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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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A Muslim Female Bildungsroman: Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005)

Raihan Rosman*

Abstract: After 9/11 and 7/7 incidents, the question of faith and identity continuously generates huge interest among Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK. This paper aims to scrutinise the quest for identity and its relation to Islamic faith in a Muslim female bildungsroman, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). It will explore the self-identification of the main character, Najwa and in particular will consider the geographical settings, Sudan and London, the shifting between twentieth and twenty-first centuries using Rita Felski's models of self-discovery and self-knowledge. It will also examine the transition of Najwa's identity from that of a secular Muslim in Sudan, to a woman with dual identities, before she becomes a practicing Muslim in London. The concepts of individualism and collectivism in Islam through the portrayal of sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque, London will also be explored in the protagonist's search for an identity and rediscovery of faith.

Keywords: Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, British Muslim literature, Muslim female bildungsroman

Abstrak: Selepas peristiwa 9/11 dan 7/7, persoalan mengenai iman dan identiti telah menjadi tumpuan yang besar di kalangan Muslim dan bukan Muslim di UK. Kertas kajian ini adalah bertujuan untuk mengkaji pencarian identiti dan hubungannya dengan keimanan berdasarkan kefahaman Islam dan ajaran Islam berpandukan sebuah novel iaitu *Minaret* (2005) karya Leila Aboulela. Kajian ini meneliti aspek pengenalan diri Najwa selaku watak utama di dalam novel ini

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berdasarkan latar belakang geografi di Sudan dan London, dan peralihan antara abad ke-20 dan ke-21 menggunakan model penemuan diri dan pengetahuan diri oleh Rita Felski. Ia juga mengkaji perubahan identiti Najwa daripada seorang Muslim sekular di Sudan, kepada wanita yang mempunyai dua identiti yang berbeza, sehingga menjadi seorang wanita Muslim yang mengamalkan ajaran Islam di London. Penceritaan mengenai kepentingan persaudaraan wanita di Masjid Regent's Park, London, dalam pencarian identiti watak utama adalah dikaji berdasarkan konsep individualisme dan kolektivisme dari kacamata Islam.

Kata kunci: Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, Kesusasteraan British Muslim, Bildungsroman (kedewasaan) perempuan Muslim

Introduction

The quest for identity seems increasingly crucial for Muslims in Britain, particularly after a number of incidents such as 9/11, 7/7, Manchester Arena, the London Bridge terror attacks, and the Windrush Generation scandal. Because of these events, the concept of Britishness is hugely debated, and identities of British Muslims are questioned. However, identity is far from straightforward. The process of forming identity or self-identification varies depending on individuals, families and even different groups of people. Some may either assimilate, integrate or accommodate two or more cultures to construct their identity. However, most modern British Muslims reflect on the difficulties of reconciling Islamic faith, Muslim culture and Britishness as part of this process of identifying a secure identity in modern Britain. This article aims to scrutinise the quest for identity and its relation to the Islamic faith in a Muslim female bildungsroman, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). It will explore the self-identification of the main character, Najwa, and in particular will consider the time and geographical settings – Sudan and London, and the shifting between twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This will be done by utilising Rita Felski's models of self-discovery and self-knowledge. Self-discovery in public sphere promotes assimilation to the host society while self-knowledge is a more personal voyage by understanding one's own consciousness and needs (Felski, 1989). This article will then discuss faith as an identity marker via the concepts of individualism in Islam (Felski's self-knowledge) and collectivism (Felski's self-discovery) through the portrayal of sisterhood portrayed at Regent's Park Mosque, London. The exploration of Najwa's developing

identity revolves around several phases in her life as she shifts from being a non-practicing Muslim in Sudan to a practicing Muslim in London.

