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The Disparity in Understanding Freedom within Diaspora: The Case of Najwa in Leila Aboulela’s Minaret

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Introduction

In a world often bound by narrow and predictable stories, there emerges a voice that defies conventions and embraces diversity. Such is the case for Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese-Egyptian writer whose literary journey has been shaped by her multifaceted heritage. Born in Cairo in 1964 and raised in Khartoum, Aboulela embarked on a new chapter of her life in 1990, when she relocated to Scotland with her family. It was amidst her academic pursuits as a lecturer and research assistant that Aboulela’s passion for writing arose. Minaret is Aboulela’s third novel, and it was influenced by her background and experiences. She was influenced by her home country, Sudan, whose culture is perpetually torn between being African and Arab. Hence, embracing her mixed background, “Leila Aboulela infuses her writing process with a reflection on her own experiences and a deep connection to what feels natural to her” (qtd. in “Interview with Sudanese-Egyptian Writer Leila Aboulela”). In fact, in a 2009 interview, Aboulela explains the motivations and significance behind her novel Minaret:

I wanted to explore the lives of Muslims who aren’t passionate about politics. I wanted to write about faith itself and how spiritual development is a need that is as valid and as urgent as love and a career. I wanted to write about the average, devout Muslim and the dilemmas and challenges he or she faces. (Chambers 15)

Leila Aboulela is considered both an Anglo-Arab and Muslim writer (Stotesbury 72). The term ‘Anglo-Arab’ is used to describe Leila Aboulela’s unique cultural and literary identity. This term acknowledges the blending of Eastern and Western influences in her work, reflecting her multicultural background and the intersection of diverse cultural perspectives in her writing. Moreover, recognizing the impact of Aboulela’s literary contributions, Claire Chambers, in her
book British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers has claimed that Leila Aboulela has made a significant impact on British Muslim fiction. Chambers notes that Aboulela’s work has helped to create a new genre of “Muslim writing” that reflects the diversity and complexity of Muslim communities in Britain (20).

As Nouri Gana observes, English writing by Arabs is not a new phenomenon; it can be traced back to the diasporic literature of Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani in the early twentieth century. After 9/11 and the start of the Iraq war in 2003, the publication of Anglo-Arab literature flourished and has seen an increment in research up until today (qtd. in Gallien, Anglo-Arab Literatures 8). This includes works by Muslim writers such as Ahdaf Soueif, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Mohsin Hamid, Fadia Faqir, and Leila Aboulela, among many others. As Geoffrey Nash argued in his book The Anglo-Arab Encounter; Muslim writers prefer the category of Anglo-Arab literature as it allows them to explore their bicultural identities and experiences. Nevertheless, according to Hassan Waïl, Aboulela’s fiction was among “the earliest to depict unsuspected spaces in Britain” (298).

Leila Aboulela adopts a different consciousness, a religious one that is relayed across cultures. Aboulela embraces her religious inspiration and weaves its influence into her literary creations. Thus, she purposefully crafts her work as a compelling response to Arab secularism (Nash 564). As Hassan claims, Aboulela's work introduces a transformative shift, as Islam finds expression in a fresh linguistic form and reaches diverse audiences: “Departing from secular Arabic fiction, her English-written narratives embody an Islamic worldview, forging a new path in immigrant and postcolonial literature” (“Immigrant Narratives” 192). Accordingly, Aboulela’s works have elicited substantial scholarly acclaim, sparking a surge of research interest and scholarly engagement with her literary contributions.

Within the literary landscape of Aboulela’s novel Minaret, the poignant journey of Najwa, a young Muslim woman, unfolds. Having once enjoyed privilege and secularism in her native
land Sudan, Najwa now finds herself impoverished in the metropolis of London. Forced to leave Sudan after her father’s execution, Najwa travels with her mother and brother Omar to London. Her living circumstances degenerate quickly as her brother is incarcerated due to his involvement with drugs and her mother passes after a long illness. Loneliness makes Najwa fall back on Anwar, a manipulative former boyfriend from Khartoum who lives in London. Her feelings of guilt after having sexual intercourse without being married intensify Najwa’s alienation, which leads her to end the affair and seek guidance at the local mosque. After adopting the veil and starting her spiritual journey, Najwa finds herself having a shortage of money which forces her to start working as a maid for rich families in the city. There, she falls in love with her employer’s son Tamer, and although the relationship develops, it ends with Najwa’s dismissal.

Aboulela’s concern with discussing the gap between modern Western and Eastern cultures by portraying Muslim women’s struggles has always been a recurring theme in her literary productions. One of the challenges she represents in Minaret is the ability to accept a distinct type of freedom, one that is not exclusively anti-religious. She thus engages with the possible multiplicity of the understanding of the concept of freedom. Modern liberal Western societies, emerging out of the Enlightenment in Europe, view freedom as tied to natural principles, valuing individual agency, which implies a shift from the religious influence in old Christian Europe. Similar to the old Christian Europe, in non-Western cultures, freedom can often be closely intertwined with morality or religion (Dallmayr 208). Therefore, writers critically examining modern Western perspectives on freedom contribute to broader discussions, fostering openness to diverse viewpoints on this evolving concept.

