

## Empowering Muslims in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

<https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.21.1.7>

Nosaybah Walid Awajan  
Middle East University, Jordan

Mahmoud Flayeh Al-Shetawi  
The University of Jordan, Jordan

**Abstract:** *Diasporic Arab writers substantially differ in how they represent aspects of contemporary Arabic culture(s) in their literary works and diasporic Arab women writers have represented Islam even more differently in their works. The study investigates how Islam is portrayed in the fiction of two diasporic Arab women writers, Leila Aboulela (b. 1964- ) and Mohja Kahf. (1967- ). General literary research has been conducted on these two writers and how they represent Islam in their writing; however, firstly, most of the conducted literature is about the veil and what it adds to Muslim women living in the West. Secondly, most of the previous research tackles each writer alone. Nevertheless, the current study is predominantly different as it shows how Islam is represented in both Aboulela's *Minaret* (2004) and Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) as a religion that provides an ethical pathway and empowers its adherents socially, politically and psychologically, thus lending purpose to one's life. It also fills the gap in discussing the works of two writers from different backgrounds and in different settings and contexts in one study.*

**Keywords:** diaspora, Leila Aboulela, Islam, Mohja Kahf, representation

### 1. Introduction

Muslim communities in the West have become increasingly visible over the past few decades due to social, cultural, economic, political and demographic reasons. Moreover, Mohammad Mazher Idriss and Tahir Abbas and Fauzia Ahmad argue that there is an overall increase in the number of Muslims in the West, thus making it one of the world's fastest growing religions (Idris and Abbas 2010: 32, Fauzia Ahmad 2011: 19). However, although there is an increase in the number of Muslims, they still do not have the same rights as other citizens of the West (Idriss and Abbas 2011: 21). Jacqueline Ismael and Shereen Ismael and Esra Santesso declare that Muslims, unfortunately, do not enjoy all their rights in the West and are often "marginalized" and discriminated against (Ismael and Ismael 2010: 197; Santesso 2017: 9).

A number of religious thinkers have explored and highlighted the way Islam is misrepresented in the West and have investigated the stereotypical images of Islam which have been widely disseminated throughout the West, especially after the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks. These religious thinkers also hearken back to

what has been narrated about Islam and try to reconstruct the image and present a real picture of the religion and its followers in order to diminish hatred in the West towards Muslims and Islam. Nouri Gana and Santesso state that many Arab and Muslim authors have countered these stereotypes (Gana 2015: 19; Santesso 2017: 9).

Additionally, some Arab religious thinkers and authors counter the prevailing image of Islam in the West by representing it as a religion of tolerance and peace. Here, one may draw on Amrah Abdul Majid's argument that Muslim writers, especially women, write to negate the stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims in the West (2015: 28). Abdul Majid also adds that these writers have a goal in defending Islam by giving a "clear image of Islam and its followers to the wider audience" (2015: 40). Furthermore, Tariq Ramadan argues that Muslims in the West are trying to create their own "Muslim personality" (2004: 4). Further, Sulaiman, Quayum and Abdulmanaf state that Kahf's positive portrayal of Khadra and other Muslims in her works undo the negative stereotypical images of Muslims known in the West. She represents them as active, social and proud Muslims (2018: 57).

As mentioned above, many Muslim authors have tried (and are still trying) to reverse the negative view of Islam and Muslims that is held by many Westerners. Instead, through their writings, these Muslim authors try to paint a picture of Islam and what it offers to its followers which is often the opposite of the oppression and violence that many Westerners believe it to be. In this deliberate effort to present Islam in a favorable way, they write in English instead of their native tongues because it is Western readers they want to reach most. Such is the case of Aboulela and Kahf who try contradicting the images the West has about Islam, especially those created after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and 7/7 in New York and London, respectively.

Furthermore, though this theme of writing to reverse the stereotypes of Islam and its adherents is ubiquitous throughout the writings of Aboulela and Kahf, this study focuses only on Aboulela's *Minaret* (2004) and Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Moreover, this study shows how both try to depict Islam as a religion which lends purpose to one's life by providing an ethical pathway and as a religion which empowers its adherents socially, politically and psychologically in these novels.

Most of the conducted research focuses on how their current novels have negotiated and tackled the issues faced by the protagonists and their families in both novels as seen in the research of Lin Ling (2019) which mainly focused on the issues of cultural clashes and race relations, for example. Other literary research on the two novels conducted by Susan T. Al-Karawi and Ida B. Bahar (2014), Carine P. Marques and Glaucia R. Goncalves (2012) and Agnieszka Stanecka (2018) mainly focuses on the veil as a symbol of Muslim identity in the West. Still other researchers like Abdullah (2017), Peter Morey (2017), Amrah Abdul Majid (2015) and Amrah Abdul Majid (2017) discuss the idea of how Islam offers peace, refuge, solace and satisfaction to its adherents. This study, however, delves a little

deeper into Islam by focusing on how believing in Islam and being a spiritual practitioner of the religion can lead one down an ethical pathway that not only lends purpose to one's life, but also empowers its believers socially, politically and psychologically as presented in Aboulela's *Minaret* (2004) and Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006).

Additionally, while most literary research has been conducted on the two authors individually, this research attempts to bring the two authors together and fill in the gaps created by the fact that, though the two novels have different settings and contexts, both Aboulela and Kahf pose similar arguments about how Islam provides an ethical pathway and lends purpose to one's life in their respective works *Minaret* (2004) and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The research then continues by discussing how the two authors represent Islam as a religion which empowers its adherents socially, politically and psychologically in their novels, *Minaret* (2004) and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006).

