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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌ًا، ◌ًى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ٌو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ٍي	in
◌َا، ◌ٰ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُوّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِيّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

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Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora

Amrah Abdul Majid*

Abstract: This article is built on the postulation that critical reading of fiction by Muslim women writers has often favoured frameworks that locate the texts as a form of 'writing back' against stereotypes of Muslim women. I suggest that while such perspectives are useful, they have also led to the under exploration of the influence that Islam has on fiction writing, particularly on the portrayal of women and their everyday lives. As an attempt to address this shortcoming, in this article, I present an analysis of two novels, *Minaret* (2006) by Leila Aboulela and *Saints and Misfits* (2017) by S.K. Ali, which are focused on the demonstration of faith by the female characters, particularly relating it to how they connect to God. This is done by utilising Allison Weir's (2013) conceptualisation of freedom as connection and belonging to God where the submission to rituals and norms is seen as a method to create a connection to God. I argue that, in the novels, the centrality of God in the lives of the protagonists is prominent. Thus, when they experience moments of spiritual depravity, they are pushed towards an improvement of personal religious commitment. This commitment has a central aim of connecting to God, and when it is realised, the female protagonists are released from the captivity of worldly desires and expectations.

Keywords: Muslim women's writing, Leila Aboulela, S.K. Ali, Muslims in diaspora

Abstrak: Makalah ini dibina atas anggapan bahawa pembacaan kritikal terhadap fiksyen oleh penulis wanita Muslim sering kali menggunakan kerangka

* Senior Lecturer, English Language Studies Section Pusat Pengajian Ilmu Kemanusiaan Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. Email: amrahamajid@usm.my

yang melihat teks sebagai satu bentuk 'penulisan semula' terhadap stereotaip wanita Muslim. Makalah ini mencadangkan bahawa walaupun perspektif ini berguna, ia juga telah membawa kepada kurangnya penerokaan pengaruh Islam terhadap penulisan fiksyen, khususnya dalam menggambarkan wanita dan kehidupan harian mereka. Sebagai usaha untuk menangani kekurangan ini, makalah ini membentangkan analisis terhadap dua novel, *Minaret* (2006) karya Leila Aboulela dan *Saints and Misfits* (2017) karya S.K. Ali, yang memfokuskan kepada penzahiran iman oleh watak-watak wanita, terutamanya berkaitan dengan bagaimana mereka berhubung dengan Tuhan. Ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan konsep kebebasan sebagai hubungan dan kepunyaan kepada Tuhan oleh Allison Weir (2013), di mana penyerahan kepada ritual dan norma dilihat sebagai kaedah untuk mencipta hubungan dengan Tuhan. Dalam dua buah novel ini, keutamaan Tuhan dalam kehidupan protagonis adalah jelas. Oleh itu, apabila mereka mengalami saat-saat kekosongan rohani, mereka terdorong untuk meningkatkan komitmen agama mereka. Komitmen ini bertujuan untuk menghubungkan diri kepada Tuhan, dan apabila ia dicapai, para protagonis wanita dilepaskan daripada belenggu keinginan dan jangkaan duniawi.

Kata kunci: Penulisan wanita Muslim, Leila Aboulela, S.K. Ali, Muslim dalam diaspora

Introduction

The image of the oppressed Muslim woman in Western literature has a long history of production and dissemination, tracing back to the height of the Ottoman Empire and enduring through the European colonial era (Kahf, 1999). It remains prevalent in contemporary narratives, particularly after 9/11 (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Bernadette Andrea (2009) identifies early modern English literature as a key period where patriarchal travel writing shaped these stereotypes. English women writers of the time replicated these depictions, often intertwining feminist demands with "[O]rientalist discourses" (p. 286). Andrea (2007) further traces the roots of these portrayals to Elizabeth I's correspondence with Safiye, the Ottoman queen mother. Although not a reigning queen, Safiye held an influential position on her son, Mehmed III's administration during an Ottoman era where women had significant influence – a period described as the Sultanate of Women. Her letters to Elizabeth were mistranslated to minimise her authority and reframe her, and by extension Elizabeth, "as a mere woman" (original emphasis, p.

26). Such alterations exemplify how the British colonial agenda sought to erase the agency of Muslim women.

Jasmin Zine (2002) observes that the enduring image of the subjugated Muslim woman reflects "discursive currents of European representational politics… [based on a] complex intermingling between the desire and disavowal of difference" (p. 4). These representations are tied to racialised and gendered experiences in Western interactions with the Muslim World, reinforcing reductive stereotypes that persist in Muslim women's writing. Randa Abdel-Fattah, a Palestinian-Australian writer, recounts being questioned by publishers if her bestselling novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), included themes of honour killing (Cassidy, 2006). Similarly, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed notes publishers' surprise at Muslim women's stories not being uniformly tragic (Chambers, 2013). These examples reflect an Orientalist expectation that homogenises Muslim women's identities, erasing distinctions of race, class, and ideology within Muslim societies (Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Zine, 2008).