Among the researchers who have contributed to the discussion of the concept of freedom and its connection to Aboulela’s writings is Waïl S. Hassan. In his article “The Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction,” Hassan emphasizes that while Aboulela appears to react against a
narrowly defined concept of personal freedom, which she interprets as anti-religious, she rejects freedom entirely. Hassan then continues by stating that “Aboulela’s repudiation of freedom often occurs in narratives about women and gender, emphasizing that her way of representing Islam reinforces male supremacy” (314). Additionally, he views her fiction as regressive compared to Tayeb Salih’s works, in which Muslim female characters are portrayed as independent and rebellious, rejecting male support for survival. However, it is important to note that Hassan’s claim overlooks the Quranic descriptions of men’s and women’s rights, placing greater emphasis on cultural factors. Among such factors are the patriarchal traditions that favor male dominance in family and societal structures, which are unrelated to Islam. This omission of a comprehensive portrayal of Islam and its gender rights can distort Islam’s principles of rights and responsibilities. It is important to consider that in Islam, as John Esposito claimed in his article “Women’s Rights in Islam”, “there are Quranic regulations that established and protected women’s rights. These regulations declared woman’s religious equality with men both as regards to their obligation in prayer and leading virtuous lives” (104). The Quran expressed one of these regulations in this verse: “If any do deeds of righteousness, - be they male or female – and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them” (Quran 4:124). This verse invites any individual, regardless of gender, to pursue faith, morality, and spiritual growth, reflecting the principles of equity in Islam (Esposito 105). When examining Leila Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* and its portrayal of gender roles and freedom, it can be observed that she draws inspiration from Quranic verses, such as the one mentioned earlier. This serves to establish and protect women’s rights from the viewpoint of Islam. In her novel *Minaret*, she depicts female characters such as Najwa, who, within the framework of their faith, navigate life’s challenges while preserving their spiritual freedom.

Consequently, among the scholars who have positioned Aboulela’s work within the broader discourse on the status of Muslim women in Western societies, Geoffrey Nash stands out. In
his article “Re-siting Religion and Creating Feminised Space”, Nash states that Aboulela’s novels go against deconstructionist dogmas that question the existence of inherent meaning or fixed interpretations in texts and ideologies. Nash argues that Muslim women indicate the possibility of defining the boundaries of Western discourse on their terms (31). This idea is further stressed by Sara Silvestri when she notes in her article the challenges faced by Muslim women in Europe as they navigate faith and religion beyond conventional religious institutions and authorities. Silvestri notes that living their faith in a situation of minority made Muslim women gain a heightened awareness of the significance of practicing their faith. This awareness engendered opportunities for personal identity, agency, and empowerment. By navigating challenges such as the lack of representation in society, fixed cultural and social norms, and identity struggles, Muslim women experience personal growth and a strengthened sense of self through their unwavering commitment to their faith. (1243). These perspectives align with Decolonial theory, which critiques the modern liberal Western representation of “non-Western women” as the “other”. Decolonial theorists argue that the notion of Western ontology’s universality is built upon the exclusion of those from the Global South (South America, Africa, or Asia) from the effective history of modernity. Consequently, history becomes a Western construct, and modernity becomes synonymous with the West, resulting in the creation of the “other” (Manning 4).

The analysis of various sources sheds light on how the theme of freedom is consistently challenged in Aboulela’s work. Waïl S. Hassan suggests that Aboulela challenges a narrow interpretation of personal freedom tied to anti-religious views. In contrast, other scholars highlight Aboulela’s novels as empowering Muslim women within Western discourse. Drawing from Plato’s insights assists in developing a theoretical framework to understand the complexities of freedom within Aboulela’s novel Minaret. This approach not only enhances the grasp of the novel’s themes but also highlights how Plato’s philosophical thought enriches
perspectives on the multifaceted nature of freedom with Islam and the Muslim diaspora, marked by migration towards the West and the establishment of Muslim communities outside their original countries (Rahnema 23). In this vein, the distinctive contribution of the present thesis lies in the connection established between Aboulela’s novel *Minaret* and Plato’s philosophical perspective on freedom and how this complex idea of freedom intertwines with Najwa’s diasporic experience in London.

In line with the aforementioned, Plato argues that true freedom is attained when individuals perceive the truth and comprehend the form of the good. But to achieve this one must first be released from the influence of the appetites, the “leaden weights” which keep us in the “world of becoming”. This process involves transcending the concerns and preoccupations that commonly burden ordinary people, ultimately paving the way for freedom (Stalley 147). Like Plato’s doctrine, religions such as Christianity and Islam emphasize the importance of transcending worldly desires and distractions to attain a higher spiritual truth and connection with the divine. By aligning one’s actions and choices with religion, individuals strive to achieve a state of freedom and fulfillment. Religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or others, serves as a framework encompassing a collection of virtues and values. As Geyer and Baumeister note “Religions serve to motivate virtuous, self-controlled behavior by providing clear standards, encompassing honesty, kindness, or compassion. Religions specify right and wrong and include direct commands about what people ought to do” (412). This perspective relates to Plato’s philosophical viewpoint, as both share the pursuit of a more self-controlled existence. For instance, in Plato’s book *The Republic*, he emphasizes the importance of wisdom and moral excellence, values that align with the core principles found in various religious traditions, such as Islam or Christianity. In book IV of *The Republic*, Plato illustrates through the dialogue between Socrates and his associate Glaucon, the concept of philosophers as rulers. They guide the ideal city-state to moral excellence through their pursuit of knowledge, wisdom,
and commitment to justice. This common thread of virtue and moral guidance runs through both religious and philosophical systems, highlighting their shared quest for a better, more virtuous way of life.

For the purpose of this thesis, the main focus of analysis will be how the theme of freedom, as explored in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*, is connected to the experience of the Muslim diaspora. This thesis claims that Aboulela’s portrayal of the Muslim world, particularly through the character of Najwa and her diasporic journey, strategically suggests the possibility of multiple interpretations of freedom against monological definitions of this concept. To this end, the thesis will draw on Plato’s philosophical thoughts to highlight the philosophical and cultural foundations that underlie the pursuit of freedom within the context of diaspora, particularly for Muslim women in the Western world. By doing so, this study initiates a dialogue on varied perspectives of freedom and explores the complexities surrounding the pursuit of freedom within the realms of religion, culture, and identity, as exemplified in Najwa’s diasporic experience.

