

Minaret: Islam and Feminism at Crossroads

Minarete: Islam y feminismo en la encrucijada

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Abstract. Feminism is alleged to have marginalized and objectified non Western, ethnic, religious, cultural and geographical communities. Women from these marginalized segments are now indigenising the movement to make the cause pluralistic, feminisms—representation of women across the globe. Islamic feminism or/and Muslim feminism, not necessarily advocated by Muslims, is one of the feminist facets that enriches the concept of feminism by bringing to the fore Islam as a faith towards women liberation. This study engages with expression of femaleness, if not feminism, in Sudanese-Scottish fictionist Leila Aboulela's work—'Minaret'. Aboulela's heroine, Najwa, reinvents herself from liberalism towards Islam. She does not set out to defend Islam from a Western perspective that has come to characterise popular narratives about identity and the clash of cultures in Britain. Instead, she relates to an inside experience of connecting with Islamic network of customs and beliefs for spiritual appease. The key concern of the study is to examine the way this transformation takes place—stimulus and modalities. At times her version of bondage with Islam justifies and reinforces patriarchy rather than combating it. In that, she appears to be standing on the wrong side of notion of gender egalitarianism in Islam. Incongruously, Anwar, the male protagonist emerges as a pro-feminist portraying liberal feminist values. The denouement is that we need to tolerate diversity of feminist cause within Islamic circles and beyond with a progressive spirit

Keywords: Islam, gender, islamic feminism, Middle Eastern, women fiction, minaret.

Resumen. Se alega que el feminismo ha marginalizado y objetivizado a las comunidades no occidentales. Las mujeres desde estos segmentos marginalizados (étnicos, religiosos y culturales) ahora inician movimientos para convertir a la causa en plural con el fin de que los feminismos sean representados en todo el planeta. El feminismo islámico y/o feminismo musulmán, no necesariamente defendido por musulmanes, es una de las facetas feministas que enriquecen el concepto de feminismo, el cual presenta al islam como una fe que se dirige hacia la liberación de la mujer.

Este estudio, entre otras cuestiones, se compromete con las expresiones de la feminidad y no con el feminismo.

Palabras clave: islam, género, feminismo islámico, Medio Este, mujeres de ficción, minarete.

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Religion and gender and the relationship between the two have stirred many debates that begin primarily with discussions on finding the points of convergence as well as divergence in the two fields of study. Feminism, the advocacy of women rights and concerns, has lately been trying to bridge the gap between the two. The burden of bringing religion and gender/feminism closer is linked to the very spirit of the concept, liberalist-rationalist, that creates spaces for greater acceptance and tolerance within women cultures. Feminism especially in its contemporary postfeminist facet is accommodative of regional, ideological and performative diversity, one. Second, at the same time, there is a misconception that Islam as a religion is gender-unjust in its treatment of women and status that it imparts to different genders where men are privileged over women in religious and social domains. These predetermined notions disadvantage Muslim women when they connect with global feminist cause, as they have to cancel out negativities first, an extra, before making any contributions. In order to revive the foundational fortitude of feminism, representation of myriad women, Muslim women mainly from Western diasporas took up the task of reinventing feminism from Islamic perspective and emphasized mutual favourability of narrowing the distance between Islam and feminism.

The primary stance of women who realize feminism from a faith position is that Islam intrinsically is gender-just. It is certain Muslim cultures that have become increasingly patriarchal in their socio-cultural practices. In developing this Islamic feminist argument, the proponents of Islamic feminism, like Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi rely on progressive religious hermeneutics. They are of the view that male-centred theology, where only men have their say in religious affairs, translates into male supremacy in Muslim societies. Anthropomorphic verses of Quran, ill-interpreted source for patriarchal practices, are subject to multiple interpretations in the true spirit of Islamic theology. Muslims live in diverse geographical and cultural spaces and the universality of the message of Islam enables Islam to address a wide variety of audiences, however a literal-conservative approach to Quran is an impediment towards all such inclusive realisations. Quranic verses dealing with *Muamlat*, every day social affairs cannot be taken in contextual veracity of 8th century; in fact, even to claim that they should be implemented in their crude form is to challenge the eternality of Quranic message. This is where comes the role of *Ijtihad*, the consensus of Islamic scholars on interpretation of Islamic theology according to contemporary socio-cultural milieu. *Ijtihad*-inspired, faith-centred, progressive version of Muslim women's feminism is termed as Islamic feminism.

