

## Is Islam Replacing Home in Leila Aboulela's Fiction?

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article discusses the role of Islam in helping the characters adjust in their migrant lands. In context of readings of the characters as becoming anti-west due to their Islamic beliefs, it asks the question that whether Islam is replacing home in the fiction. It analyses two of Leila Aboulela's novels: Minaret (2005) and The Kindness of Enemies (2015). It explores the characters' ideologies in context of Michel Foucault's study of cultural orders that create differences and distinguishes between societies, Eugene Kamenka's investigation of histories of nations and the politics behind the spirit of nationalism, and Edward Said's idea of contrapuntal thinking.*

**Keywords:** Islam, Leila Aboulela, home, contrapuntal, nationalism, *Minaret, The Kindness of Enemies.*

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“Here he was between one dress and the other, neither Russian nor Chechen, just naked and human. It was a restful place to be with sun on his back and grass between his toes” (*KoE* 240).

This chapter addresses a question asked by Muhammad Abdullah in his study of Leila Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* in their article “*Minaret: Islam and Feminism at Crossroads*”. He asks: “Can religion replace, home”? (164), this chapter reframes it as: Is Islam replacing home in Aboulela’s fiction? This question has been answered by Eiman Hassan Abbas El-Nour in her article “Faith as Refuge: Female Migration in Leila Aboulela’s Novels”, and she discusses the role that Islam plays in the lives of Sammar and Najwa, and concludes that for Najwa it becomes a place that “serves as a substitute for the far away homeland” (326) and to find an identity, and for Sammar it evokes the sense of community. El-Nour studies the role of Islam in making a home in a migrant land. As the title suggests, her article discusses migrations of the two protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, and the role that Islam played in helping them settle in their new lands. According to El-Nour, Islam plays a great role in the lives of the two characters to find a home and it is only because of their religion that they are able to form an identity in foreign lands. “In the loneliness of her exile [...] she [Najwa] turns to religion, and faith becomes the only relief to the sudden difficulties and great solitude in which she finds herself. [...] religion for her becomes ‘a place’ where she finds her identity” (331). She has studied Islam as a “supplementary space for self and identity” (332).

Martha Cariello has discussed the role of Islam in producing a space for Najwa in London. The first part of her essay deals with religion as a space, that is achieved through migration. It is a space that allows mobility: “Religion is, in this sense, dispersed, transnational, interconnected, and global, and yet constitutes a local, always rooted and specifically – if not individually – constructed and experienced place” (342). It is something that allows Najwa to feel at home in London, as well as feed her nostalgia for Khartoum. London is also discussed by Cariello as a space that includes the exiled. She discusses London as a home for the lost and displaced, but at the same time it is a place where the migrants’ lives intrude in the symmetry of the citizens’ lives. Within London, the apartment, and specifically the kitchen, where Najwa worked for Lamya is a place where Najwa is at times included and on the other excluded. She is in the background of her employers’ lives and she acknowledges this fact without hostility. It is in fact the sole tool by which “Najwa negotiates her own inclusion, [by] developing [...] a strategy of resistance that actually relies on exclusion” (345). It is seen in Cariello’s essay how

Najwa feels displaced as a migrant and it is her religion, and her regular visits to the mosque that give her a space in a foreign land.

Rather than presenting religion as a space, this paper analyses Islam as a means of overcoming national boundaries and to look above the racial differences. It maintains that in Aboulela's novels Islam becomes the medium that invokes Edward Said's concept of "contrapuntal perspectives and historiographies" and thus induces a rejection of affiliation with a single country. This research studies the two novels individually and reads the experiences of Natasha and Najwa, the protagonists of the two novels. First, it talks about the protagonists' struggles due to their romanticized views about Europe and Africa, their need of spiritual balance and peace. Then, it will discuss the role of Islam in guiding them towards a balanced view of their selves in relation to their lands, and the fallacy of national boundaries and national identities. Although the impact of Islam in looking at the world in a contrapuntal manner is also noticeable in Leila Aboulela's other works, like *The Translator*, and some stories from the collection *Coloured Lights*, however, this article only studies these two novels to keep the article compact. Nevertheless, minor references are taken from *The Translator* where needed.