**Plato’s Doctrine of Freedom**

Freedom, defined as the ability to follow one’s interests and goals without interference from external forces, such as social norms or religion, is one of the pillars of contemporary or modern liberal Western society. However, it is argued that “the considerable emphasis on individual freedom and self-expression has led to a culture of consumerism, materialism, and narcissism. People are encouraged to pursue their desires at all costs, which has eroded the sense of community and shared values” (Bellah et al. 27). Western freedom, or more specifically, the freedom embroiled in the crucible of the Western Enlightenment is known to be anchored in the core of individualism and liberalism. Western freedom emerged mainly as a rebellion
against religious dogmas that were thought to hinder the reach of a human-centered scenario (Dallmayr 211).

The connection between freedom and desires can be traced back to the philosophical and cultural traditions of the West. Plato, among the thinkers who pondered on freedom’s connection to self-discipline, engaged in a multifaceted exploration of the concept of justice and the ideal city-state, including how freedom is connected to self-discipline in his book *The Republic*. Plato’s exploration involved discussions on the nature of the soul, the three classes in the ideal state, and the importance of individuals performing their roles in harmony, which contributed to a harmonious and just society (Stocks 205). In Book I of *The Republic*, Cephalus, a character therein, asserts that the unrestrained pursuit of desires might ensnare, not liberate. The elders’ yearning for past joys, contrasted with Sophocles’ self-control, demonstrates that temperance brings release from the grip of insatiable passions (329 a1-d7). Building upon these early insights, Plato, in Book IV of *The Republic*, extends his exploration into the relationship between human personality and the characteristics of society. In doing so, he introduces his theory of the tripartite soul, delving deeper into the connections between the individual and the broader social structure. Plato divides the human soul into three parts: the Rational, the Spirited, and the Appetite. The rational part of the soul can be metaphorically associated with the head, as it houses the brain. Similarly, the spirited aspect can be likened to the heart, which symbolizes vitality and pulsates with the essence of life. As for the appetitive, it symbolizes the stomach and genitals, the bodily organs from which impulsive desires tend to emerge (Stocks 211). Balancing these elements, the tripartite soul achieves harmony (Plato, *The Republic*). Plato’s prescription for moral conduct involves cultivating virtues and self-mastery, enabling one to act guided by reason and goodness (443 a1-e11).

Accordingly, Plato contends that the truly free individual achieves inner harmony through the cultivation of virtues such as wisdom, courage, and moderation. This inner harmony allows
the individual to act by reason and good, rather than being driven by their passions or desires (Plato, *The Republic*). In his view, individuals whose souls are governed by unnecessary desires and lack of commitment to meaning or values tend to harm both the body and the reason and moderation of the soul. It is important to have a framework of values and principles to guide individuals’ actions and help temper their desires. This approach finds resonances within dominant religious contexts such as Christianity or Islam. For example, Plato’s impact on Islamic philosophy can be most notably seen in ethics, the human condition, and the nature of reality (Walker 5). According to Walker, notable connections between Plato and Islam are found in the works of Islamic philosophers such as al-Farabi in his book *The Political Writings*. Specifically, Plato’s concept of the soul as a different entity that gives life to the body resonates with al-Farabi’s exploration of the nature of the human self and its connection to the divine (96). Furthermore, the tripartite soul consisting of reason, appetite, and spirit can also be connected to religion, as it aligns with the emphasis on self-control and moral development. For instance, Islamic thinkers like Ibn Miskawayh incorporated the tripartite theory of the soul into their teachings, providing a guide to learning to control desires and impulses (Morgan 35). By understanding the different aspects of the soul, individuals are encouraged to cultivate their reason to make rational and informed decisions. This aligns with the Islamic emphasis, in this case, on using one’s intellect and rationality to navigate moral challenges (Walker 6). Therefore, in the present paper, the understanding of freedom will be explored through the lens of Plato’s thought on freedom, which finds relevance in Najwa’s journey within *Minaret*.

**Najwa’s Freedom Within Diaspora**

In a world marked by diverse cultures and far-reaching migrations, “a single word stands as a testament to the profound human experience of dispersion: ‘Diaspora’” (Gazsó 162). According to Walker Connor, a political scientist known for his significant contributions to the study of
nationalism, ethnicity, and the politics of identity, the word ‘diaspora’ has come to be used for various migrant communities. Basically “diaspora” has come to signify “any ethnic, nationality or religion-based macro community whose members live dispersed all over the world, far from their real or imagined homeland” (qtd. in Gazsó 164). The classical concept of Diaspora encompasses several key dimensions. These include the dispersion from a central homeland to multiple locations, forming a triadic relationship between the homeland, ethnic community, and host land. It involves an enduring sense of longing and belonging to the homeland, intertwined with a collective awareness of the group’s history and identity. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswan capture the essence of the diasporic experience. They highlight the enduring feelings of longing and attachment to the homeland, asserting that “becoming diasporic requires an acknowledgment of sacrifice, whether a personal or collective sacrifice in the present. Such sacrifice is about creating a new beginning and, for some, fulfilling the desire to eventually return home” (46). The aspiration for return and idealization of the homeland persists, alongside processes of transnationalization and networking within the ethnic communities.

In Aboulela’s novel Minaret, Najwa is depicted as a character who finds her identity within the Muslim diaspora in London. As she navigates through the challenges and freedoms of life in London, her journey leads her to explore her spirituality and faith. This narrative resonates with Rachael Loxston and Liza Jachens’ observations made in their article on how Muslim women construct their identity and sense of belonging in Europe. The Muslim women involved in the study “recognized the importance of their faith and the Muslim community in providing them with a sense of belonging and solace in times when they felt disconnected from their country of residence” (19). Najwa’s journey reflects the experiences of these Muslim women, as she discovers a new approach to engaging with her religion away from her homeland. London’s diverse cultural landscape provides her with opportunities to connect with other Muslims, exchange experiences, and strengthen her sense of belonging to the global Islamic
community. Through this community bonding and self-exploration, Najwa’s religious identity flourishes, offering her a source of comfort amidst the complexities of identifying with the Muslim diaspora.