Muslim women, all of them, living in Islamic constituencies are not strictly Islamic feminist. Some of them are liberal feminists and side with western feminist agenda, others are Islamist-traditionalist and do not favour any reformist agenda, while there is a group that does not want their efforts to be labelled as feminism despite working for the cause of Muslim women. The latter group of women, avoiding feminist nomenclature, considers use of the term feminism as favouring colonialism. They contend that there is no need of branding gender egalitarian practices of Islam as feminism or Islamic feminism when Islamic principles are intrinsically liberatory for women. Women who call themselves Islamic feminist are encouraging Muslim women to contribute intellectually in production of Is-

lamic knowledge. According to Amina Wadud (1999), a female scholar of Quran, gender of interpreter has a key role in interpretation of religious texts. There is need of more and more *Mujtahidaats*, progressive female scholars of Islam; women should themselves deal with exegetical affairs of the matters that are related to them else men would keep exploiting them in the name of religion. Miriam Cooke (2000) characterises women in three categories: 'Islamists' are literalist-conservatives and believe in traditionalist role of women said to be laid by Islam, 'Islamic' are the ones who seek for progressive interpretations of Islam, and 'Muslims' are the believers of Islamic faith, not necessarily practicing it.

Islamic feminists are perceived as defending Islam, but in fact they are guarding women without disorienting them. They do not follow apologetic discourses to support Islamic teachings concerning women; rather they simply detach themselves or present a feminist version of these sayings. For example, the verse dealing with the concept of *Qiwamah*—men are guardian of women, responsible for women's living—feminist version of the concept says men are not only responsible for providing women households, but they should assist women in conducting the chores too. On polygamy: according to Islamic feminist stance, it is allowed in Islam only if a man assures to keep the justice between wives. Similarly, Islamic feminists have come up with an alternative feminist interpretation of the concept of inheritance and legal witnesses for which Islam has repeatedly been objected as harsh. Islamic feminism is a decolonial feminism where women are rewriting discourses that marginalise them as women, be it religion or Western canon. These women on one hand are working towards Muslim women's cause and at the other liberating religion itself from the shackles of patriarchy.

The acceptability of the concept 'Islamic feminism' among Muslim women and beyond is divided, despite all what it claims to offer. There is a group of Muslim women who consider feminism as 'un-Islamic' and tag it as a Western agenda to distract Muslim women from real teachings of Islam. This divide of rigidity versus acceptability has historic roots where people hailing from Makkah have been non-accommodative and people of Madina flexible. Like Islamists, Western radical feminists are equally unwilling to accommodate and accept Islamic feminism as a representative form of feminism; 'Islamic feminism' to them is an oxymoron. They are of the view that religion binds women and the idea of affinity between Islam and feminism would result in compromise on feminist ideals. There is yet another group that transcends beyond religious boundaries and despite having no affiliation with Islam as a faith is welcoming towards Islamic feminism, and envisions the possibility of its application for Muslim women in particular and women in general. This brings us to a subtle division in the concept of relationship between Islam and feminism, i.e. Islamic feminism vs. Muslim feminism. 'Islamic feminists' are those women or men who defend women rights from the viewpoint of Islamic teachings and do not necessarily believe in Islamic faith, whereas those who are Muslims and take Islam as a source in advocacy of women's issues are 'Muslim feminists'.

The debate of connecting feminism and Islam raises many questions. Should Islam and feminism converge? If yes, what should be the nomenclature of the concept? What are the modalities of convergence? Do Muslim women need feminism? Is Islam not alive to