This trope – the use of language to convey specific or complex ideas beyond its literal meaning – has perpetuated a dominant readership that expects Muslim women to be portrayed as passive, victimised, and reliant on Western figures for liberation. Such portrayals embed colonial subtexts and the view of the Muslim World as inferior to the West while fostering commercial success for writers and publishers. These constraints limit the creative freedom of Muslim women writers, who may feel compelled to meet these expectations. However, the post-9/11 era has begun to destabilise this narrative. Movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have amplified voices advocating for women's and minority rights, fostering greater diversity in portrayals of Muslim women. Writers like Leila Aboulela, S.K. Ali, Ayisha Malik, Na'ima B. Robert, Ausma Zeenat Khan, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, Huda Fahmy and Uzma Jalaluddin have already emphasised faith and religion in their works. These authors depict Muslim women protagonists as religiously observant while navigating ambitions and experiences common to their non-Muslim peers. Their unique trait lies in how their religiosity shapes their lives.

These works have gained recognition in academia, prompting discussions on Muslim women's subjectivities. Nonetheless, existing

analyses often approach these narratives through postmodern, postcolonial, or multicultural lenses (see Ahmed, 2015; Ahmed, Morey, and Yaqin, 2015; Chambers and Herbert, 2015). Frequently, identifiers like the hijab are examined primarily through sociopolitical and historical frameworks, focusing on visibility and agency. This approach risks oversimplifying Muslim women's identities and neglects their spiritual connections. While such critiques are valuable for challenging hegemonic narratives, they do not fully address the integral role of faith in these women's lives.

In this paper, I examine *Minaret* (2006) by Leila Aboulela and *Saints and Misfits* (2017) by S.K. Ali, highlighting how faith is central to their narratives. While previous analyses acknowledge the importance of Islam in these novels, they often frame discussions within diasporic and postcolonial contexts. These perspectives can overemphasise sociopolitical resistance, leading to a one-dimensional interpretation of Muslim women's identities. By contrast, I argue that these works illustrate the protagonists' journeys toward self-actualisation through their connection to God. Faith and religious practices emerge not only as personal commitments but also as transformative elements that shape their agency and identity within their respective cultural and social contexts.

Theoretical Imbalance in Reading Muslim Women's Writing in the Western Diaspora

Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2006)

Leila Aboulela's second novel, Minaret, explores contrasts through its six-part first-person narrative. The story alternates between Najwa's past as the Westernised daughter of a wealthy aristocratic family in Khartoum and her present as a devout Muslim woman working as a maid in London. After the 1985 coup in Sudan, Najwa's father – an influential government official – is executed, forcing her family into exile. In London, tragedy continues as her mother succumbs to cancer and her brother is jailed for drug-related charges, leaving Najwa alone to face displacement. Initially, she embraces the freedom of exile, reconnecting with a former lover, Anwar, but his inability to provide security and her growing spiritual emptiness push her toward a transformative religious journey.

Najwa's "coming-to-faith" (Dimitriu, 2014, p. 120) is portrayed as a gradual process rooted in personal growth. Early signs of her spiritual longing appear when Quranic recitations evoke "a bleakness" and "a depth and space" that feel "hollow and numb" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 134). While waiting for her mother's shrouding, she reflects on "that hollow place… where the longing for God [is] supposed to come from" (135). Responding to this inner calling, Najwa finds clarity and peace in devoting herself to activities at the Regent Park Mosque, befriending its community, and working for a wealthy Arab family. Her spiritual strength becomes evident when she ends a love affair with Tamer, her employer's devout younger brother, choosing connection to God over romantic fulfilment. This decision culminates in her pilgrimage to Hajj, steering the narrative away from traditional romance tropes.

The novel's Western setting plays a symbolic role, mirroring Aboulela's own spiritual growth when she adopted the hijab in London. She credits this transformation to "her sense of spirituality, which asserted itself more powerfully perhaps, against the new, secular backdrop" (Akbar, 2010). London acts as a transformative space, highlighting Islam's universality and challenging the perceived dichotomy between Islam and the West. Critics often interpret Minaret as a counter-narrative to Orientalist depictions of Muslim women (see Al-Karawi & Bahar, 2014; Ball, 2010; Hasan, 2015; Morey & Yaqin, 2011). However, Najwa's commitment to her faith transcends binary representations of female Muslim subjectivities, reflecting her agency and spiritual growth as a devout Muslim.