Najwa’s newfound approach to engaging with her religion resonates with Mahmudul Hasan’s discourse in his article “Seeking Freedom in the “Third Space” of Diaspora”. In this piece, Hasan argues that in Minaret, “face to face with possibilities and obstacles of diaspora, Muslim women negotiate and prioritize Islamic identity in the metropolis” (1). This process, for Hasan, is a conscious choice facilitated by the freedom that the third space of diaspora creates, a conceptual realm transcending the homeland and host country (13). “This freedom is characterized by the liberation from rigid cultural norms and expectations that might have been more pronounced in the countries of origin” (Makdisi 136).

In this new sociocultural context, Muslim women find themselves in a milieu where they can reinterpret and express their religious and cultural beliefs more openly and individually. However, reaching this situation is not devoid of challenges. The contrast between the societal norms of the countries of origin and the liberty of the diaspora creates a complex paradox, where freedom from traditional expectations might introduce new cultural or identity-related challenges (Grossman 12).

As Mark J. Goodman claims, “groups in diaspora are confronted with new realities and new opportunities – and new challenges” (54). For Najwa and other Muslim women in similar positions, these challenges involve negotiating personal autonomy, potential cultural clashes, and stereotyping and discrimination due to their belonging to a racialized minority. Because of the challenges faced in the Muslim diaspora, Haleh Afshar et al. observed that “the situation and circumstances in which women find themselves in host countries have an important impact on identity formation” (170). In the same vein, Rahat Raja, research coordinator at the Institute of Policy Studies in Islamabad, adds in his article “Western Women and Islam” that “identity
negotiation is to a large extent dependent on circumstances; so that a Muslim woman in any Muslim state would not be so compelled to emphasize her religion, as compared to one in the West” (5). It is through interaction with other Muslims and with the wider Western society that Muslim women begin to negotiate what being a Muslim signifies for them. Hence, in a Muslim encounter with non-Muslims, Islam tends to be the identity marker (Raja 6). In the novel Minaret, Najwa’s character exemplifies the complex negotiation of Islamic identity within London’s cosmopolitan society. As Najwa moves from her previous life of privilege in Sudan to London, her experiences in the Muslim diaspora reflect this negotiation process. Her encounter with both the Muslim community and the broader Western society challenges her adherence to Islamic values, especially when she faces some of the contrasting social norms of London, such as the party culture, dating, and the general lifestyle that differ from her religious principles.

Amid this identity negotiation within the assimilation of the Western society, Muslim women living in the West adopt Islam’s principles and beliefs following a spiritual and intellectual journey facilitated by the freedom prevalent in the host society. As noted by Raja, this transition often diverges from their native cultural customs, which tend to fall under the rubric of Islam (3). Raja distinguishes between ‘cultural Islam’, shaped by practices and values influenced by the culture or customs of a particular Muslim majority region, and Islam revealed through its sources, which involves core teachings and principles derived primarily from the Quran (4).

In the novel Minaret, Najwa embodies this intellectual and spiritual transformation. Her pivotal moment of transformation occurs when she recognizes that her entanglement in a mentally abusive relationship with Anwar, her former lover from Khartoum, Sudan, has led her to overlook the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan. This realization, coupled with the weight of familial loss and Anwar’s disinterest, and neglect in a romantic relationship with Najwa,
leaves her in a state of profound isolation and vulnerability. In a quest to alleviate her overwhelming guilt and loneliness, Najwa ultimately finds solace by embracing the opportunity to join a community of women at Regent’s Park Mosque. Here, she commits herself to daily prayers and engages in the study of the Quranic scriptures, marking a significant turning point in her journey of self-discovery and spiritual reawakening. In her homeland, Sudan, Najwa’s religious identity might have been a part of her life, but it is not as central as it becomes in her diasporic experience. The challenges and displacement she faces in London prompt her to reevaluate her faith and its significance. Her religious identity undergoes modification in the Muslim diaspora. As Raja noted while examining Western women who decided to adopt Islam:

A reason why Western women have embraced Islam is that their study of normative Islam has demonstrated this gap in most Muslim countries between religion and culture or tradition; and how the latter has been absorbed and deemed Islamic, while in many cases, it may conflict with Islamic norms. (7-8)

A further reflection on Najwa’s journey and complexities in the Muslim diaspora can be noted when examining Barbara Metcalf’s perspective on the “Muslim space”. Metcalf argues that this space does not necessitate any legally claimed territory or formally consecrated architectural space. She points to the formation of a “social space” through connections and new identities in unfamiliar environments. Metcalf also underscores the rise of a “cultural space” as Muslims interact and a “physical space” through residences and community establishments in new locations. All these dimensions collectively form the intricate “imagined maps of diaspora Muslims,” illustrating the intricate layers of their diverse identities and associations in dispersed settings (qtd. in Vertovec and Peach 19). Therefore, Najwa’s attempts to establish a connection to the divine in a foreign setting highlight the concept of diaspora
communities creating new sacred spaces that bridge the gap between their original homeland and their current location.

Ultimately, Najwa’s journey of self-discovery and adaptation reflects the impact of individual agency facilitated by the Muslim diaspora in London. As Haleh Afshar et al. note, when individuals have the choice to define their identities, different aspects of identity can change in varying situations (176). According to Apala Vatsa in her article “Women in a Multicultural Diaspora”, this occurs because “their dissociation from their native environments, combined with the new, liberal, and individualistic context they encounter in the Western society, leads to greater freedom to explore and shape their identity” (73). For Muslim women, this sense of “freedom” emerges because of their challenges encountered while negotiating their religious beliefs and adaptation to the host society, as well as the supportive network and comfort found within their religious community.

