

Identity Crisis as Depicted in Leila Aboulela's Novel, Minaret

Javed Akhter¹, Dr Najia Asrar Zaidi ²
Shahida Sher Mohammad³ & Dr. Ghulam Nabi Sajid⁴

Abstract

The aim of this on-going study is to conduct textual analysis of Leila Aboulela's novel, Minaret (2005), highlighting the struggle of the Muslim Arab women over adopting a Western yet traditionally religious identity on the bedrock of the Post-colonialist theory of Homi Bhabha. Najwa, the female protagonist of the novel experiences a sense of ambivalence because she finds herself in-between to choose the Western and Islamic life styles. The multiply identities and Najwa's struggle to grasp her developing Muslim identity are explored through her believing in Islam. The research study attempts to trace Najwa's trauma of identity crisis, frustration and loss in which her character develops to be religiously faithful in spite of living amongst non-Muslims and non-practicing Muslims in the West. The main argument of this research article provides the means of signifying individual struggle through which spiritual journey is successfully reached the level of achievement of a hybrid identity of Muslim and Western secular cultures.

Key Terms: Hybrid identity, third space, Islam, Western Islamophobia

Statements of the Problems

Identity crisis is one of the main problems of humankind in the postmodern era. It was intensified with the emergence of the Islamophobia of the Western world in the post 9/11 era. Aboulela deals with the identity problem in her novel through the spiritual journey and struggle of Najwa. Therefore, the statement of the problem of this research is identity crisis.

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, Institute of Linguistics and Literature, University of Balochistan, Quetta

² Professor, Institute of Linguistics and Literature, University of Balochistan, Quetta

³ Lecturer, Institute of Linguistics and Literature, University of Balochistan, Quetta

⁴ Assistant Professor Balochistan Study Cente, University of Balochistan Quetta

Research Objectives

The article tends to focus on the following research objectives:

- ▶ To conduct textual analysis of Aboulela's *Minaret* on the bedrock of Bhabha's Post-colonialist theory based upon hybridity and third space.
- ▶ To trace the development of Najwa's character from the westernized modern girl to the faithful Muslim woman.

Research Questions

The article attempts to answer the following research questions:

- ▶ How Najwa comes to term with her Muslim identity
- ▶ Which factors helped her develop into a faithful Muslim woman

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the Post-colonialist hermeneutics of Bhabha has been applied to the text of the novel under discussion to describe the treatment of the novelist towards the situation of the post 9/11 age, which is still prevailing in the world in general and in Islamic countries in particular. Bhabha's conception of third space and hybridity as theoretical tools will be helpful in understanding this type of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, H 1994). Cultural hybridity is identified as an amalgamation of the new adopted British homeland and traditional Arab cultures. "Hybridity provides an alternative kind of identity that is neither completely defined by the authority of the coloniser nor fully under the control of the colonised" (Bhabha, H: 174).

Justification

Aboulela's novel can be viewed from the Post-colonialist perspective because it provides the sound theoretical and analytical framework to find out the identity crisis. This study is a great contribution to the area of literary Studies especially in the Post-colonialist Studies. This research hopes to provide the theoretical and analytical insights of the novel to the future research scholars. The research may be very useful to the researchers because it gives obvious guidance to develop their insights in conducting textual analysis of the literary works within the same field from the Post-colonialist perspective.

Limitations

The research is strictly limited to the textual analysis of the selected novel on the bedrock of the Post-colonial theory that is related to the identity crisis of the Muslims living in the West.

- ▶ The research focuses on the conditions of the identity crisis of the third world people in general and the Muslims in Europe in particular after 9/11 era.
- ▶ The study sheds light on the development of Najwa's character.

Research Method

- ▶ The concept of hybridity and third space taken from the Post-colonialist theory of Bhabha has been applied as a theoretical and analytical framework to develop and strengthen the main argument of the study.
- ▶ This theory is considered as the fundamental pathway for the ongoing research to structure the textual analysis of the selected novel as research method that is used in humanities in general and in the Literary Studies in particular.