Minaret's plot – the genre in which it is written, and the style of writing employed – in particular, the non-linear arrangement of chapters is very important for the purpose of exploring Najwa's shift of identities in relation to her faith. The structure of the novel is complex as Najwa is described in two different geographical settings, which are Sudan and London, and the novel is also set both in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The novel begins in Khartoum in 1984-1985 before moving to London in 2003, 1989-1990, and 1991 and it ends in London in 2004. The non-chronological order of the chapters thus offers an expression of women's constantly evolving identity. Najwa is introduced as a secular upper-class Sudanese, but the novel then gradually shifts to a view of her as a practicing Muslim in London. This organisational strategy can be read as Aboulela's method of enhancing a sense of her main character's fluidity and her identity from a Muslim youth to a Muslim grown woman.

Female Bildungsroman as a Genre

Aboulela's organisational strategy suggests that *Minaret* may be categorised as a female bildungsroman, as the plot of the novel expresses and emphasises Najwa's quest for her own sense of identity and her process of rediscovering faith. Generally, the bildungsroman is viewed as a nineteenth century form that incorporates a story of an individual's self-development within the concept of a specific social order. Some critics also define bildungsroman as the articulation of a concept relating to 'apprentices of life' (Hader, 2005). This expresses the traditional concept of bildungsroman as a biography or life-writing encapsulating the protagonist's quest towards self-development, maturity and knowledge. Rita Felski (1989) however proposes that a female or feminist bildungsroman offers a different vantage point to the traditional concept of bildungsroman:

> "…the heroine has to struggle painfully toward by freeing herself from the subordinate role she has occupied in the heterosexual relationship. Whereas the male Bildungsroman is often defined as a novel of apprenticeship and typically depicts the childhood and early manhood of the protagonist,

> the feminist Bildungsroman thus embraces a much wider range of ages. It is often after the experience of marriage that the heroine is able to see through and reject the seductive myth of romance as the key to female identity, so that the journey to self-discovery frequently occurs at a relatively late stage in the protagonist's life" (p.138).

This shows that the feminist bildungsroman is not entirely the same as the concept of traditional bildungsroman as the latter offers a simple and straightforward story of the life journey of the protagonist at an early stage in life. Traditional bildungsroman can be found in works by, for example, Charles Dickens, such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Dickens' works portray the standard form of a traditional bildungsroman, which introduces the protagonist's childhood and concludes once she or he has redefined a point of significant development in their lives. Ilott (2015) stated that "the Bildungsroman (from the German for a novel of education or transformation) is a novel from predisposed towards discussions of identity in crisis, as youthful protagonists consider various ontologies that they will either accept or reject in their paths to maturity, self-awareness and autonomy" (p.28). The female or feminist bildungsroman, however, is more symbolic, often non-linear, and does not necessarily use the habitual framework where the life journey of the protagonist begins during childhood and ends during early adulthood. This feminist model can be seen in *Minaret* as readers are only introduced to Najwa at the point when she is halfway through her teenage years in Sudan with limited information about her childhood background. Then the text is fast-forwarded to her life in London, first as an exiled daughter of a politician then as a maid. Felski's feminist model of the bildungsroman suggests that the female protagonist struggles to free herself from heterosexual relationships and subordinate roles and indeed we can see this model portrayed in *Minaret*. This is portrayed when Najwa begins to regain her faith and sense of identity after the male characters in her life such as Anwar and Tamer have left. *Minaret* also illustrates that Najwa accomplishes self-satisfaction towards the end of the novel that can be seen as a parallel to Felski's suggestion that "the self-discovery journey of female protagonist often occurs later in life" (Felski, 1989, p.127).

On a similar vein, Ilott (2015) added a significant point in her book chapter, "British Muslim Bildungsromane", by stating that "it is

more important than ever to consider the nuanced accounts of Muslim faith and identity provided in fiction and to evaluate crucially the relationship between Britishness and Islam enacted therein" (p.27). This is undoubtedly important when exploring *Minaret* as the main character, Najwa, adopts an identity that the primary signifier is a Muslim or an Islamic identity despite her multicultural background coming from Sudan and an immigrant Muslim in London. Aboulela successfully "recentres identity around Muslim faith, releasing her Bildungsromane from West/East, colonial/postcolonial, centre/margin binaries. She gives her characters a new stable and rooted mode of being whilst challenging Orientalist stereotypes" (Ilott, 2015, p.43). In a later section of this paper, we will explore the ways in which the quest of identity in *Minaret* is strongly centred with Islamic faith which directly suggests *Minaret* as a Muslim female bildungsroman.