## 2. Analysis

In their novels, Aboulela and Kahf focus on Islam as a kind of safe haven from the pressures facing Muslims relief and safety from all of the issues facing any person living in the West. They both offer a more realistic and nuanced picture of Islam by differentiating between Muslim practitioners and non-practitioners. As a result, the reader of this research may notice a disparity in the discussion of the two novels; however, this is dependent upon both what the author presents and how they present it in each of their respective novels. Read in tandem, the two novels show how Islam is the cornerstone in some characters' lives. For the protagonists of both novels, Islam is a *modus vivendi* that enlightens and regulates their lives.

The first novel to be analyzed is Aboulela's *Minaret*. Aboulela presents Najwa, her protagonist, first as a lost girl living in the West who indulges in all kinds of freedom. She lives as a Western citizen with no religious limits or restrictions and tries many things that are forbidden in Islam. In the end, she finds that the only thing that truly satisfies her and helps her reach a point of rest and confidence is when she starts to practice Islam. Mahmudul Hasan argues that Aboulela's *Minaret* does not portray Najwa as a victim of Islam; on the contrary, she is just a Muslim woman who has faith and is committed to it (2015: 70). As a result, the reader notices that living her life without inhibition left her empty and unsatisfied, but when she started practicing Islam, she found a certain spiritual comfort she could not find outside of Islam.

Najwa first started feeling this spiritual comfort at Regent's Park where she meets friendly and supportive Muslims. Charles Campbell states that the mosque gathers people from different ethnic groups, but what really joins Muslims together is the practice of Islam (2019: 56). Additionally, it helped open up the path she chose to take that led to her becoming a practicing Muslim. Hasan states that Regent's Park is presented in the novel as a mosque which is not for any particular ethnic group (2015: 101), but like a mosque, it brings together all the practitioners of Islam who have the same spiritual thoughts and beliefs. Hasan adds that Najwa and the other women approach religion and Islam in an intellectual and spiritual

way (2015: 101). Perhaps Aboulela intentionally puts forth the idea of having Najwa participate in spiritual activities to show that Najwa has changed as a result of becoming a true believer in her devotion to Islam. Yousef Awad posits that the mosque is a place that puts the individual on the right path to survival and helps the individual overcome feelings of loss and instability (2012: 153-155). This is what has happened to Najwa as a practicing Muslim – the mosque lights her path along the way in her spiritual journey. Additionally, the Muslim women who regularly meet at the mosque for both personal and religious reasons are intelligent and highly educated women; thus, by presenting them as such, Aboulela intentionally provides her reader with a link between intelligence and Islam. Hasan also declares that Aboulela presents women who are truly devoted and faithful to their religion. This is a result of their being open-minded, enlightened and educated in Islam. For example, Najwa lives in a non-Muslim community, where she creates a Muslim identity for herself (Hasan 2015: 101). The devotion of the women can be seen in their relationships, in their spirituality, and in the words of their lectures on the tenants of Islam and how aware they are of becoming better Muslims. This is exemplified by the way they sit together, read the Quran together, and pray together. It can also be seen in how spiritually aware they are to perform each of the daily prayers and to observe fasting in both Ramadan and other optional times designated for fasting.

According to Abbas, Aboulela's religious novels do not just present religious characters, but also their narratives lead to religious endings. Abbas states that Aboulela presents what makes a Muslim marriage ideal--the man being responsible for his wife and children, and the woman being safe with her husband (2011: 82). This is related to the fact that Islam provides its adherents with an ethical path and lends purpose to one's life which, in turn, enhances the life of any family. Abbas adds that Islam is shown and presented as offering "comfort, community and access to identity" (2011: 84). Abbas highlights Najwa's realization that men who do not practice Islam could not offer a safe life to their wives, and they could easily commit sins and be dragged into mistakes (2014: 441). The novel is not just about religious and nonreligious people; it is about how the novel ends and how Najwa reaches peace through Islam and her faith in it (Abbas 2014: 441). This can be seen in such examples as the time when Najwa thought of Tamer as her husband, but realizing that marrying him is just not possible, she backs away from the idea.

Nesrin Koc declares that Aboulela tries to prove that all characters who practice Islam are good and caring individuals such as Shahinaz, Um Waleed, and Wafaa and her husband. On the other hand, people who do not practice Islam or Islamic rituals are presented as mean and evil such as Anwar and Omar, Najwa's brother (2014: 41). Yousef Awad indicates that Aboulela presents religion as the reason for her characters' relief and as what helps them in coping with others and with the society (2012: 70). Aboulela tries to differentiate between practicing and non-practicing Muslims and how different their lives are from one another. For instance, when something bad happens to her brother, Najwa firmly believes that it is a result of him turning his back on God and Islam.

Furthermore, she shows how becoming a practicing Muslim has changed Najwa's life. By examining the following quote, one can see the difference in Najwa's thinking both before and after becoming a practicing Muslim and how her conversion back to Islam seems to give her life meaning in her diaspora. This is clear in Najwa's meditations on her status quo right after she sleeps with her boyfriend:

Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? Auntie Eva, Anwar's flat mates. Omar would never know unless I wrote to him. Uncle Saleh was across the world. A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack, dealt a blow to my mother's marriage, and mild, modern Omar, instead of beating me, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom (Aboulela 2004: 175 -176).

As the above quotation shows, Najwa's monologue highlights how Islam plays a pivotal role in giving meaning to her life by making her think responsibly. In other words, it is Islam which regulates Najwa's life and makes it meaningful. What the passage above clearly shows is that Najwa is aware that Islamic values dictate the rhythm of her life and regulate her daily actions.