Najwa’s Cross-Cultural Journey

After a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted theme of freedom, it becomes crucial to delve into Najwa’s cross-cultural journey in the novel Minaret. This transformative journey enables her to delve into diverse perspectives on freedom, dismantling preconceived notions and broadening her comprehension of liberty. Along the way, she encounters various paths to attaining freedom, ultimately choosing the one that guides her toward inner peace and a clear sense of purpose.

Embarking on a journey that unfolds against the backdrop of contrasting social realities, Najwa’s story in Minaret begins in Khartoum, Sudan. As the daughter of a privileged family with a lavish lifestyle, she experiences the comforts and privileges reminiscent of Western societies, which are at odds with the state of the country. To emphasize this idea, Najwa’s father says, “In university, you’re seeing how the other side lives. You’ll understand the reality of your
country” (Aboulela 23). Najwa becomes aware of this conflict when she enrols in a public university and notices the clash in lifestyles and classes. She belongs to a group that is disaffected with the country’s customs, beliefs, and religion. Even though her family and she identify as Muslim, they are not practicing Muslims. In a conversation with her friend Randa, she mentions “What do we know? We don’t even pray.’ Sometimes I was struck with guilt” (Aboulela 35). Furthermore, she also contemplates the butlers working at her house and is impressed by their determination to follow their values and religion (Islam): “The servants from the back of the house prepared themselves [...] A light bulb illuminated. They were getting ready to pray. They had dragged themselves from sleep to pray. I was wide awake, and I didn’t” (Aboulela 38). Even at university, when she observes girls wearing the veil (hijab), and praying during their break, she remarks how much she enjoys watching them.

Aboulela highlights how Najwa experiences a sense of guilt, indicative of her perceived detachment from her authentic self, and her cultural and religious identity. She behaves in a manner that indicates the significant influence of her community on her actions and beliefs. It is noteworthy that her community seems inclined towards adopting certain aspects of the modern liberal Western lifestyle, believing it to be the sole and suitable means of achieving certain goals. A compelling illustration of this mindset is evident through the interactions with her brother Omar, as Najwa mentions: “Omar did not have time for the likes of Anwar; he had his own set of friends. They lent each other videos of Top of The Pops and they all intended to go to Britain one day, Omar believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left” (Aboulela 17). This sentiment highlights the perceived pressure on individuals of Eastern background to conform to cultural expectations. As observed by Plato, individuals who succumb to societal expectations and allow their desires to govern their actions may inadvertently compromise their happiness (Plato, Phaedrus 234 a). Thus, by belonging to such communities, Najwa appears to experience peer and family pressure that encourages her
to adhere to the views they hold. Notably, one prevailing notion within these circles is the pursuit of the modern liberal Western lifestyle as the exclusive means to attain freedom. This perspective asserts that freedom is perceived to have only one form, often aligning with modern liberal Western ideals. Thus, placing societal expectations and conformity at the forefront of Najwa’s experiences. Significantly, the pressure exerted by the community becomes evident through a telling statement; “Anwar would laugh at me if I started to pray, he would really laugh” (Aboulela 156).

However, as Najwa’s journey continues and her family faces hardships, such as her father’s imprisonment, the circumstances compel her to relocate to London with her mother and brother Omar for safety reasons. Despite the challenging family situation, Najwa and Omar find themselves immersed in the modern liberal Western lifestyle they had idealized and yearned for in their home country. Omar begins to enjoy his freedom in London, away from Khartoum’s society, by clubbing without restraint, spending nights away from home, drinking, and smoking. However, the consequences of his decisions harm his life, and he ends up in jail due to drug involvement. Accordingly, Omar consistently rejects the idea of religion or a framework of values that would guide his actions and behavior, as well as temper his desires and impulses. Therefore, with the absence of values and restrictions Omar gets controlled by his desires. However, it is essential to acknowledge that within the narrative, Anwar also follows the modern liberal Western lifestyle but does not end up facing the same negative consequences as Omar. Anwar’s experience presents a balanced perspective in the exploration of the potential outcomes of adopting the modern liberal Western lifestyle. Unlike Omar, Anwar manages to navigate the freedoms offered by the Western world without falling into destructive behaviour or encountering legal troubles. This juxtaposition serves as a reminder that individual choices and personal circumstances can greatly influence the outcomes of following a particular lifestyle.
In the case of Najwa, she enjoys her first months in London without restrictions, but after her mother dies and she is left alone in London, she becomes confused and worried about her future. During her first months in London, she encounters Anwar, her former lover from Khartoum. They begin dating and spending time together. However, Najwa becomes uneasy with Anwar following their sexual encounter and realizes that he lacks any serious intentions for their relationship. Furthermore, he does not like the Islamic way of living, he refuses to follow any religion and prefers the secular Western lifestyle. Given that Najwa is not entirely persuaded by the secular Western lifestyle, distancing herself from all things Arabic and Muslim causes her considerable distress. Contrary to Hassan’s assertion that Aboulela’s female characters seek protection and guidance from men for survival (316), Najwa challenges this expectation and rejects Anwar as a suitable partner. This highlights Najwa’s agency and her refusal to compromise her values and principles. Despite enduring immense hardships, including the loss of her family and enduring financial limitations, Najwa prioritizes the compatibility of their way of life and breaks her relationship with Anwar over following gender roles and seeking easy protection from him. Her decision to turn away from Anwar reflects her commitment to living in alignment with her own beliefs and aspirations, rather than seeking protection or guidance solely based on gender dynamics.