Another element that can be observed in Aboulela's written style is discussed earlier. *Minaret* is introduced and written in a symbolic way:

> "I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of the birth, there is always disappointment. Now at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent" (p.1).

This extract is particularly significant in the exploration of identity and its multiple phases in *Minaret*. This can be seen when Aboulela introduces her main character, Najwa, in relation to the British four seasons: autumn, winter, summer, and spring. She describes these seasons and then aligns these to a woman's maturity. This suggests that the whole opening section symbolises Najwa's character, who at the end of the novel is portrayed to be a mature woman who has changed both physically and spiritually from a non-practicing Muslim girl to a practicing Muslim woman. This correlation between the British four seasons and Najwa's sense of identity suggests that *Minaret* may be best understood symbolically. The novel is full of visual imagery that aids readers to engage and understand Najwa's shift of identity. Despite the fact that the novel is not written in a direct manner, it emphasises that it is about a woman's search for her own sense of identity, particularly

as the above extract is written at the beginning of the novel. It is also interesting that Aboulela describes spring as the season of birth, but suggests that it brings disappointment whilst autumn is described to be the most beautiful season. Possibly, in the context of the novel, autumn offers the benefits of maturity, thus maturity itself is the reason for autumn's beauty.

Quest for Identity

The quest for identity in *Minaret* is mainly presented through Najwa's growth, which ultimately leads her to regain faith. Initially, faith is absent in Najwa's life, but her sense of self shifts significantly after her rediscovery of faith. Rita Felski proposes two useful strategies in searching for an identity arguing that it may be found, either through self-discovery in what she terms as 'public sphere' or through inward discovery of 'self-knowledge'. Self-discovery in a public sphere is an assimilation process where one will try to adapt to other cultures. On the other hand, an inward self-knowledge is when one tries to understand one's own consciousness and tries to integrate it into the public domain (Felski, 1989). An inward self-knowledge aids in finding satisfaction as both inner self and public world are taken into consideration without having to reject and conform specifically to one culture. Meanwhile, self-discovery in a public sphere is limited only to the process of assimilation instead of taking into account either integration or accommodation. Furthermore, Felski (1989) suggests that the separation of inward consciousness and outward self-realisation does not signify resistance and both strategies are to be perceived as "mutually inclusive" (p.127). The term 'mutually inclusive' suggests that self-discovery in a public sphere and inward self-knowledge are not standalone strategies as they may be interlinked to one another. This can be observed in *Minaret* as self-discovery in a public sphere and inward self-knowledge are portrayed as mutually inclusive as Najwa finds herself undergoing both strategies in finding a sense of identity. These strategies help her to rediscover her faith and become a practicing Muslim. Thus, both Felski's strategies in searching for an identity offer useful frameworks for reading *Minaret.*

In *Minaret*, the ways in which Aboulela uses time and geographical settings are significant as they contribute to our understanding of Najwa's quest for identity. The novel takes place in twentieth century

Sudan and twenty-first century London. This breakdown illustrates two opposing identities that Najwa holds, first as a secular Muslim teenager, and later, a practicing Muslim woman. Felski's strategy of self-discovery in a public sphere can be observed when Najwa is portrayed undergoing several phases of assimilation from Sudanese culture to British culture. For example, she is mentioned wearing western clothing, she starts drinking tea and coffee without sugar, she contemplates buying an Arabic magazine or *Slimming*, and she even visits Selfridges without buying any goods, simply for the British experience. Furthermore, Najwa's assimilation to British culture begins to affect her dressing styles: "In Khartoum I would never wear such a short skirt in public. I might wear it at the club or when visiting friends by the car, but not for walking in the street" (p.129). This shows that Najwa is aware of changes in her lifestyle and this includes the way she dresses as she does not observe her normal dress code when she is in London. She is more confident doing the things that are considered inappropriate in Khartoum when she is in London. This is most probably due the state of Britain as a non-Muslim country, or simply an example of hedonism. Thus, Najwa feels as if she has much more freedom than when she was in Sudan, an Islamic country. Although freedom may be subjective from one individual to another, the freedom she feels may be due to the fact that being away from home means being detached from strong familial, cultural, and religious ties. In other words, in Britain, Najwa feels as if she is not forced to abide by the Islamic faith or any Muslim cultures. However, this freedom is not always described unproblematically.