Introduction

Aboulela was born from an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father in Egypt in 1964. She was brought up in a very liberal family, studying at an American Primary School in Khartoum. Afterwards, she attended a Catholic School before receiving her undergraduate degree in Statistics at the University of Khartoum. After completing her undergraduate education in Sudan, she attended School of Economics in London. She settled in Scotland in 1990 with her family. She has three children. Aboulela involved with Islam while living in London. She began practicing Islam, and paying visit mosque daily despite the negative responses from the Europeans towards the Arab Muslim women after the turbulent events of 9/11. She was not refrained from being published in Europe. She is one of the most famous Arab authors in English. Her novels are listed in the courses of Postcolonial Studies in the universities of the world. *Minaret* was written in English and published in 2005. It is a narrative about spiritual struggle, migration, and exile in England in the post 9/11 era. Aboulela depicts the character of a practicing Muslim woman Najwa. She reflects an ever-present a self-realisation of her Muslim identity. She finds herself in the world of multiple identities that are hindering to her spiritual development. This world marks influences on her childhood and adolescence. Her family belongs to the Sudanese feudal aristocracy that welcomes the seeming liberalism and secularism of Western Europe. She realises herself deeply as a Muslim. She was compelled into exile as a Sudanese Muslim woman in England. She recounts her past as a feudal aristocrat, and secular Westernised girl living in Sudan. Now, she attends the mosque and wears the veil. She has undergone a spiritual self-realisation that separates her from her past bourgeois class-background in Sudan.

In the period of exile, Najwa rejects liberalism, political activism, secularism and sexual attachment. The novel presents a contrastive situation to dominant Western Islamophobic discourse on Islam, Muslims and the identity and experience of the Arabian Muslim women in the post 9/11 era. Aboulela challenges the Islamophobic Western discourses on Islam, Muslims and Muslim women to counter the misrepresentation of them in the Islamophobia writings of the Western authors. She portrays a picture of immigrant Muslims and Islamic lifestyle through the sympathetic illustrations of believing in Islam. She narrates how Najwa goes through the different stages of transition between resolutions of secular Western and Islamic lives to achieve a hybrid identity. Najwa confronts ambivalence in her continuous struggle to form Muslim identity as a respectable faithful Western Muslim woman. She also faces the contradiction between comfort struggle and security of the self-realisation by Muslim women whether they are faithful or non-practicing Muslims. She continues her journeys to achieve hybrid identity as well as the diversity of Muslim women. Aboulela explores how Najwa finds herself in-between the situation of struggle and comfort, ambivalence and security, security and insecurity. The novel provides insights of faithful women in London (the United Kingdom), and shows the significance of Islam in the interfaith relationships and transculturation of Muslim women in Europe.

In this regard, the narrative centres on Muslim identity that provides alternative to contemporary anti-Islam Western discourses. The novel describes the rootedness of Islamic way of life in Muslim women to counter the Western misrepresentations of Muslim women as secluded in the four walls of home, oppressive and dominated by men. The study attempts to discover how Muslim identity and struggle are formed and continues through the images of the Muslim woman. Bhabha's conception of hybridity and third space is employed as a theoretical and analytical tool in the discussion of cultural hybridity. The cultural hybridity is depicted as an amalgamation of the new culture of Najwa's adopted British homeland, London and traditional Arab culture.