Michel Foucault notes that:

[t]he fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices – establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home (xx).

A person is born into this sense of "ordering surfaces and [...] the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, [...] our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other" (Foucault xv). Slavoj Žižek explains this phenomenon as "the unknown knowns": "All the silent prejudices that determine how we act, how we react, [...] there is so much the texture into which we are embedded that we literally don't even know that we know them" (00:06:24 – 00:06:46). These inherent ideas define the good and the bad, and the ideal and the flawed, and to break away from these hierarchies requires a complete re-education of a culture, and a re-formation of one's ideology. It becomes a part of a person's ideology and defines common sense for them. This chapter discusses the national differences that a person learns in his/her life and the way it effects their thinking. These differences include nationality, and as a result, the difference in culture, economic position,

and social security offered by that nationality.

In his book, *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea*, Eugene Kamenka takes up essays that discuss the histories of how nationalism evolved in different parts of the world. The dramatic qualities of the Easter Rising in 1916 resulted in the Irish consciousness of their country and the need to free it from English rule. Wang Gungwu's essay points out that it was primarily to counter the Western colonizers that Asian countries evoked nationalist spirit in their masses. Those countries that did not need to counter colonization do not have a strong nationalist ideology. Eugene Kamenka himself talks about the French Revolution as the most successful movement in promoting nationalist thinking. This spirit of nationalist ideology aims at setting differences of one's country from other countries in terms of its heritage, traditions, and history. It arouses an idea of superiority of one's own culture in comparison to other cultures, and demands loyalty and patriotism. Thus, these differences are purely political and the idea of difference is inculcated in a people to produce better soldiers for war, and better workers in national offices.

This idea of identifying oneself with one's country and a readiness to dissociate with others is discouraged by Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism*. He quotes Hugo of St Victor:

The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his (qtd. in Said 407).

Said's aim in presenting a polyphonic concept of culture is not to eliminate differences, but to respect them. The goal is to eliminate hierarchies based on race, creed, and nationality. The above quote draws a journey of a person overcoming territorial boundaries. Independence is achieved from sentimental allegiance to land by "*working through* attachments, not by rejecting them" (emphasis in original) (Said 407). Leila Aboulela's characters grow out of their attachments to lands and through Islam they overcome cultural hierarchies. They outgrow the awe of the Western cultural supremacy and instead of blind mimicry of the Western culture, they incorporate Islamic values and Western culture according to their individual needs. Thus, Islam does not replace home, it evolves a new idea of home.

Islam gives them a “third time-space [...] where “the fragmentation of identity” is conceived not “as a kind of pure anarchic liberalism or voluntarism, but ... as a recognition of the importance of the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of solidarity” (Lavie and Swedenburg 16). Uniformity to one culture or one nationality is not the aim of Aboulela's characters, but to emerge from these affiliations and think of people as a whole, working together with differences and using their experiences that connect them to their migrant countries. By the end, the characters realize the fallacy of relying on one country or another as a promise of security or prosperity.

*Minaret* is a story of Najwa's migration to London from Sudan because of political assassination of her father, and the problems she faces, and her blessings in London. As a citizen of the postcolonial Sudan, Najwa believes in the cultural superiority of the West, and her family aims at adapting a perfect Western manner of living. Due to corruption charges on her father, Najwa has to leave Khartoum and move to London with her mother and her brother Omar. Her brother starts dealing in drugs and is imprisoned, and her mother dies of leukaemia. Realizing that she cannot fulfil her dream of having a family with Anwar, she starts practicing Islam. She gets hired by an Arabic family as a maid, falls in love with her employer's brother, Tamar, but leaves him in the end.