Najwa's character is described as lost in the freedom she is offered in London but later in the text, London is also the space she becomes closer to her faith. This phase of religiously observing Islamic faith and practices only occurs after she unsuccessfully tries to conform to British culture. Felski's second model of inward self-knowledge is significant in discussing this phase of transition as Najwa is described as unsure of her actual identity: "For a brief moment, I am not sure who I am, the Najwa who danced at the American club disco in Khartoum or Najwa, the maid Lamya hired by walking into Central Mosque one afternoon" (p.111). Najwa is capable of reflecting and engaging with her inner self which offers her the ways in which to contemplate and thoroughly analyse herself without any distractions from her surroundings. Lindsey Moore (2012) in her reading of *Minaret* suggests that a 'voyage inward'

is when a female identity is reacquired by disengaging from dominant social norms and regained through the consciousness of a female self. This idea is useful as Najwa is portrayed successfully finding her own sense of identity after she withdraws herself from the normalities of her former life. For example, Najwa's decision to leave her boyfriend, Anwar, acts as a catalyst for her shifting identities from a non-practicing Muslim teenager to a practicing Muslim woman.

A number of episodes in *Minaret* prompt us to view Felski's model of inward self-knowledge as a suitable method for reading Najwa's character. However, Anwar's character can also be considered as the source of epiphany in Najwa's quest for identity. Anwar does not aid Najwa in her rediscovery of Islamic faith but instead he influences her to constantly indulge in worldly affairs and sins. Thus, Anwar's character indirectly contributes to Najwa's quest for identity as he triggers her to respond to her own consciousness, and to finally rebel against his orders and acts. This is can be observed in the novel when Anwar and his friends do not observe their fasting during Ramadhan, and Najwa feels concerned about it:

> "Instead of getting the ice I locked myself in the bathroom. My mind felt tilted. I almost expected to look in the mirror and see my neck craned to one side. I had always observed Ramadhan even when Mama was ill in hospital […] Fasting was the only religious thing I ever did – how many days have I missed? Anwar knocked the door and I thought, 'He knows I'm upset, he's coming looking for me.' But he just needed the toilet" (p.232).

This incident provokes Najwa to question her identity, and to reconsider her relationship with Anwar. It is as if as a result of this event, she begins to engage with her inner self and learns to prioritise herself over Anwar and his affairs; this can be identified as a form of inward self-knowledge. These questions of Islamic practices, specifically, fasting, and the dynamics of her relationship with Anwar indirectly remind Najwa of her mother, her home country, Sudan, and her religion, Islam. Hence, Anwar's character can be considered as the source of epiphany or a catalyst that triggers Najwa to begin thinking about her sense of identity through inward self-knowledge instead of self-discovery in a public sphere. Furthermore, the word 'mirror' in the above extract is significant in exploring Najwa's shift of identities as the concept is repeated twice

in the novel. The second appearance of the 'mirror' is described in the above event that takes place at Anwar's flat. An earlier use of the idea is found describing the night when Najwa's father is arrested at their house in Sudan, and Najwa is mentioned staring at the mirror thinking it was a dream: "Wide awake, I went to the bathroom. I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror, smoothed my eyebrows, admired how the yellow of my pyjamas suited my skin and forgot about Baba." (p.54). Both of these incidents signify Najwa's shifts of identity as she leaves Sudan after the first incident and later is described as drifting apart from Anwar and her secular lifestyle. Therefore, the image of the 'mirror' indicates a glimpse of Najwa's inner self which makes her question her own sense of identity and her principles in life indirectly leading her to explore which identity to uphold or find suitable for herself.