the concept of gender equality already? Answers to these questions are not definitive and female scholars of Islam who work for gender egalitarianism have varied opinions in response. Asma Barlas, an expert in anti-patriarchal Quranic hermeneutics, projects naming of Muslim women's gender activism as feminism, an acceptance of Western hegemony that undermines non-white women's intellectual and activist contributions (2004). Contrarily, Margot Badran (2009) supports the coinage 'Islamic feminism' and considers the reconciliation of Islam and feminism as helpful for projecting the issues of Muslim women to a larger audience. Whereas, Fatima Seedat (2013) does not favour branding the efforts of Muslim women for gender equality as Islamic feminism. She emphasises that feminism should not be portrayed as zenith of women's liberty and there is a need to acknowledge the efforts that a large number of women are making for their respective communities without borrowing the concept of feminism. Realisation and implication of ideas in crude form is not an easy possibility in varied contexts, so even if there is reliance on feminism as an expression of women's voice, it should not be essentialist but pluralist. Escalating the issue of nomenclature defeats teleological spirit of Islamic feminism, which is collectivism. Islamic feminism has a potential to unify women who come from varied geographical and cultural backgrounds. It is a mean to keep Islam interested in places where gender is crucial and discussed. Through Islamic feminism diversity of the concept of womanhood is strengthened for the women around the world. This intersection and unification creates possibility for multiple ways of expression of identity, one local (Islamic) and the other transnational (feminist).

Islamic feminists have a profound agenda that foregrounds critique of prevalent patriarchy in interpretations of Islamic faith and related sociological practices. They deem absence of women from religion as responsible for gender divide in understanding of Islam—Islam for men and Islam for women. Epistemological contributions of women on religion are not valued much, their gender becomes a disadvantage to claim due credit. Muslim women do not want themselves to be presented merely as miserly beings; they want their successes stories to be celebrated too. They are also fighting for their lesser representation on academic platforms. They are advocates of diversity; to them if women are comfortable with their choices, they must not be seen as pitiable victims of cultural or religious patriarchy. For example, veil is perceived as the most powerful piece of cloth that ever existed to oppress women to the extent that by wearing it all other qualities of women become dormant, Islamic feminists are combating such perceptions. Veil is neither a symbol of piety nor of oppression, it just represents Islamic identity of Muslim women. Moreover, veil is not necessarily religious all the time; it can be cultural or economic too. There are situations in which veil enables Muslim women to become an active part of the world outside their homes. In Western diasporas veil has also acquired a political significance, where Muslim women identify, and unify themselves by using veil as a symbol. However, there are some Muslim majority countries where women have no choice but to wear veil when they appear in public spaces that is discouraged and detested.

Creative constructions of Islamic feminism through literatures in English have fewer archetypes. Fiction produced by Muslim women that centres feminist concerns does not

strictly symbolize 'Islamic feminist' agenda. Modern fiction emerging from Muslim countries, especially the fiction by women has visible presence of Muslim imagery. We find frequent references to Muslim/Islamic cultural products, processes and values. Women based in diasporas are very interestingly incorporating interaction of Islam and West—resilience, assimilation, acculturation and adaptation—in their works. In this tradition of Muslim women fiction, Leila Aboulela, an acclaimed Sudanese-Scottish novelist, is admired for her Muslim female protagonists. In *Minaret*, the work under concentration, female lead character, Najwa, recuperates Islam providing her refuge from societal injustices—patriarchal or otherwise. Islam functions as a liberating force in Najwa's story; she secures solace in religion, in place of a new free environment that West had to offer. Aboulela has tried to decolonise ethics and morality from mere reliance on secular strands towards religiously determined and ethnically varied ways of conduct. Dissent, migration, and marginalization acquire a newfangled description in *Minaret*. Migration is not seen as a source of redemption, dissent is not ridiculed, and facets of marginalization (woman, Black, Muslim) are combated than surrendering to them. Living in diaspora, despite her troubled experiences, Najwa feels stronger than she was in Sudan and proudly avows Islam.

Najwa, the protagonist is neither explaining Islam nor complaining about it, she is living it. *Minaret* is her spiritual journey, from faithlessness to faith in Islam. Aboulela, is staging a vigorous Muslim woman who relies on religion to get a relief from soreness and dejection. Najwa bears a message of significance of spirituality in life and power of faith in healing hearts. Islam inherently is peaceful and promotes love. The predicament arises when in the West, Muslim woman is framed in orientalist stereotypes and reinforcement of these stereotypes, in effect, promotes Islamophobia that distances people. Such unitary descriptions based on limited understanding of Muslim women harm the harmony on the whole.