The sexual intercourse she had with Anwar was a turning point for Najwa. She was convinced that in London her desires would win against her reason, as she says:

We had circled each other for months, flirted for months, all the time aware that we were in London, conscious that we were free. And I had known in the back of my mind, that I would hold out and then give in to that side of me that was luxurious and lazy, that needed to be stroked and pampered and through him never be the same again. (Aboulela 166)
Najwa realizes at this point that her behaviour since arriving in London does not represent her. Upon reflecting on her time in Khartoum, Najwa stood apart from her community due to her divergent views. Specifically, she remained unconvinced by the predominant Westernized convictions and beliefs held by those around her. For instance, during her university days, she used to envy her religious colleagues when they were praying during breaks:

"Around me, the students began to shuffle their feet and fidget, murmur that it was time to pray [...] And when they bowed down there was the fall of polyester on the grass [...] I got up and walked away in the direction of the lecture room. I couldn’t see the students praying anymore and I felt a stab of envy for them. It was sudden and irrational. What was there to envy? (Aboulela 48).

Furthermore, the call for prayer (Azan) used to elicit an emotional response within her as she explains: “The sound of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me, it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco, and it went to a place I didn’t know existed. A hollow place” (Aboulela 37).

Therefore, Najwa’s religious yearnings have been present, though latent, since her early years. In Khartoum, Najwa’s religious inclinations were seemingly unquestioned and inherited from her surroundings without much introspection. However, in the diasporic context of London, she is exposed to different perspectives, lifestyles, and religious practices. This exposure prompts Najwa to engage in introspection and question whether her religious inclinations truly align with her desires and convictions.

After the sexual intercourse with Anwar in London, Najwa experiences a significant shift in her perception of the city and its modern liberal environment, leading her to question her values and desires. In her own words, she states, “For the first time in my life, I disliked London and
envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused [...] modern Omar, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom” (Aboulela 168). This moment prompts Najwa to take charge of her own life, liberated from societal pressures and expectations. She decides to end her affair with Anwar and begins to be involved with Muslim communities in London to ultimately practice Islam. The diasporic experience plays a significant role in this transformation, as Najwa, no longer bound by the societal pressures and cultural taboos of her upbringing in Khartoum, is free to make her own choices. In this newfound autonomy, Najwa chooses religion in the Muslim diaspora. Her journey exemplifies the transformative power of the diasporic experience and the freedom of choice inherent in Western societies, as she asserts her autonomy and seeks fulfilment through her religious beliefs.

Aboulela’s writing highlights the conflict Najwa experiences between the Eastern Muslim culture she was brought up in and the modern liberal Western lifestyle. As noted by Bellah et al., the understanding of freedom in modern liberal Western cultures tends to prioritize individuality and self-expression, whereas Arabic-Islamic cultures may place more emphasis on communal well-being, social responsibilities, and adherence to religious norms (27). Therefore, although the understanding of freedom in modern liberal Western and Arabic-Islamic cultures may differ, this fact does not condemn either but facilitates the acceptance that the concept of freedom is multifaceted and not an exclusively Western monopoly as viewed by characters like Anwar or Omar.

**A Spiritual Awakening**

Najwa’s transcultural experience from Khartoum to London becomes an important aspect of her personal growth and development as a human being. Her journey is filled with internal and external battles that she has to confront on her own. Her first experience is with the society
surrounding her; her community in Khartoum is primarily founded on people’s-imposed expectations. Struggling to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, Najwa faces pressure to embrace modern liberal Western trends and ways of life, resulting in an internal struggle over her identity. This external pressure reflects the ‘world of becoming’ described by Plato. In his work, *The Symposium*, Plato uses the allegory of Diotima’s ladder to illustrate the ascent from the world of becoming to the world of being:

If it were possible for someone to see the Beautiful itself, pure, unalloyed, unmixed, not full of human flesh and colors, and the many other kinds of nonsense that attach to mortality, but if he could behold the divine Beauty itself, single in nature? [...] in seeing the Beautiful with that by which it is visible, to beget, not images of virtue, because he touches the truth? But in begetting true virtue and nurturing it, it is given to him to become dear to God (Plato, *The Symposium*, 156).

He explains that as individuals progress in their philosophical and intellectual pursuits, they move from the appreciation of physical beauty (world of becoming) to the contemplation of the Form of Beauty (world of being). This progression is a journey toward understanding higher truths and achieving intellectual enlightenment. The “world of becoming”, therefore, encompasses the material, changing, and imperfect aspects of our everyday experience, while the “world of being” represents the transcendent, unchanging, and perfect forms that underlie and define these worldly phenomena. Much like the individuals in Plato’s World of Becoming, Najwa grapples with the clash between societal expectations and her inner quest for authenticity. As she embarks on her journey from one culture to another, she emulates Plato’s concept by striving to rise above the transient influences of the world around her and find her path toward self-discovery and self-realization (Plato, *The Symposium*, 157). Laziness, lust, or
luxury are examples of “leaden weights” that, Plato claims, maintain us in the “world of becoming” (Stalley 147). This balanced perspective acknowledges the multifaceted nature of Najwa’s journey and reveals the complexities of her transcultural experience.