*The Kindness of Enemies* is about Natasha's experiences in Scotland after 9/11 as a Sudanese migrant. Natasha hates her father's side of her parentage and wishes to make it invisible by gaining professional success. However, when Osama Raja is arrested for being mistaken as a terrorist supporter, she realizes that she is as vulnerable in Scotland as she was 20 years ago. She feels even more alienated when her house is broken in and she has to find another accommodation for a month. She craves for Malak and Osama's company, but Malak is busy trying to free her son from police custody, and has to leave London for legal advice. The novel also narrates Imam Shamil story of the jihad against Russia. Shamil's son, Jamaledin, is kidnapped by the Russians, and after trying for ten years to get him back, he kidnaps Princess Anna of Georgia and her two children in hope to bargain her for his son as a war prisoner. Shamil's story works to juxtapose the concept of jihad as followed by one of the greatest heroes of Islam, with the twisted concept of jihad implemented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In *Minaret* Najwa considers herself Westernized whether she lives in Sudan or in London. It is a source of pride for herself and her family because “anything Western was unmistakably and unquestionably better

than anything Sudanese” (*Minaret* 131-132). Thinking of the Western culture as liberal Najwa gets trapped into giving forced approval to her physical relation with Anwar. She finds liberation in Islam which allows her personal space. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Natasha cannot forego her past to make a living in Scotland. She has to come to terms with her Sudanese past and accept it as a part of her self to truly adjust in the West.

The irony in Natasha being a history major is that although she learns about the important events and battles, she cannot analyse the distortion in historical records that allowed manipulation of ideology to create hierarchies. Natasha was impressed by West at a very young age. She was eight years old when the prospect of a better life, “better school in Britain, brighter toys, bookshops. Sharpened pencils, a calculator, a microscope” (*KoE* 284) was put forward to her. She had heeded to this difference and had moved to Britain with her mother. There she spends all her energy trying to fit in and become a native of Scotland. She compromises with her values and beliefs and dives in to fulfil the demands of her hosts for whom a “complete irrevocable dissolution [...] was required” (*KoE* 6). Her professional excellence in her field depicts a struggle to make herself a part of the native Scottish society, however, during the novel this struggle proves futile. Aboulela shows Natasha as easily replaceable when her flat was broken in during the two days that she was away at Malak’s place. Then again, in the presence of the police officers, their interrogatory procedure made her think of herself as “an impostor [in the country] asking for attention, a troublesome guest taking up space.” (*KoE* 102). Previously too, she had thought of herself as vulnerable as a foreigner and had consented to interrogate Muslim students for terrorist activities, knowing it to be hypocrisy. Here Aboulela juxtaposes Natasha with her Scottish colleagues who had turned down the order under the same grounds and had judged it as being unfaithful to their students and their profession. Natasha herself identifies this as an opportunity to present herself as un-Islamic despite her academic field and her name (*KoE* 141). Regardless of her continued efforts, she is unable to feel at home in Scotland. Then, her father’s illness give her a reason to visit Sudan.

When she goes to Sudan for a short visit, she encounters an environment that is completely different from what she remembered. Although she complains about not having complete information about minor things like the change in dress- code, however, she feels herself blending in the environment. While she was staying with Grusha and Yasha she met with their friends and caught up with her own old age-fellows and “it was hard [for her] not to relax with them, enjoying their company, practicing that

dance from Russian to English to the Arabic words [she] was now remembering or relearning or a little bit of both", she was warming up to the Sudanese ways and even started considering a life where her parents had never divorced (*KoE* 287). With Grusha, Yasha, and Mekki she "valued the sense of belonging they gave [her], the certainty that [she] was not an isolated member of a species but simply one who had wondered far from the flock and still managed to survive, for better or for worse, in a different habitat" (*KoE* 310).

