number of non-Muslims, like Lamay, believe that Muslims are not compatible with the West. Amer Sahar argued "because of this powerful symbolic role, Muslim head-covering practices have provoked heated and emotional debates in both Muslim majority and Muslim minority states" (Amer 2014,19). That's why Lamay from the beginning does not like her. However, wearing a hijab in a non-Muslim country can be controversial, as it is seen by some as a rejection of the host country's culture and values. In reality, Najwa and other Muslim women who dress modestly are not oppressed or uneducated, as some may assume. They are brave

for asserting their identity and culture in a foreign country that values women's liberation and freedom of expression. By doing so, they challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as submissive and oppressed, and instead promote diversity and acceptance.

4. Conclusion

The Islamic hijab is used in *Minaret* to problematize the issue of religious identity and the ideologies that underlie it. Najwa's hijab as a signifier of her religious identity does issue from difference with the Western community where she lives. Empowered by religion, this identity plays on resistance in its cultural sense to Western secularism. Such resistance is ideologically motivated as it involves power relations. Najwa uses the Hijab to subvert the power web of Western cultural hegemony. One concrete manifestation of this resistance is her insistence to wear hijab in an Islamophobic community. This is one manifestation of how identity politics pervasively operates in the formation of Najwa's sense of identity in a diasporic community.

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