Embarking on a journey of self-discovery, Najwa navigates the intricacies of her transcultural experience. She experiences a spiritual awakening that had occurred long ago, although she was not fully aware of it at the time. As her journey progresses in the Muslim diaspora, she starts recognizing and realizing the depth and significance of this spiritual awakening. The evolution of her awareness is depicted in the following passage: “When she told me that I should pray for my mother, I felt that same bleakness in me. I became aware of that hollow place. Perhaps that was where the longing for God was supposed to come from and I didn’t have it” (Aboulela 132). This realization resonates with the Islamic notion of *fitrah* or “innate nature” in English, and “it is considered a natural component of the human being in which God and Truth can be perceived through man’s existential experience” (Mahdavi Azadboni and Chenari 187). In Plato’s perspective, the inherent nature of individuals plays a significant role in understanding human behavior and virtue. Within Plato’s account of the tripartite soul in Book IV of *The Republic*, he illustrates the presence of an inherent essence within individuals that comprises the rational, spirited, and appetitive elements (Stocks 206). This inherent nature, often described as a pure state of the self, aligns with Plato’s idea of the rational element in the tripartite soul, emphasizing the pursuit of truth and wisdom (Mix 30). However, Plato also highlights that this inherent essence can be disturbed when an individual permits the influence of their environmental expectations (Stalley 150). Similarly, Islamic teachings in the Quran reference the internal struggle between inclinations towards good and the temptations of the world. For instance, chapter 12 of the Quran remarks the acknowledgment of the self-inciting towards evil: “And yet, I am not trying to absolve myself: for, verily, man’s inner self does incite [him] to evil” (Quran 12:53). This echoes Plato’s
depiction of the conflict within the rational, spirited, and appetitive soul’s elements. The connection between Plato’s tripartite soul and Islamic teachings underscores a shared belief in the presence of an innate essence within individuals. This understanding can guide individuals in navigating internal conflicts and external influences, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and preserving this inherent nature amidst the challenges of life. Aboulela examines this aspect through Najwa’s spiritual journey, where she must navigate the need to control these influences. For instance, the fact that Najwa decides to wear a veil in a society where women predominantly do not wear one. In this sense, Najwa’s journey and her struggle to find her identity resonate with Plato’s tripartite soul theory, wherein the process involves recognizing and balancing the various aspects of oneself (reason, appetite, and spirit) to attain harmony.

After Anwar’s experience, Najwa starts to take Islam more seriously, she begins to wear the veil, read about the religion, and becomes more involved in the Islamic community. As Nancy J. Hirschmann argues, “Historically, veiling has been seen by the majority of Western societies as the ultimate symbol if not tool, of gender oppression in Islamic cultures” (461). Moreover, the incongruity between veiling and personal liberty arises from the perception that the veil can sometimes be construed as a tool for exerting control over women. This portrayal diminishes women from mere physical entities and undermines their position as equal and independent individuals (Ahmed-Ghosh 183).

However, in her research on the agency of young Arab Muslim women in the United States and France, Danielle Dunand Zimmerman, an instructor in the women and gender studies department at Loyola University Chicago, highlights an important finding. Her study remarks “participants’ claim of agency as young Arab Muslim women living in a country whose values are often at odds with that of their country of origins” (151). Additionally, Zimmerman noted that among the 16 Muslim women participants, wearing the veil is their private choice, with all
but one participant in the sample emphasizing its significance as a religious expression (151). This echoes the arguments presented by Mustafa E. Gürbüz, an author and Middle East politics professor at the American University in Washington, D.C., and Gulsum Gurbuz-Kucuksari, a professor in the Humanities department at the University of Northern Iowa. They argued that secularization has stigmatized the veil and enabled it as a symbol of identity reconstruction. The stigmatization of the veil is seen to enable identity reconstruction in two ways: “First, by reinforcing personal identity, as individuals internalize the symbol of the veil independent of parental influence, and second, by serving as a means to reproduce a collective identity, fostering a sense of representing Islam” (qtd. in Zimmerman 147).

Therefore, choosing to wear the veil by many Muslim women living in the Muslim diaspora stands as a significant assertion of agency and religious identity. Much like the findings of Zimmerman’s research, this choice is a commitment to their faith and a visible marker of personal autonomy. For Najwa, adopting the veil is a means of achieving the protection of God, devotion to him, and a sense of purpose. Her experience in the Muslim diaspora leads her to incorporate religion as a component within her identity development while navigating a diasporic environment. Najwa finds what she considers to be her community through her religion and her practices of Islam. Thus, as a result of her diasporic experiences, Najwa decides to practice Islam and wear the veil after desiring to do it for many years:

I see teenage girls wearing hijab and I wish I had done that at their age, wish there was not much in my past to regret. The religious programs make me feel solid as if they are telling me, ‘Don’t worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this, all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end. (Aboulela 168)
Hence, Najwa exercises the freedom that she is given in London to practice Islam and belong to the Islamic community in London.

Consequently, an important place in Najwa’s spiritual journey is Regent Park’s Mosque. Following the challenges of losing her parents, her brothers’ imprisonment, and navigating the challenges of belonging to a religious minority in the diaspora, Najwa discovers the solace and community in Regent Park’s Mosque. This marks the beginning of her exploration of self-discovery and faith as she develops a spiritual affinity with the mosque’s Muslim community.

Najwa’s first contact with the Muslim community is observed in the following passage:

The first time I walked into the mosque I saw a girl sitting by herself, an open Qur'an on her lap, reciting Surat Ar-Rahman […] There were teenagers in jeans and headscarves; there were neat middle-aged ladies who looked like they had just come in from work. But it was the girl reciting who held my attention, her almost angelic detachment […] I wished I were like her. That in itself was strange. She was pale and serene, her clothes unremarkable, her face neither lush nor pretty. She did not shine with happiness or success, qualities I usually envied. But still, I wished I were like her, good like her. I wanted to be good but I wasn't sure if I was prepared. (Aboulela 225-6)

As Ahmed Ben Amara observes in his article “Melancholia and Resistance in Fadía Faqir’s My Name Is Salma and Leila Aboulela’s Minaret”, this quote “is important because it makes it clear from the outset that the kind of religious outlook Najwa is about to embrace is divested from any nativist or radical elements” (12). Following Ben Amara’s insights, Najwa’s initiation into her newfound religious path becomes evident. After her initial visit to the mosque, Najwa begins attending prayers and sermons. She also enrolls in a Quran reading lesson, where she meets a group of women, particularly the Syrian teacher Um Waleed and her new friend
Shahinaz. The nuances of the religion, encompassing various aspects such as acts of worship, and the support of the community, intertwine to bring Najwa serenity and tranquillity. This interplay is exemplified in her own words: “The Tajweed class is my favorite [...] this concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me” (Aboulela 81).