Literature Review

As far the employment of Bhabha's conception of third space and hybridity is concerned in this research, there is no pre-existing research theses, books, articles and material on the subject. However, there are a few research theses, which have employed the Post-colonialist hermeneutics to study Aboulela's *Minaret*. For instance, Katayoun Toossi's PhD thesis, entitled, "Dislodging (New) Orientalist Frames of Reference: A Muslim woman in Diasporic and Immigrant Muslim Anglophone Narratives" (2012) in this respect is very remarkable study. She writes that her research objective "is

designed to counter stereotypes of Muslim women” (Toossi, K 2001: 20). She borrows several theoretical and analytical tools to structure her study from Post-colonialist theory, particularly from Orientalism, Islamic feminism, cultural studies and discourses on diaspora. She considers the novels of Arabian immigrant Muslim women authors as an integral part of the Muslim diasporic and immigrant fiction that engages “dominant, Western misrepresentations of Islam” (Toossi, K 2001: 34). She writes, this misrepresentation, is “best viewed as characterising Muslim women as oppressed and victimised by the patriarchal authority of Islam or liberated from such control when Muslim women move to the West and adopt its values and lifestyles” (Toossi, K 2001: 25).

Toosi’s dissertation challenges misrepresentation of Muslim women in Europe and America investigates, employing different Postcolonial and feminist theoretical and analytical lenses. She counters the Western Islamophobiatic narrative of religiosity. Her research thesis is more focused on the political implications of identity, assumptions and perceptions about Islam as an imposed religion rather than an adopted way of life. However, the on-going research article attempt to explore how identity shapes over time and the characters become ambivalent, a situation of undecidability between the resolutions and being in-between. The contradictory phenomena marked by daunting experiences. The identity transitions are associated with the image of the faithful Muslim, which enable Najwa to achieve the hybrid identity. Unlike Toosi’s research work, this study, is definitely non-political and does not touch the Western hegemonic discourse. On the contrary, it is a textual analysis of the selected novel to use a fresh theoretical and analytical framework to fill the research gap in literature previously written on the topic.

Identity Crisis

Aboulela presents a contradictory world of practicing and non-practicing Muslims. Almost all-practicing Muslims in her novel are presented as sincere, kind and selfless and the non-practicing Muslims as cruel, selfish, mean opportunist and shallow. For example, Anwar, Najwa’s boyfriend, Omar, her fraternal twin brother and Sameer, her cousin are non-practicing Muslims whose figures are endowed with bad characteristics and traits such as irresponsibility, opportunism, selfishness and hedonism. Najwa, describes Waffaa and Ali English converts to Islam and practicing Muslims with a great appreciation as “kind” and “protective to others” (Aboulela, 2005: 242). Aboulela produces her fictive characters in a realistic manner due to the stark contradiction between the good practising Muslims and bad non-practising Muslims. However, this narrative technique and strategy enables the author to concentrate on the struggle of Najwa. She progresses from unfaithful to faithful

woman and located herself within both traditional and modern socio-cultural mores when she remains firm and confident in her belief in Islam.

In this manner, Aboulela examines the identity crisis, confusion and struggle of Najwa over Western modernity and traditional Arab cultures. This conflict may threaten Najwa's identity on the one hand, and help her achieve hybrid identity and live successfully in the West on the other. Najwa overcomes this crisis, through hybridity and the third space to achieve cultural hybridity that is a blend of the new culture of the adopted Western homeland and traditional Arab culture. Bhabha's idea of hybridity is based upon the images of identity and culture existed within the colonialism. The rejection and hostility of the colonised produce unique and new kind of identity. The new kind of identity is the product of the interaction of the colonisers and colonised, because each is lacking complete power to determine the outcome. Binary oppositions come to Eastern and Western identities, which are fixed. As Bhabha opines, "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (Rutherford 1990: 211).

This process of identification rejects the opinion of single right position, which takes apart the dichotomy centre and margin and the space between the centre and margin. Hybridity rejects the idea of originality purity, and authority of the identity, and gives significance to the limited categories of the binary oppositions. In this manner, Bhabha argues that "third space is only a site in which difference of interacts and cultural production, not reflection or mimicry, from which new possibilities of identity are enabled. Hybridity found in the third space is a lubricant" (Papastergiadis 1997: 56) that fosters the interactions between different cultures. The third space helps Najwa cross the boundaries and limitations of binary thought and oppositional positioning found in the colonial thought. Third space provides a "spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion which initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (Bhabha, H 1994: 1) despite contradictions and ambiguities. When the colonisers seek to define and normalise the colonised, the act of hybridity by the colonised produces a third space through which identity and meaning are signified.