Faith as an Identity Marker

One of the significant ways of exploring Najwa's quest for identity is through the relationship between faith and identity. Najwa's growth is strongly interlinked with faith, particularly, in her quest to rediscover Islamic faith. Islamic faith is not parallel to Muslim culture, as faith is a global phenomenon inclusive of all Muslims despite their differences in nationality, ethnicity, and geographical setting. It is a global portrayal of Muslims in that it focuses on the Islamic teachings and practices that are derived solely from Islamic scriptures such as the Quran and Hadith literature and Islamic jurisprudence, and puts aside local Muslim cultures. Thus, Islamic faith is more transcendental than Muslim culture, as it applies to all Muslims regardless of time and space. Examples of Islamic faith are practices that are bounded by the pillars of Islam such as praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and performing Hajj when one is able to. One of the practices that is often debated is the act of veiling or wearing *hijab*. When observing these practices, they indirectly and directly make Muslims, particularly Muslim women, across the globe more visible in public especially when they are not within a Muslim community and a majority Muslim country. Hasan (2015) offers a useful view of this as he suggests that the religion of Islam itself has no boundaries, and its believers and practitioners tend to feel at home despite being in different geographical settings. This view is depicted in many of Aboulela's works such as *Minaret* and *The Translator* as the main characters are described as feeling at home when practising faith in Britain despite not being literally and physically at home in Sudan.

Tariq Ramadan (2010) suggests that culture and faith are interconnected, and that faith tends to be grounded in or related to a specific geographical setting. He states that:

> "[t]here is no faith or religion without culture, nor any culture without a religious substrate, but religion is not culture: operating distinction is not easy […] They stick to the ways of life of their countries of origin, often confusing religion, culture and tradition" (p.43).

This suggests that Islamic faith and Muslim culture are mutually significant and work alongside each other in shaping one's Muslim or Islamic identity. However, at times, this overlapping of practices may cause confusion as to what is Islamic faith and what is culturally inscribed. In Shelina Janmohamed's *Love in Headscarf*, for instance, Shelina and her Buxom Aunties have different beliefs concerning what constitutes the idea of an Islamic identity because Shelina is more inclined to practise Islamic faith than rely on culture. On the other hand, the Buxom Aunties are more culturally-driven with their Muslim culture of South Asian roots.

Ramadan (2010) argues that the differences of identities among Muslims globally may be due to diverse interpretations of the Quran and Hadith literature, and a diversity of cultures and traditions which have existed prior to Islam (p.42). Muslims from Africa, Asia, and Europe share the same religion but have their own principles and ways in which they practice faith. This can be observed in the characters of the sisters at Regent's Park Mosque in *Minaret* as they came from multiple backgrounds and cultures yet all of them share the same faith. However, the distinction between Islamic faith and Muslim culture in *Minaret* is not as apparent as most British Muslim writings such as *Love in a Headscarf* and *The Making of Mr Hai's Daughter* since *Minaret* seems to offer a more positive portrayal of a Muslim identity that is not too attached to any culture. Ilott (2015) also believes that "*Minaret* can be read as an example of the prioritisation of religion as a new source of identity for her postcolonial, migrant characters" (p.44). On a similar vein, Sorour (2021) argues that despite the fact that *Minaret* narrates a journey of Najwa who is in a dilemma to succumb to Western norms when she first arrived in London, in the end, it (the Western norms) could not save her. This is undeniably accurate when exploring *Minaret* through the lens of postcolonialism as none of the characters are

bounded by any cultural or national backgrounds. Instead, their priority is practicing Islam and upholding Islamic faith as their identity marker.