Another important element in Najwa’s religious choice is fasting during the month of Ramadan, a month of fasting and abstaining from negative acts such as gossiping, lying, or arguing. Najwa’s commitment to fasting during the month of Ramadan creates an engagement with the philosophical framework of Plato’s tripartite soul. In Plato’s perspective, the soul is comprised of three distinct parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. The appetite component of the soul is characterized by basic physical desires and an inclination toward pleasure (Stocks 207). Within the context of Najwa’s spiritual journey, her attention to Ramadan serves as a conscious effort to navigate and regulate this appetitive aspect of her soul. This disciplined approach aligns with Plato’s notion of self-control when faced with appetitive impulses. During Ramadan, Najwa exercises self-control and discipline over her desires, using the occasion as an opportunity for self-reflection and spiritual improvement. In Plato’s philosophical terms, this resonates with the idea of nurturing the reasoning part of the soul. In Plato’s perspective, “the rational element in our souls is inherently inclined towards the good, reinforcing the idea that goodness is intricately tied to a rational order” (Stalley 150). In this light, Najwa’s experience transcends physical abstinence; it becomes a means of aligning with this rational order, fostering spiritual purification throughout the month of Ramadan, and creating connections with London’s Muslim community. In this line, Najwa expresses: “Ramadan had brought us close together” (Aboulela 177). The diasporic context of London provides a unique backdrop for these experiences, as individuals from diverse backgrounds come together, united by their
shared faith and cultural heritage. Within this environment, Najwa finds a sense of support, community, and belonging.

As observed in Minaret, Najwa decides to follow and practice Islam while living in a Western environment. This decision may have been influenced by the cultural context she found within the Muslim diaspora, which gave her a community to belong and relate to. It suggests that personal agency is influenced by a range of factors, such as personal circumstances (Hitlin and Johnson 1435). She chooses to utilize the liberal aspect of the West to find peace, freedom, and community in Islam. As Hasan notes in his article “Seeking Freedom in the “Third Space” of Diaspora”, “Women in Minaret far from embracing militancy or religious extremism, approach Islam intellectually and spiritually” (101). However, the adoption of Islam is not restricted to individuals residing in Arabic or Islamic nations; Westerners residing in the West may also choose to convert to Islam and practice its teachings. Wafaa’s husband, All, a painter who has always resided in Britain, exemplifies this phenomenon. His conversion to Islam serves as a powerful illustration of Western individuals choosing to follow Islamic teachings within their native cultural context. In the novel Minaret, Najwa articulates her surprise regarding this revelation in the following passage:

He was English and blond [...] I had never met anyone like him before, a convert [...] All intrigued me. I had got the impression from Anwar that the English were all secular and liberal. All was nothing like that, yet he was completely English and had never set foot outside Britain [...] The more lifts I accepted from them, the more I got to understand him. (Aboulela 228)

This encounter broadens Najwa’s perspective and challenges her preconceived notions. It allows her to experience the diversity within Western society and the unexpected presence of
individuals who have converted to Islam and were not just born into it. Considering these aspects, Najwa’s journey to find her identity is multifaceted and complex. By utilizing what is known in the West as liberation and freedom of choice, Najwa, influenced by her diasporic experience and the need to find a community, decides to follow Islam and its teachings. This helped her to find a collective which she can relate to and learn from. Najwa then becomes an example of a free individual in the West, shaped not only by personal choices but also by the circumstances surrounding her diasporic experience. Living her faith as a minority, and confronting challenges related to familial circumstances, cultural norms, and identity struggles, Najwa gains heightened awareness of the significance of practicing her faith. This awareness becomes a catalyst for opportunities in personal identity, agency, and empowerment.

Conclusion

Minaret relates the story of a young Muslim woman’s journey, offering an exploration of the theme of freedom within the context of the Muslim diaspora. Through the incorporation of Plato’s philosophical thought as a guiding framework, the thesis delves into the philosophical and cultural foundations that underlie the pursuit of freedom in the diasporic context, particularly for Muslim women living in the West.

Najwa’s transformative journey, as reflected throughout the chapters, depicts a process of self-discovery and adaptation within the Muslim diaspora in London. Her understanding of freedom evolves through the challenges faced in navigating the complexities of diaspora life and distancing herself from the cultural norms of Khartoum. In Khartoum, societal and cultural norms played a defining role in shaping her identity, but her move to London, allows her to break free from these constraints and experience a newfound sense of freedom. This liberation is a result of her dissociation from her place of origin, and the challenges combined with the new liberal, and individualistic context encountered in London. These challenges include
familial loss, solace after her brother’s incarceration and detachment from her former lover Anwar, adaptation to London’s society, and the search for support within the religious community. Scholars like Vatsa have asserted that for women living in diaspora their “dissociation from their native environments, combined with the new, liberal, and individualistic context they encounter in the Western society, leads to greater freedom to explore and shape their identity” (73). Najwa’s newfound identity is shaped by her spiritual yearnings. Engaging in religious sessions at the mosque, interacting with the London Muslim community, and adopting practices such as prayer, fasting during Ramadan, wearing the veil, and reading the Quran contribute to her sense of fulfilment and liberation.

As the novel progresses, the exploration of differing understandings of freedom within various cultures, notably the modern liberal Western and Arabic-Islamic cultures in Minaret, emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the existence of diverse perspectives on freedom. This novel illustrates that freedom can manifest in various forms, whether through adopting a liberal and individualistic lifestyle like Anwar, or adhering to religious practices for communal well-being, exemplified by Najwa. This acknowledgment fosters an acceptance that the concept of freedom is multifaceted and can vary among individuals, advocating for a departure from a singular interpretation.

By highlighting the possibility of multiple interpretations of freedom in Minaret within a Muslim diasporic context, guided by Plato’s philosophical thought, this thesis contributes to a critical reflection on societal norms. It encourages an exploration of diverse perspectives on freedom and free will within a multicultural context, challenging the notion of a singular interpretation and paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of this complex and multifaceted concept.
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