While some critics, like Eva Hunter (2013) argue that Aboulela's advocacy for complete reliance on faith cannot be the "quietist 'solution'" (p. 94) to a troubled life, Aboulela herself contends that the novel is about "faith itself and how spiritual development is a need that is as valid and as urgent as love and career" (Chambers, 2009, p. 100). Anna Ball (2010) echoes this by pointing out that the strength of *Minaret* lies in the portrayal of the simplicity of Najwa's faith that is focused on individual spiritual fulfilment. This theme is introduced from the first page with "Bism Allahi, Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raheem" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 1), an invocation of God which means, "in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful." This phrase, which precedes all Quranic chapters except one, signifies reliance on and connection to God in all endeavours. It comes as Najwa is anxious about starting a

new job, underscoring the novel's emphasis on dependency and spiritual connection as central themes.

S. K. Ali's Saints and Misfits (2017)

S.K. Ali, a Canadian Muslim author, has gained recognition with her Young Adult (YA) novels, including four romances and a dystopian narrative. Her debut, *Saints and Misfits*, stands apart from *Minaret* in its setting and themes but similarly advocates for Islamic faith as essential to female agency. The protagonist, Janna Yusuf, a practicing Muslim teenager, is depicted as navigating her beliefs in challenging circumstances rather than seeking spiritual awakening. A finalist for the William C. Morris Young Adult Debut Award in 2017, *Saints and Misfits* is celebrated among Muslim teens. Ali's intent was to offer "foundational books" with "stories [that are] rooted in their own Muslim backgrounds" (Young, 2021). However, the novel has yet to receive substantial scholarly attention.

Told from 15-year-old Janna's perspective, the story presents her as a hijab-wearing, devout Muslim engaged with her local mosque and knowledgeable in Islamic history. She is also portrayed as a relatable teenager – introverted yet sociable, studious, and diligent. However, she harbours two significant secrets: first, her trauma from nearly being raped by Farooq, a respected *hafiz* in her Muslim community, and second, her feelings for Jeremy, a non-Muslim classmate. Janna struggles to report Farooq's actions, fearing her accusations would not be believed against the reputation of someone who has memorised the Quran. Farooq's continued presence at community events intensifies her distress. Meanwhile, her romantic feelings for Jeremy conflict with her self-image as a "non-casual-dating kind" (Ali, 2017, p. 19) of Muslim, complicating her internal struggle.

Critics have mainly focused on Janna's dual identity as an American-born Muslim, exploring the tension between Islam and the West. This tension is particularly evident in the perception of her veiled body, which draws both attention and judgment in predominantly white spaces. Such representations turn the Muslim woman's body into a "freak show to establish the spectator's legitimacy and power over the spectacle on display" (Khachab, 2020, p. 5), while also suggesting the 'hyper-visibility' of female Muslim identity (White, 2020). These analyses focus on Ali's (2017) critiques of societal efforts to control

Muslim women's identities, showing that the pressure stems less from Islamic practices and more from societal biases that resist diverse expressions of Muslim womanhood.

I move the attention to the central position of Islam in the narrative. As Janna confronts fear and shame, she struggles to maintain her faith, experiencing moments of spiritual weakness. Janna builds a supportive relationship with Sausun, a young *niqabi* whose boldness inspires her to confront Farooq. She also seeks guidance from her uncle, an *imam* known for his unconventional approach to *da`wah*. These individuals demonstrate resilience in hostile environments, reflecting the strength Janna needs to reconnect with her faith. Unlike Najwa's spiritual awakening in *Minaret*, Janna's approach to challenges is practical but deeply rooted in her belief system. By recognising the connection between her difficulties and her faith, Janna reaffirms her relationship with God. Ultimately, it is this spiritual foundation that enables her to address her struggles and reclaim agency.

Alternative Theoretical Consideration: The Centrality of God in Reading Fiction by Muslim Women Writers

Both *Minaret* and *Saints and Misfits* challenge stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman by showcasing how Islam empowers the protagonists to assert their agency. Their actions stem primarily from personal spiritual development rather than as a reaction to Western ideologies. This demonstrates that the characters' dedication to Islamic practices reflects multifaceted motivations, highlighting the depth of their religious commitments. To understand this further, I draw upon Allison Weir's (2013) work, which expands on Saba Mahmood's (2005) reconceptualisation of agency. Mahmood's seminal study of female 'pietists' in Cairo – active participants in mosque activities during the 1990s Islamic revival – offers insights into how agency can be understood beyond conventional secular-liberal frameworks.