Womanhood and Islam in this work subtly interact with each other negotiating for space. Aboulela draws upon religion as a transcultural force for connecting people and binding ethnicities together. She presents a woman from Sudan who was living an elitist secular life, but sponges her secular values off relying on support system provided to her at the mosque. Mosque reflects a strong religio-cultural gravity in Islam. The role mosque plays in Muslim communities is not limited to worship, it functions as a community centre and a place to socialize. Najwa feels family like affection by connecting with the mosque community, something she was direly missing in Scotland. The motives (failures in love, impoverishment, familial calamities) of her reconciliation with Islam could be argued upon, but it is, in no way a forced submission. *Minaret* is not a formulaic story of a submissive Muslim woman. Aboulela gauges religion, Islam, as a transnational uniting force that seamlessly accommodates differences of race, colour, and origin. Identity of Aboulela's heroine gets metamorphosed not through assimilation in Western norms, but via cultural memory, nostalgic affiliations, Islamic belief systems and rituals. There is also an implicit appreciation for religiously tolerant communities having acceptance for people from different faith groups. At times, the freedom migrants enjoy exercising their beliefs in Western diasporas, seemingly surpasses the sovereignty they might have had in their home countries.

In *Minaret*, diction of the story is very smooth, rhythmic and involved. Aboulela, has not tried to overplay with language instead the emphasis has been on developing a rich plot. She deploys Arabic phrases, un-translated expressions and Islamic symbolism to strengthen Islamic cultural appeal. There are throbbing expressions of Muslim women's choices throughout the novel in the form of a variety of socio-cultural 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. At no time in the course of the novel we find characters wanting to be 'ideal' Muslims, but Muslims in a situation where their identity was under influence and evolution. Islam provides Najwa, a cohesive connection and emotional support that translates into her new identity. The emergence of Najwa's identity where religion foregrounds other identity markers becomes more significant, placed in the context of migration. To practice Islam, which is mistakenly perceived as violent, in the West requires some tenacity of character and determination.

We find politics of religion, morality, class, and love (Islamic romance) at work throughout the book. Anwar, Najwa's first lover, and Najwa flirted for many months and their intimacy finally resulted in intercourse, though Aboulela avoids sharing graphic details of the event. "It was inevitable that one day I would sit on his bed" (p.172), Najwa says. After having sex, she gets worried that if she became pregnant, how she was she to handle the situation as Anwar was not going to marry her. This will bring a bad name to her among friends and family—fear and guilt. Unsuccessful love life and the guilt of sleeping with Anwar triggered spiritual feelings and connections that she was missing in her life. "Now I wanted a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence, I yearned to go back to being safe with God" (p.242). Despite having constant interactions and a heartfelt affection for Islam in Khartoum, she was away from it. Najwa nostalgically remembers Khartoum University where she would sit and watch only, male and female students pray together. Her body used to become numb whenever she heard *Azan* or listened to Quran. She confesses that in Khartoum she did not pray and fasted either to lose weight or for fun. She used to cover herself because it was cosy and prayed only to get better exam results. She did not fear the day of judgement, even the mention of it was depressing for her. Now that she is a practicing Muslim, there is no materialistic intent in her prayers, listening to Quran does not generate numbness in her eyes anymore, she rather listens to learn and act.

She feels guilty about not having been able to follow Islamic values. After this new-found connection with Islam, Najwa's views on men and masculinity, modesty, and purpose of life in general get radically transformed. She started believing that the foremost responsibility of a man is 'protecting' her woman in a married relationship, love and compassion is secondary. This knowingly or unknowingly reflects an acceptance of male dominance that in no way is a representative of Muslim woman's concept of ideal of womanhood. Najwa starts appreciating absence of men in her life and to visit Makkah to perform Hajj becomes her foremost desire. She deterministically develops a belief of temperance of life:

“No matter how much you love someone, they will die one day. No matter how much health you have or money, there is no guarantee that one day you will not lose it. We all have an end we can't escape” (p.243).