At the end of her apostasy case she had told the judge that she had come to Sudan so she "would not be an outcast, so that [she] would, even in a small way, faintly, marginally, tentatively, belong" (*KoE* 290). However, Natasha ends her visit to Sudan and goes back to Scotland.

By the end of the novel Natasha's question of belonging was not resolved and she is shown starting a journey towards an Islamic life. She says: "I might still not have reached home or settled where I belonged, but I was confident that there was a home, there, ahead of me", and then: "Perhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual" (*KoE* 314). Sadia Zulfiqar's study of Aboulela's *Minaret* and *The Translator* leads her to assert that "Aboulela is fascinated by, and seeks to address, the 'inner path (*tariqa*)' of her characters, which helps them to make sense of their lives in unfamiliar environments" (153). The novel shows that despite having a respectable job with an ample pay, a descent apartment, and the luxury of sporting two cars, Natasha is still unresolved about the idea of home. She cannot find it in Scotland: in her personal apartment, which was broken in, she cannot seek her stepfather in times of need, and although she was welcomed by her friends in Sudan, she decides against settling there. In Natasha's wanderings Aboulela shows that Natasha does not need a physical space to possess, or to link herself to, she needs to transcend from the need of such labels "to make sense of [her life]" through spiritual balance. Natasha's discomfort about her heritage and her physical appearance show that material possessions cannot satisfy her.

Natasha is much interested in Imam Shamil's jihad with the Russians and the novel narrates his story alongside that of Natasha's. Imam Shamil's story is a narration of a resolution of stereotypes and a coming together of people from different cultures separated by war. There are strict paradigms about Shamil's army that are revealed through David and through Jamaleldin, who was captured at the age of eight by the Russians and was educated by them. David believed that Imam Shamil should not be "resisting all that would be good for them" their acceptance of Russian rule

would give them “peace for one, prosperity too. Modern roads, sanitation, education, enlightened thinking. Everything that is uncouth and reprehensible to be replaced by what is civilized and rational” (KoE 51). The Chechens were “primitive” according to David. Jamaleldin too thought that “they were wild [,] not because he remembered them as such but because Russia and Europe said they were” (KoE 222). On the other hand, Shamil’s army also did not trust the Russians’ manners “[a]nd surrender to the Russians would have meant the end of their traditional way of life, the end of Islam in Dagestan” (KoE 9). Both had their own views on civilization and the other seemed removed from them and primitive. As a result, there was “[m]istrust on both sides. [...] The Russians believed the Chechens were wily and suspicious. The Chechens believed the Russians were aggressive and treacherous. They were both right, they were both wrong. One led to the other.” (KoE 224).

However, through Jamaleldin, Aboulela shows the closeness of religious rituals of different faiths. With Imam Shamil and Jamal el-Din in his room near his death bed “[h]e heard the chants of the Orthodox funeral services. Were they burying a Russian? They must be. A dear, good friend who had walked by his side and helped him when he stumbled” (KoE 275). These chants could not have been Russian because the only people in the room with him were his father, Imam Shamil, and Shamil’s religious teacher, Jamal el-Din. They were saying prayers for him and Aboulela draws the similarity between two religious rituals by having Jamaleldin confuse between them. Aboulela makes this connection clear when she writes that the Church bells, like the Azan, “can remind us of Allah. If [we] listen carefully [we] will hear them say His name. Truth! Truth!” (KoE 301). Malak senses spirituality in places like the Stonehenge and Dunnottar Castle where people had worshipped centuries ago, and connects to it by reciting the *Quran* there. She practices her faith there and does not distinguish between the categories of faiths of the Scottish ancestors. It is an encouragement for Natasha to consider religion while finding a home in Scotland. In *The Translator* Aboulela writes about “a bend in the Dee where [one] would see the Nile. [...] a house with a flat roof, a lighthouse that looked like a white minaret, castles where believers lived long ago, subservient to the climate (55). These landmarks diminish distances and connect Europe to Africa. The zikr meeting in the dance studio in London hosted a multinational gathering of Muslims from different parts of the world – Nigeria, Asia, Germany. The meeting itself was a following of Imam Shamil’s legacy that had crossed borders and was being remembered by people in the middle of London, not confined to religious practices of a



particular region. There are differences in the two cultures of Europe and Africa, they are both unique in their own rights, however, Malak does not concern herself with the history of differences, instead she focusses on the resemblances that connect the two.