Najwa changes herself when she breaks up with Anwar, her lover. "One life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one" (Cariello 2009: 340). Anwar is a Communist who has supported the first 1984 Military Coup in Sudan. Then, he is exiled. He gives Najwa a sense of nostalgia, belonging and location for carefree days of university life in Khartoum. Najwa enters into the relationships with him by Western culture standards with him. They have dating, kissing in public places and later sexually intimated. Finally, she is disillusioned with him and turns to Islam. The change motivates her once she

adopts Muslim identity. Najwa parted at the American club to prefer to attend the religious or political gatherings. However Najwa's relationship with Anwar fails because of having different opinions, Najwa states, "I wanted to know how to live with that, how to be happy with that. Change, he would say, revolution. But I had been hurt by change, and the revolution, which killed my father, did not even do him the honour of lasting more than five years" (Aboulela, L 2005: 164). Anwar does not want to marry Najwa because he has traditionally been betrothed to his cousin as revealed in a letter from his sister. Then Najwa keeps herself in touch with the practicing Muslim women, whom she has previously rejected, those who washed the body of her mother before burial. They guide Najwa to attend the Muslim women's study session of the Quran in the mosque. For her, the mosque is a space of location belonging, and rootedness that she feels at home. As she states, "In the mosque, I feel like I'm in Khartoum again" (Aboulela, L 2005: 244). The mosque becomes a secure space where she Najwa finds herself comfortable and secure. The mosque helps her overcome the painful identity crisis, spiritual up-rootedness and the sense of loss.

Najwa feels a sense of security, belonging and location in the mosque. She waits for azan. As she recalls, "I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am small back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, [and] a quiet room to rest in" (Aboulela, L 2005: 74- 75). In this way, the mosque enables Najwa to reconnect to the period of peaceful years of her life in Sudan. She states, "A fractured country but not a broken home" (Aboulela, L 2005: 165). Minaret, the title of the novel symbolises mosque, religion religious peace of mind and spiritual prosperity. The mosque is a cosmopolitan place like London that is full of women from the different parts of the world as well as converted English Muslim women. Najwa embraces Islam and being amongst the practising Muslim women in the mosque, there are no national ethno-linguistic and racial discriminations. Islam unites them in a one community. They become a multinational family. The mosque becomes her new home. Najwa's growing Muslim identity in the Regents Park Mosque London reminds her of the days at Khartoum University in Sudan. As she describes, "I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University" (Aboulela, L 2005: 243).

The last site of identification for Najwa is Layma's home, where she works. Layma is an Egyptian woman and a PhD scholar in London, who lives with her younger brother, Tamer, an undergraduate student. While serving Layma Najwa maintains friendly terms with Tamer because both share Muslim

identity in common with each other. However, the relations of Najwa and Lamya are not friendly because Lamya is a Westernised girl, having contacts with Arab girls from her class. She dismisses Najwa because of possessing lower class background. Therefore, Najwa identifies with Tamer, who is practicing Muslim. When Najwa discusses with Tamer on his education and upbringing, they enter into a discussion on identity through which they identify themselves. As Najwa describes, “Therefore, I guess, no, I don’t feel very Sudanese, though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you? I talk slowly. I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I’ve changed. And now like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim” (Aboulela, L 2005: 110). Like, Najwa, Tamer also identifies himself with Islam. He considers that Islam is a source of providing a sense of belonging and location. When Najwa asks him about Lamya, he answers, “I guess she thinks of herself as Arab” (Aboulela, L 2005: 110).