Aboulela's characters solicit parochial viewpoint of a married relationship and the realisation of roles of husband and wife in this bond. Muslim family set up is perceived to be patriarchal where girls are born to get married and men are allowed to flourish and establish their carriers. Najwa says: “I was going to get married to someone who would determine how the rest of my life followed” (p.78). She later idealises a London based married couple, Ali and Wafaa, with a visible Islamic outlook, who catalysed her religious transformation. In Najwa's words: “Anwar condemned as narrow-minded and bigoted, men like Ali, were tender and protective with their wives” (p. 242). Najwa praised Ali for he was not 'liberal' unlike most of the English men. Even the reason we find of Ali's conversion to Islam is that in Islam he found a stricter code of life than Christianity, which leaves a false impression that Islam is about restrictions and limiting freedom, only. The character of Shahnaz in the novel reverberates another account of what to a Muslim woman ideal husband is, in her words: “When I think of a man I admire, he would have to know more than me, be older than me....Otherwise, how can you listen to him and let him guide you” (p.215). Najwa's love with Tamer was also primarily inspired by Tamer's religious world view. She even disregards the age difference between the two, probably, following the tradition of Prophet Muhammad—he married Khadija, a woman fifteen years older than him. Najwa believes religious people are more family oriented and have higher regards for their relations. Tamer's concept of marriage compliments Najwa's concept of ideal Muslim husband. Tamer says, “If I were married, my wife would have made sure I get up to pray...‘Oh, I would only marry someone who was devout. And she would have to wear hijab” (p.199). Tamer disbelieved in friendship among opposite genders as it at some point results into a physical relationship. Tamer proposed Najwa for marriage, which she remained reluctant to accept, whereas Anwar slept with her to satiate his bodily desires. On Tamer's passionate argument to marry her, Najwa puts up a condition: “Well to say yes, you must promise me you will take a second wife” (p.253). This reflects showing regard to polygamy permitted in Islamic family structure. Aboulela is presenting a unique 'Islamic' version of romance here. Najwa wanted to be in the 'background' of Tamer's life as a subservient wife because she believed Tamer deserved a better woman than her. Reciprocatively, Tamer stayed firm on his decision to marry Najwa despite knowing that she will not be able bear any children. Najwa's words nicely describe Tamer's feelings for Najwa: “[h]e wants my full attention; he wants to be my child” (p.254). She thanks God; Anwar did not marry her as she considered him an atheist.

Aboulela constantly poses a contrast between valuing liberalism vs. religiosity. At different stages during the novel, characters engage in dialogue favouring one or the other worldview. Najwa's ideological conversion is an escape than recourse of a Westernized Sudanese woman that, to an extent, shows people become radical in their choices to overcome insecurities. Is assimilation bad? To what degree maintenance of home culture is

important and where comes the need of being sensitive towards target culture? What are the motives of overly sticking to a certain form of identity, in this case religious identity? Western values of liberty and sexual freedom should not be confused with provocation. Najwa was liberal in Sudan and becomes religious in London—a complex reversal. Najwa's coming to Islam is very shallow and helpless. A financially stable Najwa in Sudan was not practicing Islam and later when she became a devout Muslim, she had to survive as a servant in UK. Is it a way of redemption from her sins? Is becoming servant a punishment? Or alternatively a poor weak woman is confiding in religion. Initially, Najwa doubts the very possibility of being purely pious and having no impurities, as she says: "I wish I could believe that everyone was able to reach out to Allah, that it was possible to be innocent and clear" (p.161). Najwa had no answers on Anwar's argument about role of reason and individuality in life, she says, "I did not have the words, the education or courage" (p.242). So, what brought her to Islam were guilt, helplessness, and lack of choices. Acceding to adversities cannot be ranked as an empowered woman's conduct regardless of her religious affiliations. These feelings of returning to God hardly got ripened in her ever. On getting invites from Wafaa to attend mosque and learn prayers to wash her sins away, she soliloquizes, "[c]ouldn't they see I was not the religious type" (p.135)

Najwa embodies Islamism than Islamic feminism in the novel. She was always eager to continue her higher studies but the distance with her father never let her express this desire. Omar, her brother got full attention all the time from her father, while Najwa was ignored being her mother's responsibility. Najwa secretly idealised Lamya, a professional woman; she believed her life would have been different, if she were independent as Lamya. She expresses: "Yes I wanted to pray as I wanted to sprout wings and fly" (p.179). There is also a clear sense of appreciation in Najwa about bodily self-expression in the West. She liked that no one stared at them when Anwar circled his arms around her. She admits that it only became possible because they were in Hyde Park not in the streets of Khartoum. Najwa enjoys Scottish multiculturalism, freedom, and stability and explicitly maligns people of Africa for wars and miseries in their homelands. Deep inside, Najwa wanted to freely make love to Anwar, she vents it out saying: "Freedom enthralled me when I was with him..." (p.166). Najwa having slept with Anwar exclaims that she can now talk about sex from experience, not based on readings and assumptions. Further, she now losing her virginity finally belongs to London. Even with Tamer, despite shying away from her feelings initially, she celebrated his company.