Mahmood (2005) critiques dominant feminist notions of freedom, which equate agency with autonomy and resistance to norms. She argues that agency and norms are not necessarily in opposition. For many Muslim women, adherence to religious practices and norms serves as a pathway to self-realisation rather than a symbol of oppression. Mahmood's use of "paradox of subjectivation" (29) urges for a re-evaluation of freedom that transcends the binary of subjugation and

resistance. She explores how submission to "historically and culturally specific disciplines" (29) can foster empowerment, challenging Western interpretations of freedom as strictly individualistic or oppositional. Mahmood's framework opens a space for understanding religious practices as tools for cultivating agency and offers an invitation to refine and extend this perspective.

Weir (2013) builds upon Mahmood's ideas, suggesting that Mahmood's focus on power and norms restricts the broader understanding of freedom. She argues that "disciplinary practices are not fully analysable in terms of operations of power directed toward inhabiting norms and toward the achievement of a pious self" (327). For the pietists Mahmood studied, religious submission is not merely an act of compliance but a means to establish a connection to God. Weir highlights this "creation of a connection to God" (original emphasis, 327) as central to understanding agency. Unlike Mahmood, she emphasises that freedom extends beyond the self and is shaped by relational connections, particularly those with the divine.

Weir (2013) identifies two dimensions of freedom within these religious practices: inhabiting norms and inhabiting connections. In the first, freedom is realised through disciplined actions oriented toward a clear purpose, providing a framework where "free play is possible" (329). This enables individuals to fully immerse themselves in practice without distraction. Weir describes this as the "phenomenological dimension of participant experience" (329), emphasising how focus and discipline foster liberation. The second dimension involves cultivating connections to the self, others, and, most importantly, the Sacred. This aligns with Islamic tradition where religious practices are fundamentally about connecting with God. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2008) underscores that faith centres on a believer's relationship with God, shaping daily life, mental well-being, and interpersonal relationships. It also forms the cornerstone of a meaningful existence.

The concept of submission in Islam further supports this perspective. Mehdi Aminrazavi (2001) explains that 'Islam' signifies both "peace" and "submission," and "only he who submits himself to God can be in peace" (106). Submission does not negate human agency; instead, it aligns human freedom with responsibility toward God. As Dogan (2014) notes, humans are seen as mirrors reflecting divine attributes

and as stewards of the universe, capable of making free and accountable choices. Weir (2013) integrates this theological perspective, emphasising that a connection with God possesses a spiritual and mystical quality. This connection becomes the axis around which all other relationships and responsibilities revolve, enabling freedom as both a discipline and a relational experience.

In the context of *Minaret* and *Saints and Misfits*, the protagonists exhibit a conscious commitment to Islam, structuring their lives around its principles. Md. Mahmudul Hasan (2015) observes that Najwa's transformation in *Minaret* reflects "an alternative definition of freedom that is, the right to choose one's way of life based on the Islamic worldview, to adopt Islamic identity and to embrace Islamic principles" (98). Similarly, Heather Snell (2017) asserts that Janna's faith in *Saints and Misfits* propels her to confront and resolve the challenges that entrap her. Faith becomes a crucial resource for navigating personal and societal struggles. Drawing on Weir's theorisation, I analyse how both protagonists recognise their spiritual voids and rebuild their agency by adhering to Islamic practices. These practices act as structures that regulate their lives, enabling them to focus on their connection with God. Through this connection, the protagonists transcend worldly desires and expectations, achieving liberation. This demonstrates that agency is not limited to resistance against external forces but can also emerge from spiritual growth and connection. Mahmood and Weir's insights provide a lens for understanding how religious practices shape individual and collective identities. This perspective shifts the focus from oppositional narratives to the transformative potential of faith, highlighting the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's experiences.

Minaret: Materialism as a Destructive Force

By highlighting the duality of material wealth and self-fulfilment, *Minaret* is a staunch critique of materialism. Through Najwa, wealth is described as a destructive force that removes social cohesion and silences one's agency. Despite being the daughter of an influential and wealthy father in Khartoum, she is a docile and passive character who is detached from reality. She carelessly insists that "[t]here is nothing [she] can do about" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 34) the poverty she sees in Khartoum and fails to understand the impact of the anti-government political rallies at her university on aristocratic families like hers. Najwa's shallowness

stems from how her family paradoxically treats her. Her parents adore and spoil her, and she is expected to maintain her *status quo* by living "at a certain standard" (35). However, she has little other purpose in life, and becomes overshadowed by her twin brother, Omar. She studies Business at the university because that is what her father demands of Omar, and she wants to be with him. Her studies are only "to kill time" (102) until she is expected to marry. This aimlessness erodes her agency and despite her social status, she is unable to find a voice to assert her subjectivity. During one of her mother's charitable visits to a local orphanage, Najwa becomes aghast at the way the guardian is harshly addressing a disabled boy and she tries to speak up. Yet, she is quickly silenced by her own realisation that her "voice sound[s] stupid, everyone ignore[s] [her]" (21).