Hankir, Carrick and Zaman declare that Islam is a religion which provides a way of life and as long as he/she is alive, each Muslim should be spiritually governed by it. They add that Islam is a kind of submission to Allah which an individual embraces and is led to peace (2015: 53). When a Muslim embraces Islam as a way of life, according to Hankir, Carrick and Zaman, he/she will be able to avoid committing sins such as adultery (2015: 54). Islam also teaches people and Muslims that sins are forgiven, if the sinners regret what they have done and commit themselves to Allah again and reach "earnestness" (2015: 57). Aboulela reflects this nuanced image of Islam in her representation of Najwa's experiences in the West. Najwa first lives a liberal life that is detached from Islamic values and mores until she commits adultery with Anwar. She then realizes her mistake and reflects on the hollow life she lives. At this point, she spiritually embraces Islam and starts to practice it. From this point, she follows Islam as a guide in her life. As Canpolat puts it, Najwa finds herself when she decides to hold on to her religion and in the process she overcomes feelings of isolation, loneliness and loss (2016: 226). It is only in London that Najwa begins to hold on to her religion. She reminiscences whenever she hears the words of the dawn *azan* in Khartoum, it goes into a place inside her that she did not know really existed, a place which she describes as "[a] hollow place" (Aboulela 2004: 31).

Najwa becomes a different person in London because she has Qur'an Tajweed classes at the Regent's Park Mosque; she eats at a halal restaurant; prays in the mosque and spends her time there. Her favorite class is Tajweed. She says that it makes her forget everything around her (Aboulela 2004: 74-79). Najwa spiritually changes to a religious practicing Muslim, and this could be seen when she recites verses from the Qur'an, and when she keeps telling herself that Allah will protect her whenever she faces strange men in London (Aboulela 2004: 80).

These practices show how Najwa is devoted to her religion. She feels comfortable in the Regent's Park Mosque and feels safe while reciting the Qur'an. Islam is a kind of spiritual sanctuary for Najwa that provides her with safety, security and protection.

Wail Hassan states that Aboulela intentionally presents Najwa as a devoted Muslim practitioner who performs religious rituals as a way of life (2011: 192). He states that Aboulela enjoys presenting Muslims who are so devoted and faithful. Her characters are not ideal Muslims, but Muslims who try to practice their faith in "difficult circumstances" and in non-Muslim societies (Hassan 2011: 192). Indeed, Najwa becomes a strong woman and a new person after she holds on to her religion. Awad also comments on how Islam eliminates Najwa's isolation and her feeling of loss in London. Awad argues that Islam provides Najwa with a new environment and a new group of friends (2014: 145). Aboulela introduces another faithful religious practitioner whose life is sanctioned by Islamic values and mores. Tamer, Lamyia's brother, is a strict religious man who, unlike his secular sister, does not smoke and goes to the mosque for each prayer (2004: 93). According to Hassan, Aboulela presents Tamer as a faithful practitioner of Islam (2011: 191).

Tamer thinks of Najwa seriously as a wife although she is older than him. Aboulela shows through Tamer the idea that Muslims will never get lost as long as they follow the minaret of the mosque (2004: 208). In a way, this echoes Hassan's argument that in Aboulela's works, Islam makes Muslims stronger and gives them the capability of being free, dynamic and strong (2011: 125). Similarly, Awad points out that in *Minaret*, the mosque provides security, solidity and consolation to Muslims and this is what Najwa gains in her affiliation with Muslim women who frequent the Regent's Park Mosque (2014: 147-149). The mosque, Awad asserts, is a place which unifies people regardless of their educational levels, nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds (2014: 153). It is also a place which puts the individual on the right path to survive and overcome feelings of loss and instability (Awad 2014: 155).

Thus, as the above examples show, Aboulela's religious characters are ethically and morally guided by faith, and hence, they are more considerate and accommodating than those who reject Islam as a pathway. On this point, Hanan Ahmad Khimish states that Islam provides a way of life and a path to follow for each Muslim individual which is based on ethics. The Qur'an states that Muslims should base their behavior with others and within their community on ethics (2014: 134). Suleiman also points out that Islam is based on ethics, which is the ideal way of living. It encourages teaching Muslims from childhood "ethical education" (2009: 12). In *Minaret*, Tamer is portrayed as a religious practitioner of Islam. It is mentioned in the novel that he does not leave any prayer, and if he sometimes does not perform the dawn prayer, he feels uncomfortable. According to Hankir, Carrick and Zaman, performing the five pillars by Muslims gives an answer for each Muslim to the question "What is the meaning of life?" (2015: 58) They add that Islam gives structure to one's life. It leads to a point of equilibrium. It is an expression of love to Allah represented in Islamic sujood, which is the motion of

placing one's head on the ground during prayer (2015: 58). In this sense, Aboulela's representation of Tamer highlights the importance of the five prayers done by Muslims each day. It is presented as an everyday activity which the Muslim individual gets used to doing, as it is part of his life. It is a practice which is spiritually done by each Muslim which would protect him/her from any harm and from committing any sins. In *Minaret*, Tamer's parents are also happy because he is religious. They believe that Islam will protect him. His mother is happy because he is spiritually religious which would prevent him as an individual living in the West (Aboulela 2004: 264).