Ramadan (1999) offers a useful definition of Muslim identity as an identity that is "altogether faith, rulings, emotions, and feelings which have to be organised, shaped, harmonised within a spiritual and active way of life" (p.179). The Muslim identity that *Minaret* offers is not limited to strict Islamic rulings. Instead it offers a larger scope by mixing faith and emotions together. This is evident when Najwa observes:

> "Sometimes the tears ran down my face. I sweated and felt a burning along my skin, in my chest. This [faith] was the scrub I needed. Exfoliation, clarifying, deep-pore cleanse – words I knew from the beauty pages of magazines and the counters of Selfridges. Now they were for my soul not my skin" (p.247).

Terms such as 'exfoliation, clarifying, and cleanse' are more common nowadays as people are more concerned with beauty and health, and Selfridges is undoubtedly well-known to British people. The above extract shows that Aboulela successfully describes her character's feeling of longing for faith in a metaphorical way by integrating both modern day lifestyles, or specifically British lifestyle, and faith to offer readers a glimpse of how Najwa's inner self operates. Thus, the Muslim identity that *Minaret* offers is not only bound to Islamic faith but instead suggests that faith, emotions, and culture can be harmonised. The phrase: "Now they were for my soul not my skin" offers a double meaning that suggests the terms derived from modern day skincare routine can offer a wider meaning by connecting those terms with soul cleansing instead. Thus, this duality in meaning suggests that harmonising and overlapping faith and culture are possible.

Although we have explored that Muslim identity is a mixture of Islamic faith and Muslim culture, Anshuman Mondal (2008) suggests that Muslim identity tends to be more common among those who are involved in mass migration either voluntarily or forced. He states that "there is a more profound and fundamental way in which migration has affected Muslim identity" (p.115). He suggests that a diasporic community asks greater questions about identity, and in most scenarios, those who are dispersed find it hard to self-identify as anything other than a Muslim. Many of the characters explored in British Muslim

writings, or perhaps British Muslims in reality as well, feel as if they are less British and less Asian and more of a Muslim although in reality, they are a mix of all three: British, Asian, and Muslim, for instance. In *Minaret* this is evident in one of Najwa's conversations with Tamer when they discuss each other's identities, and how they self-identify themselves. Tamer states:

> "I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity" (p.110).

Mondal's idea is exemplified here as the characters in *Minaret* are more prone to adopt a practicing Muslim identity or rather Islamic identity instead of culturally-driven identities. In *Minaret*, faith seems to be portrayed as the main objective of its characters as all of them want to uphold a Muslim identity that is driven by Islamic faith more than any other sense of identity. Rehana Ahmed (2017) states that "faith is a positive component of identity and here [in *Minaret*] too, the protagonist Najwa journeys from a vague cultural identification with Islam to a profound and enabling piety" (p.218). This is a useful reading of Najwa's journey as readers are not informed of Najwa's cultural identification or anything cultural when she is in Sudan, but the novel is then fast-forwarded to her time in London, in search of an identity that leads her to rediscover Islam. It is because of Najwa's religious faith that she is able to articulate an Islamic feminism which is at odds with secular feminisms that have historically sought to overcome religion.

Individualism in Islam and Collectivism through the Portrayal of Sisterhood at Regent Park Mosque, London

The relationship between faith and identity in *Minaret* is portrayed in two ways. One of these explores the concept of individualism in Islam and its relationship to collectivism through the sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque. These two concepts can be scrutinised using Rita Felski's models of self-knowledge and self-discovery since the concept of individualism can be seen as a form of self-knowledge where faith is a unique spiritual and individualistic bond within oneself. Meanwhile, self-discovery can be elucidated through the shared sisterhood in the novel. The term 'individualism' is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*

(2024) as "the habit of being independent and self-reliant; behaviour characterised by the pursuit of one's own goals without reference to others; free and independent individual action or thought" or "the principle or theory that individuals should be allowed to act freely and independently in economic and social matters without collective or state interference. Opposed to collectivism." This definition of individualism may be seen as promoting negativity as individualism is often regarded as a self-centred concept that is only concerned with oneself and not with others. However, there are a number of ways in which the concept of individualism is viewed and practised in the past and today. In fact, the concept of individualism varies as the West and the East view them in different ways especially in relation to collectivism. The East is not as positive as the West concerning the concept of individualism as collectivism is more common in their everyday life. On the other hand, in the West, individualism has evolved as a common social practice, especially in striving for one's rights, interests, and achievements. This distinction might be seen as an oversimplification, but it is still useful for the purpose of this paper.