The narrative does not explain if Najwa's father is correctly charged with corruption, but he is described as a man who is preoccupied with wealth – he comes from a poor family who works his way up in the government and "married above himself…into an old wealthy family" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 8). Upon his execution, his family finds themselves becoming "unfamiliar to each other simply because [they have] not seen each other fall before" (61). Najwa's brother later squanders his inheritance on drugs and ends up in jail for a drug-related violence. Perhaps the most notable critique of materialism in *Minaret* is reflected in Najwa's relationship with Anwar. Their brief university romance quickly ends due to his role as a socialist student leader who openly condemns her father for corruption due to his role as a socialist student leader. Anwar reappears later in Najwa's life in London, where, like her, he lives as a political exile after the government he helps bring to power is overthrown in another coup in Sudan. They rekindle their relationship, but as it progresses, Anwar takes on an antagonistic role. He is critical of Najwa for her aristocratic background although he has no qualms about benefiting from her wealth, such as when she purchases him "the best, most up-to-date computer" (170) and finances his PhD tuition fees.

Anwar and Najwa is a mismatched couple from the outset. As the son of a senior technician of the railways in Khartoum, Najwa describes that his world is far removed from hers, yet it is this disparity that draws them to each other. In London, they both become equals in their exiles. Anwar's presence offers Najwa comfort and gives her "hope that

[she] would not be in limbo for long, that [she] would not be without a family for long" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 156). Their relationship creates the experiences of temporal and narrative moments for Najwa to envision the possibility of returning home. This indicates that while the concept of home is structured in one's identity paradigm, it is less about a physical concept and more about the emotional resonance of familiarity and belonging (Stierstorfer, 2015). Their forced displacements bind them together, with each representing a metaphorical reflection of the other's fragmented self and desire for connection. Their shared stories of losses and hardships become personal narratives that structure their lives, allowing them to form an emotional attachment.

Najwa eventually becomes ambiguous with this relationship, admitting that "could never feel entirely safe with him" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 163). The relationship ends when Anwar accuses her of being "brain-washed about the importance of virginity" (175) when she expresses sexual guilt and asks for him to marry her. Najwa feels deeply betrayed when he refuses and chooses instead to continue his betrothal to his cousin in Sudan. He criticises Arab societies where there are "double standards for men and women" (174) yet shamelessly recounts his visits to the brothels in Khartoum and speaking about a prostitute there "as if she were a pet" (176). Anwar's behaviour outlines the hypocrisy of patriarchy where he, like her father and brother, has failed to provide her with a sense of security or safety (Chambers, 2009). Although he presents himself as progressive on women's issues, Anwar clearly submits to power-structured gender relations that allows him specific benefits and control over the women in his life. This difficult relationship compels Najwa to reconsider her attachment to what is familiar, and to reassess her idea of home, for it has now become a space that exploits her femininity, leaving her vulnerable.

The Centrality of God in Friendships and Marriage

Najwa's transformation begins when she realises that she is unaware of the arrival of *Ramadan*. She tries fasting and is ashamed when she fails. This is a symbolic realisation of her spiritual deprivation, marking a turn-to-religion moment. Najwa recognises a desire for "a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence [and] yearn[s] to go back to being safe with God" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 242). She turns to the Regent Park Mosque for guidance, and it does not disappoint. When she is at the mosque for

the first time, an unseen woman comes up from behind to help cover her exposed knees and legs as she awkwardly prays in an inappropriate dress. A young woman sits near her and recites Surah Al-Rahman from the Qur'an. Najwa becomes aware of the repeated verse: "So which of your Lord's favours do you deny?" This becomes a metaphorical scene that welcomes her back to Islam. As she is awakened to God's presence, she is also offered a sense of home.

Talafha et al. (2022) argue that her spiritual deprivation is erased by the connection that Najwa makes with people at the mosque, rendering the central position of the mosque in aiding her transformation. Finding meaning through human connections is inherent to Najwa's nature, and this is evident in her relationships with the women at the mosque. Unlike previous connections, these friendships are now intertwined with a spiritual bond. Najwa, for example, befriends Shahinaz who vehemently believes that their friendship is strong simply because they "both want to become better Muslims" although they have "little in common" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 105). Najwa also describes how she performs *Taraweeh* prayers during *Ramadan* next to the wife of the Senegalese ambassador and how the woman's chauffeur drives her home afterwards. She poignantly remembers how important people would frequent her parents' house in Khartoum but recognises that such a connection was only possible because of her class status. Now, the focus on God quite easily erases these differences and connects one person to another.