In the same context, Suleiman states that Shariah is put by Allah in order to protect the life of Muslims. It also aims to protect the "intellect/thought, religion, lineage/family, and property/wealth of the individual" (2009: 54). Shariah establishes the individual's responsibility towards himself. It promotes self-development and regulates his relationships with other Muslims and the world (2009: 54). Suleiman also states that Shariah provides a way of life based on morality. It determines what is right and what is wrong for Muslims (2019: 52). It aims to protect the individual from himself and from others (Suleiman 2019: 15). Thus, in the novel, Najwa wanted her brother to be punished in Sudan by the Islamic law to forbid him from committing any other sin, and hence, protect his own life. The representation of Islam and Shariah by Aboulela resembles what Suleiman states. Aboulela portrays Shariah as a way which controls the individual's behavior which will protect his life. Najwa believes in the importance of the prayer and shown by Aboulela as worried about Omar and wants him to pray so that Allah would forgive him (2004: 96). Omar thinks of his situation and tells Najwa that if they have prayed with his parents, nothing bad would have happened and that Allah would have protected them (95). These examples invoke to Hankir, Carrick and Zaman's argument that prayers are the structure of one's life and protect the individual from any harm (2015: 58).

Aboulela reinforces the distinction between practitioners and non-practitioners of Islam in her representation of Um Waleed, a Muslim practitioner who is the Qur'an teacher in the mosque and Lamya, Tamer's sister, who is a non-practicing Muslim. Um Waleed makes a speech about Ramadan. Its purpose is what Muslims do in Ramadan and how Muslims could fulfill their duties in it (2004: 184). Najwa describes Um Waleed, and how she is beautifully dressed and she says that it is only faith that makes her cover her body and teach and plead for change (2004: 185). Um Waleed is asking Muslim women in the mosque to give charity and avoid lying, gossiping and envying (Aboulela 2004: 185). She has a way of convincing others and giving lessons. Overall, Um Waleed is a role model that Najwa upholds with the highest respect and wishes to emulate. In describing Um Waleed and how she helps other women become more aware of Islam and its customs and practices, Aboulela presents what she believes is the exemplary image of a Muslim woman.

In contrast, Lamya is a non-practicing Muslim. We mostly know about Lamya through her brother Tamer, who always talks about her to Najwa. Tamer thinks that Lamya's behavior is unacceptable as a Muslim woman. Aboulela tries

to show how the behavior, attitudes and moral rectitude of Muslims who do not practice Islamic rituals in their life and Muslims who are devoted and faithful to Allah are markedly different. While the first group seems morally and ethically disoriented, the latter group is more balanced and has a clear sense of right and wrong. But that is not to say that Aboulela romanticizes and idealizes the second group. In fact, these characters, including of course Aboulela's protagonist, are far from perfection and flawlessness. That is to say that one who is a practicing Muslim is more perfect or infallible.

Aboulela also presents men who are devoted to God and are practitioners of Islam as men who are protective and good to their wives, such as Ali, Wafaa's husband (2004: 242). Aboulela shows how Anwar would not be like Ali by presenting the incident when Najwa tells Anwar that Kamal has sexually harassed her in the kitchen (2004: 242). In other words, non-practicing Anwar lacks the sense of protectiveness towards his supposed beloved Najwa. This is in sharp contrast to Ali's behavior who exerts no effort to protect his wife and keep her safe. In the same context, one could just draw on the words of Koc and Abbas. Koc states that Aboulela represents practitioners of Islam as good and caring people who prevent themselves from harming others. On the other hand, non-practitioners of Islam are portrayed as evil and mean people who easily harm others (Koc 2014: 4, Abbas 2011: 441). Overall, in *Minaret*, a Muslim character's life is strongly influenced by the extent to which this character is a practicing or non-practicing Muslim. Furthermore, Aboulela shows how Muslims could reach to a kind of relief by following Islamic rules and stipulations. As Awad puts it, at the end of the novel, Najwa reaches a sense of relief and balance by abiding to Islamic rules and regulations (2014: 144). At the end of the novel, Najwa goes to Hajj after she takes the cheque from Doctor Zainab, Tamer's mother (Aboulela 2004: 165). She finds out that the amount on the cheque is exactly the same amount of money she lent Anwar to continue his studies which he never paid back (2004: 268). This is to show that in Islam, when you do good deeds, God will reward you in another stage in your life.

From the previous episodes, it can be noticed that Aboulela represents Islam as a faith that provides its adherents with a clear sense of moral rectitude and lends purpose to one's life. Similarly, Kahf presents Islam as enveloping its adherents with a sense of benevolence and moral righteousness. Specifically, in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf shows how Islam provides an ethical pathway to practicing Muslims, bestowing meaningfulness to their lives. Abdul Majid states that Kahf shows how Islam equips its believers with freedom which leads to its practice in their everyday life (2015: 10). According to Abdul Majid, Kahf expresses this idea through the actions of her protagonist, Khadra, who considers Islam and its teachings as her main reference in life (2015: 10). Khadra performs the Islamic rituals as a way to organize her life and at the same time to integrate in her new life in non-Muslim societies (10). Cariello also adds that Kahf's novel explores issues related to Muslims living in the West (2017: 226). She adds that Kahf believes that Muslims have to practice their Islamic rituals freely even though



they are in the West or live in non-Muslim societies (Cariello 2011: 232). This could be noticed through Ebtehaj, Khadra's mother, when she tells her daughter that a person has to practice Islam to be a Muslim (Kahf 2006: 24). People could be Muslim practitioners and at the same time could enjoy their lives. As an example women and girls could swim and enjoy swimming in private pools, even when they are wearing hijab (Kahf 2006: 23). Thus, Kahf's novel shows how Islam does not restrict a practicing Muslim's freedom and liberty as long as they do not contradict or impinge on one's moral values and mores.