Contrariwise, the concept of individualism in Islam offers a different form of meaning as it refers to a unique relationship that one has with one's God without having to have a mediator such as an *imam* or a priest to speak to God. Aboulela explores this idea in one of her interviews with Catherine Rashid (2012) when she states that "I think individualism is a good thing in Islam, in that every Muslim has a direct relationship with Allah without the need of church or clergy" (p.621). This direct connection with God is exclusively personal as it is only between oneself and the inner self. It is of course impossible to know how an individual perceives faith and God; while individuals may share similar values, culture, and even surroundings in a collective community, they may not all share faith in the same way. There are undoubtedly many types of individualism but I would like to categorise this kind of individualism, in *Minaret*, as spiritual individualism due to the protagonist's personal and unique relationship with God (Allah).

Borhandden Musah (2011) adds to Rashid's idea of individualism as he sees individualism in Islam as "creating a link to Allah, emotional stability and balance, patience at hardships, flexibility in facing reality, optimism, and uniqueness of Muslim personality and (that it) develops socialisation" (p.71-71). This suggests a deeper form of individualism

as it offers various outcomes and elements instead of simply a link to God. Again, these may differ from one person to another. This form of individualism in Islam can be perceived as an important aspect in shaping a Muslim identity as it links identity and faith together. This can be observed in *Minar*et when Najwa first enters Regent's Park Mosque, and she says to herself: "I wanted you to be good but I wasn't sure if I was prepared" (p.237). Then she adds, "I sat hunched on the floor, knowing I wasn't good, knowing I was far away and just taking the first step in coming here still wasn't enough."(p.238). This scenario of talking to herself suggests an intimate connection that is spiritual as Najwa connects reclaiming her faith while at the same time finding her identity. In other words, Najwa consciously wants to adopt a more Islamic identity as her personal decision without it being forced upon her.

The concept of spiritual individualism in *Minaret* can be further explored when Najwa is described as surrounded by practicing Muslims at her university back in Sudan, but is not even influenced or inclined to practise her faith: "I walked past them to the garden outside and sat on the steps of the porch watching those who weren't praying. Not everyone prayed" (p.42). This suggests that faith is something personal and is not shared by everyone. Though the act of practising faith is done publicly, it does not attract everyone to perform it. Despite sharing the same faith, each individual is affected differently, and unfortunately, some may not be affected at all. This can be seen in this episode where Najwa is portrayed to be the one who is not praying and mentioned as only observing others who pray. This suggests that faith is indeed a more personal concept. Najwa is gradually affected by all these religious practices as she is repeatedly mentioned to be envious of those who pray and wear hijab at her university, and of her maids who wake up early to pray and recite the Quran on the lawn of her house in Sudan. She states "Our house was a house where only the servants prayed. […] reciting the Quran until it was time for the dawn prayer. I remember him [the guard at her house] sitting cross-legged in the garden, dark as a tree" (p.95). *Minaret* portrays faith as an individualistic concept but at the same time makes its main character, Najwa, attracted to faith in a subtle way. This can be observed in the novel as Najwa is placed in a situation where she is surrounded by practicing Muslims both at home and university in Sudan though she is not a practicing Muslim. It may

seem like the portrayal of faith is a form of collectivism, but instead, the novel makes us view the concept of faith as both individualistic and within a collective sphere. This is because if faith is really only a collective concept, Najwa eventually will be portrayed among those who are practicing since she is surrounded by practicing Muslims, but she is not. Thus, the concept of individualism in Islam is indeed personal and spiritual as the feeling itself is not shared. Najwa only begins to understand this concept of individualism after she rediscovers her faith when she is alone in London: "I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realised that this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This is what I had envied in our gardener reciting the Quran, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I heard the Quran recited, there wasn't a bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert" (p.243). This suggests that faith is indeed individualistic or personal in nature as it is only after Najwa rediscovers faith that she then understands that the hollowness within her was actually her longing for faith despite being surrounded by practising Muslims.