I have argued above on how the novel, particularly in its characterisation of Anwar, is a staunch critique of patriarchy. Here, I draw attention to an opposing perspective. Eva Hunter (2013) argues that Aboulela is not actually criticising patriarchy but rather, she is "criticising the fact that it does not work as it should". She contends that Aboulela is exemplifying the monotheistic religious beliefs that "have all promised 'protection' to women, who are offered a 'special' and elevated position in society – within domestic surroundings" (93). Hunter rightfully argues that domesticity cannot be a guarantee of female safety, and a woman cannot be expected to submit to a quiet, pious life without consideration of her socio-economic and psychological well-being. However, this outlook is limited in its conceptualisation of domesticity as it comes from a purely liberal-humanist perspective that views life of domesticity as a submissive and passive one – one

that Saba Mahmood's (2005) study works against. Hunter's argument is based on the failure to "distinguish between social norms and oppressive subordination, and rests on the assumption that all social norms are oppressive, or sources of subjugation" (125).

The differences between Aboulela's (2006) idea of patriarchy with the one implied by Hunter (2013) can be seen in the former's descriptions of men and women in marriage, significantly related to the following Quranic verses:

> [Your wives] are your garments. And ye are their garments (2:187).
>
> And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect (30:21).

These two verses outline that men and women should complement each other in marriage, with a strong emphasis on compassion and mercy. This is reflected in Shahinaz's marriage. As a homemaker and mother of four, she has put her ambitions for higher education on hold to start and manage her family, including the care of her widowed mother-in-law. It is not a perfect marriage as Shahinaz complains of hardships and difficulties, but she equally praises her husband, Sohayl. He is sensitive and understanding towards his wife and is supportive when she decides to finally continue her education. In this ideal, women's domesticity does not always have to be viewed as a docile submission to patriarchy. Gender roles can instead be seen as reciprocal acts of commitment when each man and woman fulfil their duties and responsibilities. This view is further expanded in Najwa's brief narrative of Ali, a devout British Muslim revert. He is "tender and protective" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 242) towards his wife, and Najwa is touched "by his patience with the children, the way he took on life" (241).

What these men have in common is their devotion to Islam. Both Ali and Sohayl are devout Muslims and so, they develop an understanding of their duties to God and to their wives. Aboulela's view on marriage in *Minaret* is focused on the centrality of religion in the formation of an ideal marriage. Asma Barlas (2019) suggests that in Islam, "spousal (and parental) rights are claimed through the practice of faith, hence

by observing the limits ordained by God" (198). Therefore, when a marriage is on the terms set by God, the partners would be able to understand and carry out their duties and exercise their rights.

Religious devotion is also the reason for Najwa's attraction to Tamer, the only devout member of his family. She recognises his immaturity – he is much younger than her – but she describes an enthralling smell of "Paradise on the young" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 3) when they first meet. However, when their relationship causes tension between him and his mother, Najwa realises that his mother's disapproval has become "an obstacle to his spiritual growth" (264). Eventually, she moves away from this relationship to allow "Tamer to find heaven at the feet of his mother" (Moolla, 2021, p. 18), indicating a recognition of the importance of the mother figure in Islam.

I would like to point out that Najwa's rejection of Tamer is also a final stage of her transformation that allows her to recognise her agency. She now has the ability to carve her identity and navigate her desires, mirroring Weir's (2013) description that a successful connection to God allows "an experience of freedom in one's various relationships with others, with oneself, and with the world" (329). For Najwa, this is an abstract form of freedom. It does not allow her to regain any fragment of her lost life – neither the material wealth, nor her family – yet she finds herself refreshed and filled with "spiritual pleasure" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 243). She describes being happy because she is praying and is able to enjoy a life filled with hope.

Saints and Misfits: The *Hijab* and the Wrestle for Agency

In *Saints and Misfits*, S. K. Ali provides a complex view of the practice of wearing the *hijab*. Despite Janna's voluntary decision to wear it, she finds herself struggling to assert this agency with both the secular-liberal and faith-based communities she belongs to. The novel opens with her secular father, Haroon's public display of displeasure at Janna's decision to wear burkini while swimming during a holiday with his new family. Nonetheless, Janna is no stranger to the scrutiny of her *hijab* as she is one of the few Muslims in school. She laments that on hot days, "everyone will act annoyed as soon as [she] step[s] into school" and "[t]he first thing off everyone's lips will be *Don't you feel hot in* that?" (original emphasis, Ali, 2017, p. 93).