What Kahf presents is that Muslims must not hesitate in practicing their Islamic rituals even in front of non-Muslims (Kahf 2006: 232). This is seen in the novel when the Shamy family moves from one place to another. They perform their prayers everywhere and in front of everybody in the US. As an example when they all pray and Wajdi did not have a rug to pray on, Wajdi, paraphrasing a Quranic verse, tells his kids that "[a]ll the world is a prayer mat" and that earth is pure (Kahf 2006: 104). Other examples are when the men of the Dawah Center travel from one place to another, they perform their prayers and other rituals in front of non-Muslims in the US (40) and when Khadra allows her friend, Sandra, to watch her pray with her family (Kahf 2006: 10-11). Commenting on the above examples, Cariello states that Kahf announces that Islam is "a fact of ordinary, everyday and anywhere practice" (2017: 232). She argues that Kahf tries to show what she believes, which is that Islam is not a religion which is only practiced inside hidden mosques, but is also a religion which is spiritually practiced as part of everyday life (Cariello 2017: 232). In other words, Kahf presents Islam as a comprehensive approach to life that is not detached from day-to-day experiences and dealings.

Kahf tries to inform her readers that Islam is not merely a string of rituals that are performed at specific times or in certain places. Rather, Islam, as Kahf presents it in the novel, is a way of life and a holistic moral and ethical system. She mentions many detailed examples of rituals and practices each Muslim has to follow in his everyday life. She does this through Khadra's parents, who try to educate their children. Through the Shami family, she presents the ethical way presented by Islam. Cariello states that Kahf's novel is a "dissertation on Islam" (2017: 225). In other words, she is educating her readers about Islam which must become an essential part of a Muslim's life (2017: 235). Kahf does this because Islam is known as an oppressive religion which forces its adherents to perform hard and tough tasks.

Another important point related to the representation of Islam as a religion which regulates a Muslim's social interactions is that Islam is a flexible religion as Abdul Majid puts it (2014: 130). In the novel, Khadra tells Chrif, who is a secular Muslim, that "Shariah law is elastic, it changes" (Kahf 2006: 344). She says it is progressive in a way that being a Muslim is not a "strait jacket" and not bad and at the same time, she knew it was not that simple (Kahf 2006: 344). Then she adds that Islam is flexible and God has mercy on people especially children (92). Praying is important in Islam, but it is also explained how even when you are praying and you are in the situation of sajda, it is okay to make the sajda over a baby and give him a little belly tickle. Prophet Muhammad used to allow his granddaughter to

play on his back while he was in the sujood although sometimes leading prayers behind him as the imam (Kahf 2006: 33-34). Abdul Majid also adds that Allah is the source of “love, acceptance and forgiveness” (120). Seen from the previous examples, Kahf tries to show how Islam is flexible and is not a strict religion. In other words, though there are certain rituals and practices that every Muslim must perform, there are alternatives for those who cannot perform them for one reason or another.

Islam is also represented as a creed that empowers its adherents socially, politically and psychologically. Muslims are empowered by certain rights which make their lives easier and more prolific. These rights follow a Muslim wherever he or she may go and in any situation because they are governed and protected by the law of Shariah along with the commandments of the rituals every Muslim must perform. For example, Aboulela depicts how Najwa is empowered by the hijab and the Quran and how they help her in challenging the Western society as an Arab living alone. At the same time, Kahf shows how Khadra is empowered by wearing the hijab, choosing her husband, asking for divorce and choosing abortion. As a result, the reader of the current paper may notice an imbalance between the discussions of both novels, but this depends on how and what the author presents in each novel. There are many examples where one can notice the portrayal of Islam as a source of rejuvenating power to its believers and practitioners in the fiction of Aboulela and Kahf. To start with Aboulela's *Minaret*, Islam is depicted as a powerhouse that motivates and supports Najwa in her life in the West. It also helps her overcome the oppressing conditions of displacement and isolation she undergoes in diaspora. Through holding on to Islam and practicing its rituals, Najwa had the chance to survive in the West and surpass her loneliness, isolation and loss. It also helps her diffuse anxieties and fears caused by living in a non-Muslim society.

Commenting on Aboulela's literary work, Abdul Majid argues that Aboulela puts her protagonists in a position in which their following of Islam and their practice of it gives them “a rock of stability” to survive in non-Muslim societies (2015: 23). Thus, Abdul Majid maintains that Aboulela writes from the basis of her own faith which she tries to express in her novels. She describes herself as a woman who had practiced Islam starting with wearing hijab (2015: 23). The first thing Najwa does to conquer her problems is to wear the veil and then to learn the Qur'an which eventually leads to her attachment to the mosque and her integration with Muslim women who frequent it. This is a powerful weapon which has helped Najwa overcome both the problems she faces in the West and of being alone in a non-Muslim society. The veil gives her the liberty and freedom to move and act in multicultural London. According to Canpolat, Najwa's decision to hijab and to her religion protects her from the “sexist gaze” in the West (2016: 227). In fact, Najwa expresses her satisfaction at wearing hijab: “In the full-length mirror I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer” (Canpolat 2016: 246). Aboulela portrays the veil as a kind of

protection for Muslim women because, as Banu Gokarikel and Anna Secor argue, it hides their beauty (2014: 24). Aboulela presents hijab in a positive way and reverses stereotypes about it as a sign of oppression and subordination. Thus, as Canpolat puts it, Aboulela transforms the symbolic meaning of the veil into a liberating and empowering tool (2016: 229). Badawi and Khimish also state that the veil helps Muslim females to protect themselves from the gaze of men and from those who want to harm them. It is a gift assigned from Allah to females to provide them with freedom and dignity (Badawi 1971: 5; Khimish 2014: 137).