Whether in Sudan or in England, Najwa had always considered the West as superior. She was impressed by their economic development and their prosperity. Her dream for Sudan was to be like the West and she hoped that Sudan too “would become great, become normal like all the other rich Western countries” (*Minaret* 42). Her idea of normality is linked to the West, whereas for her, Sudan is stunted due to its lack of development. She wants Sudan to be another version of the rich West. Thus, the West is the ideal that must be attained by the African. With this aim Najwa lives freely in London after her parent's death and Omar's arrest. She had seen London as a metropolitan city that invites and welcomes foreigners and as a place that looks above racial differences. It was the most modern city where people enjoyed freedom from judgment and unnecessary social intrusion. Moreover, her elite life in Sudan and her education from American schools in Khartoum led her to believe that she was Westernized and could adjust well in London. She never considered it a loss to move to London and her migration was only seen as a blessing bestowed upon her. However, Aboulela shows that the privileges that Najwa had enjoyed in London were because she could pay for them with money, because “[m]oney gave [her] rights” (*Minaret* 94).

After having sex with Anwar for the first time her views about London and its freedom change. She feels aloof and lonely there as she “walked down Gloucester Road and thought that whatever happened to [her], whatever happened in the world, London remained the same, constant” (*Minaret* 174). She realizes that here she will not be punished for her contact with Anwar as she would have been in Khartoum. She wants the closeness of her family and the intrusion of her friends and neighbours. Without them she feels deserted. She feels disconnected from it and “[f]or the first time, [she] was conscious of [her] shitty-coloured skin next to their [the British natives'] placid paleness” (*Minaret* 174). The change is subtle and she has not yet realized it, because soon after she forgets about these thoughts about London.

Anwar makes her feel better about losing her virginity by linking her to the West. “‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘how many twenty-five-year-old girls in London are virgins?’ That was when I laughed and felt a little better. [...] He was right, I was in the majority now, I was a true Londoner now.” (*Minaret*

176). Najwa craves to be a part of London because it would bring her closer to her parents. London and the Western culture was something that her parents and her brother had idealized. She wants to be a part of London and to connect to a people that she does not know. Although she had visited London quite often and has been living there for four years, she had never really interacted with its people, as Eva Hunter points out that Najwa's "[e]ncounters with the city's English inhabitants are minimal" and she "remains ignorant of the culture's variety of manifestations, including those of a spiritual and mystical nature" (92). Her understanding of the West and its ideals of freedom and liberalism were not based on first-hand experience, but on stereotypes. When Wafaa gives Najwa rides to go to the mosque, she meets Ali. Through Ali, Najwa overcomes her stereotypes about the secular nature of London. While in Sudan and in London she had considered London to be removed from Islam. She had only seen the servants pray in her house, and in the university she was never friends with students who were religious. This shows that Najwa had related Islam to anti-modernity and lack of economic prosperity. After accepting Islam her views about the two cultures became balanced. She sees Muslims who are prosperous and progressive minded. She meets the wife of the Senegalese ambassador in the mosque in the Ramadan who came regularly for the Tarawih prayer, her friend, Shahinaz, has plans of improving her academic degree and her husband fully supports her in her plans, her *Quran* teacher, Um Waleed, is well read in her subject and holds classes where students are invited to make arguments and present their own views. Her perfect picture of London also gets neutralized by the prejudiced and narrowminded people she encountered who judged her based on her dress and religion. With this, her idea of modernity changes and she lets Islam guide her towards liberation and freedom on her own terms. She becomes disillusioned about the ideals of modernity because she had lived as the most modern class in Sudan and had enjoyed all the luxuries in London as well. Neither Sudan nor London catered to her personal wish of feeling secure and loved.