The *hijab* here takes on a symbol and meaning that defines Janna's identity. This identity is stigmatised as she is seen as separate and different from the dominant white majority. However, her marginalisation and devaluation endure when she is unveiled. A clear example can be seen by her best friend, Tats' insistence for Janna to unveil in front of her love interest, Jeremy. She invites him into the all-girls gym class where Janna does not observe the *hijab*. Janna is caught off-guard and voices her displeasure, yet Tats manipulates her by suggesting that "he has every right to use the room" and he should be allowed a glimpse of "the real Janna" (112). Although this starts off as a well-meaning attempt to display Janna's attractiveness, Janna loses the right to control her own bodily autonomy. She also has her identity questioned with the claims that she loses authenticity when she is in *hijab* (Khachab, 2020).

When some jealous classmates post photos of Janna without the *hijab* on *Facebook* without her consent, the comments leave her deeply disturbed. She is described as "*hawt turd* and *sizlin' brown stuff*" (original emphasis, Ali, 2017, p. 168). These experiences of forced unveiling outline the multifaceted position of the Muslim woman in a dominant white society. They point towards the implementation of patriarchy where her veiled body is mocked and her unveiled one becomes racialised. Her image also has a sexualised undertone used to attract male attention. It signifies that Janna's otherness is retained and emphasised even without the *hijab*, hinting towards the ingrained legacy of Orientalist perception of the female Muslim as an erotic subject. She turns into a newly discovered enigma – becoming a "freak show" (Khachab, 2020, p. 14) and a form of entertainment.

The Complex Narratives of the *Hijab*

Despite feeling uncomfortable being seen without the hijab, Janna quietly enjoys the attention it brings. The admiration makes her "feel like the most beautiful girl in the world" (Ali, 2017, p. 115), and she appreciates that "[s]omeone thinks [she's] hot" (original emphasis, 35). Being unveiled offers her a glimpse of beauty and femininity aligned with normative Western standards. She seeks a similar feeling when she deliberately unveils in front of Jeremy. However, this decision comes with personal conflicts. While applying make-up and styling her hair, she ensures her body is covered with a tracksuit and jacket instead of gym shorts and a t-shirt. As she approaches Jeremy, she expresses guilt:

"I know I look good, but, oddly, I don't want him to intentionally look at me. Maybe if it's by accident, it would feel better?" (130). This reflects a complex, contradictory self-view – her choice to unveil is deliberate, presenting a new subjectivity, yet it conflicts with her beliefs. She acknowledges removing the hijab distances her from her faith.

Many Muslims believe that the *hijab* is a dress code that is meant to encourage modesty by protecting the wearer's beauty and as a form of protection against unwanted attention. This is based on a verse in the Quran,

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (33:59).

This verse underlines a profound connection between the concealment of beauty and the prevention of sexual misconduct. Within the context, the *hijab* becomes "a strong refusal to expose certain body parts in public, satisfy male voyeuristic pleasures, and cater to the ogling gaze of strangers" (Hasan, 2018, p. 33). It is a statement that protects the woman's sexuality, retaining it as a form of privacy. Even so, Ali (2017) narrates an incident that puts forth the need to interpret the injunction to wear the *hijab* beyond mere literalism. Janna finds herself becoming a victim of sexual assault *while* she is in *hijab*. The perpetrator, Farooq, is considered "a beacon of light for all youth" (Ali, 2017, p. 7) due to his achievement of memorising the whole Quran and perceived piety. Janna remains silent as she is uncertain if anyone would belief her story as Farooq's "cloak of piety" makes him "untouchable" (173). Farooq also tries to keep her silent. When Janna's unveiled pictures are spread into the Muslim community, Farooq comments that she has "taken a step to the [evil] side" (173). He secretly films her walking with Jeremy at a lake, presumably on a 'date' and sends it to her close friends and family on the pretext of protecting her against wrongdoing. This accusation shapes easily against Janna as the minority Muslim community in America is rather protective of their Muslim identity and expects a certain standard of religiosity (Casey, 2018). These are malicious actions to control the way Janna is viewed, drawing the blame away from him. A few weeks after the attack, Farooq corners Janna to admit that he made a "mistake" (Ali, 2017, p. 207) but blames her for 'wanting' him first.

Religiosity, as a concept and practice, is related to positive developments of self-control, self-regulation, and character development (S. Ahmed, 2009; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Farooq's actions demonstrate the contrary, portraying that religiosity can also be manipulated and distorted to influence the way one views the religious person. 'Appropriate' behaviours become the basis of classification and recognition of a good Muslim. The problem that such expectations create is two-fold. First, it allows certain definitions of propriety that may only suit specific people. Second, it allows the policing and surveillance of actions that work to regulate behaviours, leading to the victimisation of and discrimination against those who are perceived as 'bad' Muslims. Ali (2017) portrays that religiosity is a subjective experience of the individual although it is often seen as a concept that is measurable. This may be because as Chaudhary et al. (2020) indicate, for Muslims in America, the relations between religiosity and performative actions are linear – the more public it is, the more one is considered as religious.