Najwa chooses to wear the hijab to harmonize her inner and outer faith. Gokarikel and Secor argue that wearing a veil harmonizes the inner faith with the external one to complete the self-faith. This connects the self's piety with the veil (2014: 24). Aboulela intentionally shows how Najwa chooses to wear the veil alone without being forced to. When she wears it for the first time, she expresses her fondness of herself. This could be seen in the following quote: "I didn't look like myself. Something was deflated. And was this the real me? Without the curls I looked tidy, tame; I looked dignified and gentle" (Kahf 2006: 245). She feels she has been renewed (Canpolat 2016: 227). Aboulela shows how the hijab empowers Muslim women especially in the West. Najwa's words in the above quotation speak volumes on the psychological and mental calmness she feels when she dons the hijab. In this context, Awad argues that *Minaret* gives a chance to look at the hijab from a different perspective (2014: 160). He also states that Aboulela shows that the hijab gives women power and freedom (2014: 163). In this sense, following Islamic teachings empowers Najwa and enables her to be reconciled with her identity.

Najwa is also empowered by the Qur'an and its teachings. She becomes a different person in the West after she begins to read the Qur'an and attend lessons in the mosque. In *Minaret*, Aboulela shows a great change in Najwa's life in the West after she starts attending classes in the mosque. She becomes a different person in London and starts applying what she learns from the Qur'an in the mosque to her everyday life. She has Qur'an Tajweed classes at the Regent's Park Mosque. She prays in the mosque and spends the time there when she is not at Layla's house (Aboulela 2004: 74). On Najwa's learning of the Qur'an, Canpolat states that through learning the Qur'an, Najwa, tries to have "a new self-understanding of her faith which makes her stronger" (2016: 227). In other words, Najwa is no longer a vulnerable and beleaguered refugee, but she becomes a more self-confident and assertive Muslim woman.

Awad also adds that when Najwa studies the Qur'an and has Tajweed classes, she becomes a devoted Muslim, which in turn gives her strength to overcome her "chaotic life" and her life in a non-Muslim society (2014: 163). Geoffrey Nash also adds that Islamic teachings are presented as a tool which helps Najwa fight her obstacles in the West (2002: 150). This could be noticed in many examples in the novel. For instance, whenever Najwa faces strange men, she recites a verse from the Qur'an and keeps telling herself that Allah will protect her (Aboulela 2004: 80). Abdullah argues here that Islam provides Najwa with "refuge from societal injustices-patriarchal or otherwise". It is like a "liberation force"

(2017:154). So, Najwa, now believing that God will always protect her from harm, has no fears in facing any circumstances or situations that she may encounter.

Additionally, Aboulela also shows how the religious classes Najwa takes and attends make her confident and give her the belief that Allah is there to protect her (Aboulela 2004: 239). Najwa then expresses her relief and delight of being a devout Muslim and that she belongs to the other faithful and devoted Muslims (2004: 184). This shows, as Abdul Majid suggests, that Islam and the teachings of Islam strengthen the Muslim (2015: 23). Overall, Aboulela portrays Islam as a power which strengthens Muslims. She specifically focuses on how the hijab and the teachings of Qur'an positively affect her personality and improve her life. She depicts how abiding by Islamic teachings helps Najwa overcome the obstacles she encounters as a Muslim in a non-Muslim society.

The representation of Islam as a source of power to its believers could be also seen in Kahf's novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Kahf depicts how Islam gives power and self-confidence to Khadra to overcome the obstacles which face her in her life in the West. Just like Najwa in *Minaret*, Khadra is fortified with faith in her quest for self-discovery. It is her understanding of Islamic teachings on issues like un/veiling, marriage, divorce and abortion that enables her to emerge as a self-confident and independent Muslim woman. Abdul Majid states that Khadra uses her rights in Islam which is a consequence of her own awareness and understanding of religion (2017: 116). This shows how Khadra is aware of her rights as a Muslim woman, and she is aware that such rights empower and fortify her. Kahf, according to Sulaiman, Quayum and Abdulmanaf, tries to show the fact that Muslims, especially Muslim women, can gain their rights as Muslims wherever they are because of the Islamic law (2018: 44). They add that Khadra is given a voice by Kahf to speak up for herself as a Muslim woman (2018: 57). This is a kind of political power which guarantees that Sharia provides rights for women that follow them wherever they go and wherever they live.

Just as in Aboulela's novel, the hijab plays a pivotal role in empowering Kahf's protagonist. According to Badawi, wearing the hijab shows the amount of commitment of the Muslim woman in an honorable way (1971: 6). According to Abdul Majid, although Muslim women are not forced to wear the veil, they wear it as a sign of their own transformation to adulthood, which strengthens a woman's Islamic identity (102). El-Guindi (1999) states that women wearing Hijab are resisting modern and secular social force (1999: 51). Ullayyan and Awad declare that, by wearing the veil, Khadra is challenging society because it gives her the power to confront the Western perspectives of the veil and the veiled women (2016: 101). These examples show exactly how Khadra is politically empowered by Islam which can also be seen in the example of Khadra refusing United States Citizenship because it contradicts with her Muslim identity.