However, in spite of the importance of individualism as in Najwa's rediscovery of faith, her sense of identity is also a product of collectivism (as Rita Felski's categorises as self-discovery) through the sisterhood she surrounds herself with at Regent's Park Mosque. The sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque play a vital role in shaping Najwa's identity in relation to faith and it offers a form of collective identity. The sisters share the same faith despite having different backgrounds in terms of culture, ethnicity, and language. This can be seen in the text in the relationship between Najwa and the Senegalese ambassador's wife as they do not speak the same language yet seem to understand one another: "I didn't tell her more than my name. There was no need – we had come together to worship and it was enough […] Evening after evening, every day for three weeks, we stood and knelt together. Then our periods swung and arrived at the same time. One day I was praying and she was not there. The next day, I was absent too" (p.188). This illustrates that the interaction between Najwa and the Senegalese ambassador's wife is unique as they do not share any common values or even language but only the act of attending the congregation prayers during the nights of Ramadan. This scenario can also be seen as an example that suggests a form of individualism in Islam yet in a collective manner. It is

collective in the sense that these sisters at the mosque may or may not know each other personally but they are capable of practising their faith together. Furthermore, the sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque can be considered as similar to the concept of brotherhood in Islam. Zygmunt Bauman (2004) defines 'brotherhood' as "the epitome of squaring the circle: different yet the same, separate yet inseparable, independent yet joined." (p.10). This definition of brotherhood suggests a parallel view to the sisterhood in *Minaret*, as Aboulela successfully portrays that the sisters are the same but at the same time different. They are considered the same in terms of their act of seeking and practising faith. This can be observed when Najwa describes the gatherings at the mosque: "I did like them. I liked the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men […] I would leave the mosque refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy."(p.243). The satisfaction and happiness that Najwa describes from her visits to the mosque signifies that the sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque acts as a catalyst to her rediscovery of faith and identity. Therefore, in *Minaret*, Najwa's sense of identity is a product of both individualism and collectivism, and both contribute to Najwa's quest for identity in modern Britain.

Conclusion

Minaret is a Muslim female bildungsroman that significantly portrays its main character, Najwa undergoing several challenges in searching for an identity as she goes through a transition from a non-practicing Muslim teenager in Sudan to a practicing Muslim woman in London. The transition is underpinned by her faith. Both Felski's strategies of searching for identity offer useful models for reading and interpreting the quest for identity in *Minaret* but, ultimately, Felski's model of inward self-knowledge is portrayed as a more successful framework in aiding Najwa's rediscovery of faith and her adoption of a Muslim identity. One of the male characters in the novel, Anwar, also acts a catalyst for Najwa's quest for identity, as his character causes Najwa to engage with her inner self. Furthermore, the concepts of individualism in Islam and collectivism through the portrayal of sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque contribute in shaping Najwa's quest for identity. The concepts of individualism and collectivism both work hand in hand in Najwa's phases of rediscovering Islam utilising Rita Felski's strategies. Hence, the quest for identity in *Minaret* is strongly rooted to Najwa's rediscovery of faith, and by the end of the text, she is illustrated as a

practicing Muslim woman. The Muslim identity that Najwa upholds is a sense of identity that transcends cultural and national barriers by recentring Islam as the primary signifier. *Minaret* is a powerful literary text as it highly emphasises the strength of faith of a Muslim woman living in modern Britain. Thus, indubitably *Minaret* can be considered as a Muslim female bildungsroman that successfully debunks stereotypical images of Muslim women in the West that are commonly illustrated as Othered.

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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