"He should not come close to me, but he does and I cling to him because I am sour and he is sweet. He kisses me and he does not know how. I should push him away, not let him learn, but his smell holds me still" (p.224)

Aboulela in *Minaret* has natively knitted the critique on religious fundamentalism, inequality, gender gap, and sexual double standards of Arab world through the character of Anwar. Anwar is a torchbearer of progressive liberal values and rational thinking who exposes the hypocrisy of Muslims, especially of the Arabs on how they use religion to

their advantage than for spiritual appease. Najwa describes Anwar: “He believed it was backward to have faith in anything supernatural; angels, djinns, Heaven, Hell, resurrection” (p.241). Anwar considers Islamic fundamentalism in many countries a major cause of terrorism. He endorsed individual freedom, intimacy, and sexuality. Shereen El Feki (2014) discussing the intimate life of Arabs argues that religion’s suppression of sexuality is to prepare its believers for misery and degradation. On Najwa’s transformation, Anwar doubts that this religiosity is just a phase; she is ‘modern’ and will get over this phase. He advises Najwa that people are playing with her mind; she should not be feeling bad or guilty about their relationship. Referring to Wafaa, Anwar ironically remarks, “I am sure she invited you to accompany her to a religious lesson or offered to lend you books—they are all the same type” (p.160). He also bashed Islam by saying there was nothing in Islam to convince a non-Muslim towards it, but destitution.

Anwar’s views about sex and virginity are very secular. He expressed that his love for Najwa increased after developing physical relation and assures to Najwa, “Guilt would go away, like every other Arab girl you have been brainwashed about virginity” (p.175). Anwar shares with Najwa the stories of Arab girls getting operated to restore their virginity and doctors performing illegal abortions. Once Najwa complained Anwar about one of his friends who tried to feel her body from the back, Anwar surprisingly responded that she should have the ability to handle such situations than being fussy about trivialities. Najwa showed a concern that Anwar’s flatmates might suspect their being together; Anwar calms her down by saying they are ‘liberal’. Aboulela has portrayed a male character far more progressive than her female protagonist, very unlikely of feminist diction. Anwar as a pro-feminist seems to be promoting feminist agenda. He criticized Arab society on their double standards for men and women where men may smoke, party and go to brothels and these men would beat their sisters if they even talk to a male.

“All through life there were distinction-toilets for men, toilets for women; clothes for men, clothes for women, then at the end, graves were identical.” (p.158)

Though Anwar apparently carries liberal feminist values, yet he is not an ideal feminist character. He shares with Najwa the story of his physical relationship with an Ethiopian girl in a disrespectful manner; it appeared as if he were talking of a pet. Anwar also exploited Najwa’s loneliness and independence to his advantage. Najwa lent Anwar money to complete his PhD that he never returned. When Najwa was maltreated by Tamer’s sister, Lamya, Najwa needed someone to soothe her, but again Anwar was least concerned.

“[I]f he could come and put his arms around me and say, ‘you must not feel insecure, you must not worry’. But he would not do that. As if there was a law: Anwar must not feel sorry for Najwa” (p.228)

Randa a friend of lead character Najwa is another liberal character in the novel. To avoid fasting in *Ramdan* she lies of having periods that shows religion is not being willingly followed and people tried to find ways to escape religious duties and practices. Randa

shows discomfort with how women dress in Iran, Iraq and Middle East. To her, it is not possible for female folks to perform their varied duties, if they are covered all the time from head to toe. Making *hijab* a compulsion for women is moving backwards to the Middle Ages; this is not in the teachings of Islam. Randa detests how *hijab* hides individual identity by referring to a picture of university girls where all girls were having their faces covered. She calls Muslim women on Edinburgh campus as Islamists who exist only to expand their prodigy and maintain their 'irritating' *hijabi* attire.