Unlike, Najwa and Tamer, Layma identifies herself with secular life style. She fails to marry Tamer because of age difference. She does not dishearten but proves herself strong. The male characters play a significant role in Najwa’s life but they fail to provide security and protection to her. Her father, brother, lover, and even Tamer all possess serious flaws in their characters that “disappoint” her (Chambers 2009: 111). Najwa does not trust in any one except God to be able to successful in life. She decides to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, return to school, and help her brother. She tells Tamer, “if my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh” (Aboulela, L 2005: 209). Najwa is able to come out of fear by practicing Islam. The Hajj pilgrimage sets her free from difficulties and confusion through receiving a new kind of identity. As Wail, Hassan regards Aboulela’s novels, as “narratives of redemption and fulfilment through Islam” (Hassan, W 2008: 300).

Findings and Results

- This Textual, analysis of the selected novel describes that Islam is very important in the lives of the Muslim women in Europe.
- The representations of Muslim identity in the novel provides alternative to contemporary European discourses that present Muslim woman as oppressed, victimised, secluded and submissive.

- The novel presents a counter-narrative of the West that propagates that Muslim women are muted persons and their identities are grounded in the feudal patriarchal traditions and norms.

Conclusion

The hybridity and third space are the primary research, theoretical and analytical tools in analysing Aboulela's novel through Najwa's spiritual journey for achieving the hybrid identity through her struggle while she realises herself out of place in the West. For Aboulela, Islam is not a set of outdated traditions and mores as the Western media and authors present it. Islam is rather a sign of Muslims' self-realisation. The idea that Muslim women who visit the mosque are ignorant and uneducated belonging to the lower class background is strongly rejected in Minaret. Najwa visits the mosque who is an educated girl having a Sudanese elite feudal aristocrat Muslim family background. Finally, she succeeds to produce a third space, which is full of Islamic values and traditions, but in very modern Western city: London. Therefore, practicing Islam for Muslim women in the West is a source of reinventing their hybrid identity that is mixture of Eastern traditions and Western modernity. Najwa gradually achieves the psychological, emotional, and spiritual security and protection, which she achieves from her firm belief in Islam. Indeed, her decision to adopt Islam enables her to conquer the trauma of identity crisis, migration, loss and frustration.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The research can be used as the reference for the students of English Studies in studying literary works from the Post-colonialist perspective. It can provide the information to the research scholars about the Post-colonialist theory of Bhabha. . The novel can be studied as a counter-narrative of the West on the bedrock of the Post colonialist hermeneutics. Although this study is far from being perfect but the researcher hopes that other researchers also can conduct their research study on Aboulela's novel from the Islamic feminist perspective about women's existence because this type of researches is also very interesting about how Najwa's character develops from the Westernised girl into a practising Muslim woman.

References

A. Primary Sources

Aboulela, L. (2005). *Minaret*. London: Bloomsbury.

B. Secondary Sources

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Chambers, C. (2009). "An Interview with Leila Aboulela." In: *Contemporary Women's Writing*. 86-102. Cariello, M. (2009). "Searching for Room to Move: Negotiating Space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*." In: *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*. (PP. 39-313). Ed. Al Maleh, Layla. New York: Rodopi.

Eissa, S. (2005). "Interview with Leila Aboulela." In: *The I Witness*. July.n.p. Web. 6 Nov.2006.

Hassan, W. (2008). *Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction. Novel: A Forum on Fiction*." In: *Islamism and the Immigrant Novel*. 41(2/3), 298-319.

Papastergiadis, N. (1997). *Tracing Hybridity in Theory*. In *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*. Werbner, P. & Modood, T. London: Zed Books.

Rutherford, J. (1990). *The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha*. Identity, Community, Culture, Difference, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Toossi, K. (2012). *Dislodging (New) Orientalist Frames of Reference: Muslim Women In diasporic and Immigrant Muslim Anglophone Narratives*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, the University of Alberta.