Kahf represents Khadra as a girl who chooses to wear the hijab (Kahf 2006: 110). Her parents celebrate her hijab as if it is a crown (Kahf 2006: 112). After Khadra's trip to Syria, she insists on wearing the hijab with more belief of its importance. On the same point, Abdul Majid states that when Khadra returns from

Syria, she is a re-born person who has more faith in her Islam and her ritual practices (2017: 127). Huda Ulayyan and Yousef Awad state that Khadra used to wear a plain veil but after her trip to the East, she puts on a tangerine scarf, which is loose and touches her cheek (2015: 33). Her scarf is described in the novel as “the hand of a lover” (Kahf 2006: 313). According to Cariello, Kahf, like Aboulela, focuses on the idea that the hijab frees women from the gaze of men (2017: 233). On the same issue, El-Guindi declares that according to Qur’an and Sunnah, men have to control their gaze on women. At the same time, women have to move properly in public without trying to attract attention by sexual behavior or tabarruj (1999: 57). As Badawi declares, hijab is worn by females to be protected from the gaze of men. It is a gift assigned from Allah to Muslim women to protect their beauty (1971: 5). In the novel, Khadra has chosen to wear her hijab. The hijab is one of the things which empower Khadra to overcome the obstacles which she faces in the West. The other element which empowers Khadra is her right to choose her partner in marriage. When Juma proposes to Khadra, she sits with him several times in the presence of her family before she agrees to marry him (2006: 205-206).

On women’s right to choose their husbands, Khimish states that Islam gives the women the right to choose their partner in marriage (2014: 135), a right they did not have in pre-Islamic times when a variety of factors affected the marriage of a woman. Khadra also practices her right in deciding the form of dowry or mahr that she should receive as a bride. She agrees to marry Juma provided that he should memorize a long verse or sura as her mahr (Kahf 2006: 207-208). To use the words of Anne Sofie Roald, the dowry is a right for each wife. It is given as a gift for the wife (2010: 61). Badawi also states that Islam gives the right of dowry to women which the husband has to pay (1971: 7). The third right which empowers Khadra is her right to divorce her husband. When Juma finishes his study, he is forced to go back to Kuwait. Khadra refuses to accompany him because she still needs a whole year and asks for divorce. When Juma refuses to divorce her, she makes a wife-initiated divorce or khulu’. According to Kahf, some Muslim women did not know this right (Kahf 2006: 252).

On the right of divorce in Islam, Pirzada Athar Hussain states that there are two kinds of divorce in Islam which are Talaq and Khulu’. The first is authorized for the male against his wife. The latter is pronounced by women to protect their rights and lives, but it needs the acceptance of the husband to become valid (2004: 50). It should be stated that divorce, according to Hussain, should be the last choice when differences occur between a married couple (2004: 52). Anne Sofie Roald states that even in the West, Muslim leaders have the right and power to offer divorce for women (2010: 63). In other words, women who live in the West could still ask for divorce or khul’ by qualified imams (2010: 63). According to Hussein and Badawi, Islam came to give women their rights (Hussein 2004: 52, Badawi 1971: 9). As could be noticed, Khadra is well aware of her rights and realizes the fact that Islam is not against women, but it empowers them and protects their rights.

The fourth right which boosts Khadra’s personality and empowers her even in a non-Muslim society is her right to abortion. When Khadra asks for divorce,

she discovers she is pregnant. Khadra tells Juma about aborting the baby even if she has already filed for divorce (2006: 248). Khadra is with abortion and says it is allowed in Islam and some schools of thought in Islam allow it, but they differ in the time of abortion. According to Salaita, Kahf presents the most important rights of women given by Islam, which are divorce and abortion (2011: 39). On the issue of abortion, Serder Demirel (2011) states that it is a serious and challenging issue to humans. This is because Islam values the life of humans and aims at protecting them (2011: 230). Due to the previous fact, abortion is subject to debate. Some Islamic schools are against it as it causes the death of a living human. Some allowed it in certain conditions (2011: 233). He declares that the latest opinion on the time of the abortion allowed is the opinion of Zaghoul El-Naggar. El-Naggar states that what the hadith declares is that the *nutfah* to change to *mudghah* needs three stages, which nearly needs forty days. His opinion echoes all the modern scientific facts and other hadith (2011: 235). Abdul Majid states that Khadra is presented by Kahf as a very intelligent and educated Muslim woman and this is shown in her discussion about abortion (2017: 117). She bases her decision to abort based on two reasons: her study and divorce (Kahf 2006: 116). Khadra is aware of the prohibitions of abortion in Islam. She does not want to do something which is not allowed. She knows that it is only allowed under certain circumstances and conditions (Kahf 2006: 117). Through Khadra, Kahf presents Islam, as Suleiman states, as a religion which provides justice for everyone (2009: 12). It prohibits any action related to abuse, violence and injustice and teaches the equality of all human beings regardless of gender (2009: 12-13).

### 3. Conclusion

In sum, as can be seen by the evidence presented above along with the support of previous literature, it is clear that the fictional worlds created by Abouelea and Kahf present Islam in a favorable light as a religion that offers an ethical pathway to spiritual tranquility and belief in Allah as omniscient and omnipotent, which in turn, lends purpose to one's life. Islam is also presented as a religion that provides its believers with a psychological balance and inner peace for those who practice the Islamic faith. Both authors also present Muslims as good people who are caring and forgiving. They also present Muslims as those who are empowered by certain inalienable rights given to them by Allah and guaranteed by the *Shariah* – rights which make the lives of believers easier and more productive whenever and wherever they may go.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors are grateful to the Middle East University, Amman, Jordan for the financial support granted to cover the publication fee of this research article.