She realizes that that she cannot rely on any country to provide her protection. Najwa says "I feel like I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now [...] I just think of myself as a Muslim" (*Minaret* 110). She acknowledges the influence of both the countries on her. But she cannot describe her personality by affiliating herself to one place, as is the custom of the world. She is neither Sudanese nor British, at the same time, she is both, Sudanese and British. Sehba Sarwar calls the idea of home that

talks of assigning a single country to a person as a “romantic myth”. Aboulela also treats the idea of home as such and her characters grow out of this fantasy. She shows Islam as a catalyst in making her characters “dare to mix while differing ... [in] the realm in-between, where pre-determined rules cannot fully apply.” (Lavie and Swedenburg 16).

By educating herself in the real teachings of Islam, Najwa shatters the political hierarchy that orders Islamic teaching inferior to the Western culture. Natasha's dismal experiences in Scotland, and the unexpected comfort in Sudan make her overcome the discomfort and embarrassment in her heritage, and a need to prove herself loyal against the Islamic ideology. They step out of the clash of civilizations that was confusing them about their ideas about the West, Africa, and Islam. By working through their attachments to their homelands and their idealization of the West, the characters give them up.

Aboulela's two novels, *Minaret* and *The Kindness of Enemies* have shown that Islam is a medium through which characters dissolve the idea of nationality, and do not bind themselves to labels that describe them as Sudanese or British. They stop believing in such differences, “simple facts – religion, country of origin, race

– data that fills forms” (*The Translator* 33). Aboulela encourages a contrapuntal view of cultural differences, and also of religious differences. They break their long-held views about the superiority of Europe, the inferiority of Africa, and the image of the West as the closest place on Earth to Paradise that could teach the world about progress and modernity. They confront their “unknown knowns” and analyse them according to their own experiences. They break the hierarchal codes of the Western and the African cultures that they had grown up with, and rebuild new principles with the help of Islam. Thus, this research does not maintain that Islam “serves as a substitute for the far away homeland,” (El-Nour

326) rather it has established that Islam dissolves the need for a homeland. Islam becomes the point that connects Muslims to other cultures, not because those cultures follow Islam, but because it teaches them to appreciate difference. This acceptance of the difference in their own beliefs from those around them, and being comfortable with this difference is studied by critics, like Nash, as a “wholesale refusal of Western standards and practices” (136) by the Muslims. This problem is faced by the characters in the novels as well: they are seen as anti-western because of their headscarves or their beards. This paradigm rips them of an intelligence that can balance two aspects of a community. It renders them

incapable of simultaneously dealing with their spiritual and cultural needs. Aboulela's characters strike a balance between their devotion to Islam and their adaptation to the Western culture.

Muslims' appreciating differences also lead to a contrapuntal view of other nationalities, thus, dissolving the superiority of one culture or nationality over another. It also frees them of a need to call one nation as their home. Thus, their identities remain fluid, capable of accepting change and adaptable to different environments. This notion is debatable due to the idea of rootedness that gives a person a nationality, which is one way of defining identity. In the fiction, nationality evolves and is not defined by ancestry, or birth. Characters cannot depend on their birth lands or migrant lands to provide them with security, albeit, they benefit from their migrations and their diameter of the possible expands. Similarly, the characters do not attain a fixed/rooted identity. Their personalities remain flexible and they remain adaptive to change. Further research in this regard will help in an understanding of the ways in which the characters' following of Islam in Sudan is different from that in the West: how they hold different relations to mosque in the Sudan and in Britain, and how their celebration of the Ramazan is also influenced by the cultural difference.

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