Freedom as connection to God in *Saints and Misfits*

Saints and Misfits is more of a bildungsroman in its theme of the teenage protagonist's search for identity instead of a narration of spirituality. Despite that, as the central character is a practicing Muslim, the positioning of God in her life is rather transparent. I have mentioned above of Janna's guilt when she decides to appear unveiled in front of Jeremy. After her plan is foiled and she is embarrassed, she significantly questions "Is Allah upset at me?" (Ali, 2017, p. 131). Clearly, Janna connotes the act of wearing the *hijab* to God and thus, sees that her decision to unveil to please a boy as being against God. She also seeks to understand the Islamic view on Muslim and non-Muslim romantic relations from her uncle who is the *imam* at the local mosque. When she is advised to consider the relationship from the perspective of spirituality, she begins to work against dissolving this attraction and tells Jeremy that "[t]here can be no us" (Ali, 2017, p. 315). These scenes reflect an attempt to re-connect and re-affirm her faith where she recognises that her own actions may deplete her connection to God and actively seeks to improve this.

Janna's strength in confronting Farooq is significantly triggered by the Ramadan prayers. She becomes horrified to learn that Farooq has been asked to lead the prayers and laments that "…his hands [will

be] raised in takbeer to begin prayers …[with] [t]he same hands" (Ali, 2017, p. 84-85) that attacked her. I suggest that this realisation is steep in the understanding of the Islamic faith and a sense of duty towards the Muslim community. The role of *imam* is a significant one, even if only in leading prayers. While there is no formal training for an *imam*, he must be a respected member of the congregation as the act of praying is an act of worship. The *imam* must, therefore, be of good character conduct (Ederer, 2021). Janna does not only respond to this hypocrisy because it threatens her safety and well-being, but also because it reflects poorly on the Muslim society as whole. As she terms his attack as "*something against the laws of God*" (original emphasis, Ali, 2017, p. 161), it highlights Janna's recognition of the interrelated connection between one's actions with God. The attempted rape does not only reflect his flaws; it also indicates his failure to uphold his values before God.

S. K. Ali (2017) also provides a practical solution to sexual misconduct. Janna creates an unlikely but strategic alliance with her friend, Sausun, whose characterisation is a unique contrast: "she wears long gowns with Doc Martens boots and severe black scarves on her head" (44). While "not exactly a glamour queen" (p. 44), Janna later learns that Sausun has a popular YouTube account where she attempts to dispel stereotypes about women in *niqab*. In a significant moment when Janna tells her about Farooq's attack, Sausun invites her to perform the night prayer where Janna feels like she is "talking to Allah." They spend a long time in supplication, and she is able to say her "personal prayer to God" (p. 213). In this simple action, Janna is able to connect to God as she is in the state of *khushu'* where prayer performances involve "the profoundest reverence and humility in every gesture [where the] soul is washed of impure ideas by prayer" (Afridi and Syed, 2011, p. 263). This is because the performance of religious rituals requires the mind to escape its current state to transfer it to a sacred place (Renard, 1996). Symbolically, after these experiences, Janna receives the strength to finally voice her torment. Freedom is finally achieved with this sense of connection with God.

Conclusion

Minaret and *Saints and Misfits* are both successful representations of practicing Muslim women in fiction. Through these depictions, Leila Aboulela and S.K. Ali are presenting the subjectivities of devout

Muslim women, particularly in how practices of faith are connected to their daily lives. In this paper, I have attempted to do justice to them by emphasising the centrality of faith in my analysis, suggesting that their primary concern is in creating and maintaining a connection with God. They highlight that the protagonists' connection to God serves both spiritual and practical purposes. Spiritually, it guides them toward self-actualisation; practically, it becomes a conscious choice to exercise their agency. In this light, their lives are governed solely by the terms set by God, embodying the ultimate definition of freedom portrayed in these narratives.

Ultimately, both novels illustrate that freedom is not a monolithic concept, but a multifaceted one deeply rooted in Islamic theology and practice. Through their protagonists' journeys, they advocate for an understanding of freedom that transcends Western paradigms. They emphasise that true liberation lies not in escaping norms but in inhabiting them with purpose, connection, and devotion. This redefinition of freedom not only challenges stereotypes and enriches the understanding of the interplay between faith and agency, it also underscores the novels' success in portraying a meaningful life rooted in devotion to God.

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