Nosaybah Walid Awajan  
Middle East University, Jordan  
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-5818-4813  
Email: nawajan@meu.edu.jo

Mahmoud Flayeh Al-Shetawi  
School of Foreign Languages  
The University of Jordan, Jordan  
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-8783-6032  
Email: alshetawi\_m@ju.edu.jo

## References

- Abbas, Sadia.** (2011). 'Laila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel'. *Contemporary Literature*, 52 (3): 41-50.
- Abbas, Sadia.** (2014). *At the Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*. New York: Fordham UP.
- Abdul Majid, Amrah.** (2015). *The Process of Faith and Personal Growth in Three Novels by Muslim Women Writers in the Western Diaspora*. Master thesis, Monash University, Australia.
- Abdul Majid, Amrah.** (2015). 'The Process of Faith in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*'. *SOLLS. INTEC*. 54-63.
- Abdul Majid, Amrah.** (2017). 'The Many Ways of Being Muslim: The Practice of Immanent Critique in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*'. *Akademika*, 87(1): 221-230.
- Abdullah, Muhammad.** (2017). '*Minaret: Islam and Feminism at Crossroads*'. *Femeris*, 2(2): 154-165
- Aboulela, Laila.** (2005). *Minaret*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ahmad, Fuaziah.** (2010). 'Globalization and Women's Leadership in Muslim Diaspora: An International Analysis'. In Moghissi, H. and Ghorashi H (ed),

*Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging*, 23-38. England, USA: Ashgate.

- Al-Karawi, T. Susan and Bahar, B. Ida.** (2014). 'Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*'. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 14(3): 254-268.
- Ancellin, Karine.** (2009). 'Hybrid Identities of Characters in Muslim Women Fiction Post 9-11'. *Trans-*, 8: 1-17.
- Awad, Yousef.** (2012). *The Arab Atlantic: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*. New York: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Awad, Yousef.** (2014). 'Writing from the Margins of the Nation: Leila Aboulela's Lyrics Alley'. *Arab World English Journal*, 2: 69-81.
- Badawi, Jamal.** (1971). 'The Status of Woman in Islam'. *Al-Ittihad*. 8 (2): 1-20.
- Campbell, Charles.** (2019). 'The Captivity Narrative and East-West Understanding in Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 19(1): 53-70.
- Canpolat, Seda.** (2016). 'Scopic Dilemmas: Gazing the Muslim Woman in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*'. *Contemporary Women's Writing*. 10 (2): 216-235.
- Cariello, Marta.** (2017). "'Homeland, America, bismillah": Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and the Dissonance of Nationhood'. *Tolomeo*, 19.
- Demirel, Serdar.** (2011). 'Abortion from an Islamic Ethical Point of View'. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2 (1): 230-237.
- El- Guindi, Fadwa.** (1999). 'Veiling Resistance'. *Fashion Theory*, 3(1): 51-80.
- Gana, Nouri, ed.** (2015). *The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Gokariksel, Banu and Secor, Anna.** (2014). 'The Veil, Desire and the Gaze: Turning the Inside Out'. *Signs*, 40 (1): 177-200.
- Hankir, Ahmad., Carrick, Frederick. and Zaman, Rashid.** (2015). 'Islam, Mental Health and Being a Muslim in the West'. *Conference Paper*. 27 (1): 53-59.
- Hasan, Mahmudul.** (2015). 'Seeking Freedom in the 'Third Space' of Diaspora: Muslim's Identity in Aboulela's *Minaret* and Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*'. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 35 (1): 89-105.
- Hassan, Wail.** (2011). *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. New York: Oxford.
- Hussain, Pirzada.** (2004). 'The Notion of Divorce among the Muslim Women during Medieval Period and Contemporary Times: A Feminist Perspective'. *World Journal of Social Science*, 1(2): 49-59.



- Idriss, Mohammad. and Abbas, Tahir.** (2011). *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam*. New York: Routledge.
- Ismael, J and Ismael, S.** (2010). *Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Iraqis in Diaspora*. Moghissi, H., and Ghorashi, H. *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging*. England, USA: Ashgate.
- Kahf, Mohja.** (2006). *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers.
- Khimish, Hanan.** (2014). 'The Impact of Religion on Arab Women'. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*. 5 (3): 132-142.
- Koc, Nesrin.** (2014). *Representation of British Muslim Identities in Leila Aboulela's Minaret and Nadeem Aslam's Maps of Lost Lovers*. Unpublished Master thesis, Middle East Technical University, Turkey.
- Ling, L.** (2019). 'Diasporic Muslim Identities in Literary Representations'. *RSA Journal*, 93-109.
- Marques, P.Carine.** (2012). 'Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* seen through the Hijab Perspectives'. *Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, 177-196.
- Morey, Peter.** (2017). "'Halal fiction" and the limits of postsecularism: Criticism, critique, and the Muslim in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989416689295>
- Nash, Geoffrey.** (2002). 'Re-Sitting Religion and Creating Feminised Space in the Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela'. *Wasafiri*, 35: 28-31.
- Ramadan, Tariq.** (2004). *Western Muslims and Future of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford Universal Press.
- Roald, Anne.** (2010). 'Multiculturalism and Religion Legislation in Sweden'. In: Moghissi, H. and Ghorashi, H (ed.), *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging*, 56-73. England, USA: Ashgate.
- Salaita, Steven.** (2011). *Modern Arab-American Fictions: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP.
- Santesso, Esra and McClung, James.** (2017). *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Stanecka, Agnieszka.** (2018). 'Veiling and Unveiling Fears in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*'. 75-83
- Sulaiman, Suraiya., Quayum, Mohammad. and Abdulmanaf, Nor.** (2018). 'Negotiating Muslim Women's Right in American Diaspora Space: An Islamic Feminist Study of Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*'. *KEMANVSIAAN*, 25 (1): 43-67.

- Suleiman, Yaser.** (2009). *Contextualizing Islam in Britain: Part1*. Cambridge: Centre of Islamic Studies.
- Ulayyan, Huda and Awad, Yousef.** (2015). 'The Quest for Self-Discovery: A Study of the Journey Motif in Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and Aboulela's *The Translator*'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 16: 27- 42.