Hijab is also working as an ideological divider in the text. Those in favour defend it on religious, cultural and political grounds and those against it argue on laissez-faire human values. Anwar is also against *hijab*. Walking with Najwa towards his flat, they come across *burka* clad Arab women and Anwar comments, "it's disgusting. What a depressing sight!" (p.167). There are other characters who do not earnestly appreciate *hijab*. At a Lamya's post *Eid* party women express a sigh of relief that they were free not to cover themselves, "we are pleased to see each other" (p.184). One of them remarked: "hijab is a uniform, the official outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed" (p. 186). Lamya, throws away her *hijab* mockingly saying: "We don't make fun of our religion, but just today, just once today" (p.223). She confesses that for many Muslim women *hijab* is merely a 'fancy dress' than a religious obligation. Najwa tried to bring herself to wear scarf, but remained uncomfortable wearing it because it did not suit her style statement. Once during prayer in the mosque, she had to face humiliation when someone threw a coat on her back during prayer suggesting her dress was revealing from the back.

Feminism in Islam is freedom of Muslim women and freedom of Islam from patriarchy than accepting or surrendering to it. Whereas, Aboulela has presented Islam as a last resort for Najwa; it's not a rationale, researched submission to God. She suffered due to males in her family. Her father a politician was charged with corruption and the family had to flee to Scotland. Her brother started taking drugs and was jailed; she was the only one to attend her. Her lover wanted her physical company and never got sincerely interested in marrying her. We do not find a strong female character emerging at the end that would defeat all the odds. Though Islamic version of feminism is principally an ideological battle, from within, relying on Islamic frame of reference, yet it is not detached from activism or real life implications for bettering women's lives. Mere submission to religion is neither a way out nor does it fall in line with the spirit of Islamic feminism. Najwa, a crestfallen character by means of Islam is pacifying herself. She failed in family life; she failed in love; she struggled socio-economically and then goes to religion by shutting her eyes to the realities of life than tackling them. Her courage and zeal to face hardships was more strapping before this spiritual conversion. She managed herself in exile, took care of her mother, assisted her brother, but now she has given up on every hope and opted Islamic celibacy for her. Minaret is a distortion of what freedom to a Muslim woman means and what she yearns for. This is failing Muslim women. There is no effort made to bring religion to a progressive front. What we see is loss of love, desire and passion. Throughout the novel there is conflict between religious and liberal values and at the end the religion wins without justifying itself or deserving the victory. The way book ends, Najwa not having been able

to make her family and twice failing to attain her lovers, constructs an impression that believers have to stay prepared for hardships and challenges continuously; her worries do not end despite connecting with Islam.

Can religion replace, home, family and compassion? Is it not a deception to self? This is more of an Islamist fiction produced by a female novelist with a female protagonist, and ironically whatever little traces of feminist success we find, surface through a male character. Najwa's conduct after returning to Islam could have easily been replaced by a male character; there does not emerge a 'feminist' character. Religion itself is not presented in a dignified way. Why was religion not her first choice? Feminism in a post-feminist context requires valuing indigenous voices and decentralization of feminism. Islamic feminism is one of those strong voices emerging in contemporary feminist milieu. Explicit focus on Islam to the extent that it dehumanizes women is no solution to the problem. Islamic value system needs to internalize a progressively apt attitude in order to revitalize the concept of feminism in 21st century political thought for Muslim women and even beyond, what Seedat (2013) terms as taking 'Islam for granted'—moving away from defensive apologetics or senseless submission.

Primarily, feminism provides tools to wrestle with patriarchy. The relationship between Islam and feminism is workable and beneficial for both Islam and feminism, as it adds diversity to the notion of feminism, so does it save Islam from radicalisation. Islamic feminists bring reason and revelation on the same page. If feminism distances Islam from itself and resists inclusion of Islamic feminism in larger body of feminist ideology, it would be to disown a large group of women who consider feminism as their representative voice without disuniting themselves from their religious affiliations. To address growing cynicism about objectification of Eastern women, re-envisioning the concept of feminism without any racial, religious, or class discrimination is crucial. Neither should Muslim circles show bias against feminism nor should the scope of concept be limited to a narrowed Western version of feminism, exclusively.

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