Muslim Women's Body, Identity and Agency: Liberationist (Re) constructions of Gender in the Contemporary Transnational Fiction

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Abstract

The postmillennial period has witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of varied discourses on Islam and the question of gender. As a response to this, the contemporary fictional writings have arguably shown a renewed interest in Muslim women's experiences, producing both hegemonic narratives and reactionary counter hegemonic narratives. The hegemonic discourses on Islam that assumed centre stage in the post 9/11 geopolitical context are of the oppressed women with the major trope of 'saving Muslim women from Muslim men'. The discourses of Islamic terror and oppressed Muslim woman, presumably sanctioned by the religion, are widely understood to have furnished ideological pretexts for neo-colonial domination in the Muslim world. Paralleling this trend, counter-hegemonic narratives that challenged the dominant discourses on Muslim women also have appeared in the post 9/11 period, featuring stories of Muslim women who assert their identity, exercise their agency and act as agents of change instead of being passive victims. In this context, this

paper attempts to make a critical reading of Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), and Leila Abu Leila's *Minaret* (2005) as counter hegemonic–narratives which contest the stereotyped representations of Muslim women in the dominant narratives.

Keywords: Postmillennial fiction, Discourses, Counter hegemonic narrative, Identity, Agency.

The postmillennial period, marked by the emergence of discourses on terror and Islamophobia, also witnessed a resurgence of a renewed interest in the question of gender in Islam. Throughout history, discussions on Islam have often portrayed the religion and its followers as inherently patriarchal and misogynistic. The perceived status of women is frequently cited as evidence of the religion's alleged backwardness, contributing to the rise of radical elements within Islam. Consequently, Muslim women are commonly depicted as 'weak,' 'oppressed,' and 'passive victims' within a social system deemed oppressive and supposedly sanctioned by the religion. Dominant narratives, particularly those emphasizing Islamic prescriptions on issues such as headscarves, marriage, and sexual freedom, reinforce the notion of the 'necessity' to 'save Muslim women from Muslim men'. These discursive formations, prevalent in dominant narratives, heavily rely on Islamic religious principles, with particular focus on matters such as the veil and gender segregation. There have been attempts, as Leila Ahmed puts it, to paint Islam as "innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (152). The renewed interest in Islamic perception of gender roles in general and the importance it assumed in the 9/11 context is reflected in the dominant as well as reactionary fictional articulations that emerged after 9/11. This paper attempts to make a critical reading of Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), and Leila Abu Leila's *Minaret* (2005) with an intention of unravelling how these works challenge the mainstream narratives by

presenting counter-hegemonic narratives.

Fictional Depictions of Muslim women in Dominant Narratives

The contemporary literary writings on Muslim women, by and large, fall into two categories. According to Mohja Kahf, there are two "[e]urocentrically slanted slots for Muslim women's stories: Victim and Escapee." In the victim stories, Muslim women are represented as powerless and weak to speak for themselves and these narratives are characterised by the presence of a 'forbidding father', 'rotten religion', 'stifled sexuality' and 'vile veil'(Kahf 'On being'). In the escapee stories, Muslim women often escape Islam and practising Muslims seek liberation and assertion of their identity. In both the cases, Islam is seen as the problem, never part of the solution and the underlying assumption of this discourse is that free will and agency originate solely from the West and Islam always stifles agency of women. According to Kahf, the dynamics of the book industry pressures Muslim women writers in the West into conforming to this normative homogenized representation (Kahf 'On being'). For Kahf, Islam is being painted as extremist and terroristic, not only in Western media but by secular Arabs, Arab Feminists, and others in the Arab world who consider themselves 'progressive'. These progressives are often extremists themselves, favouring undemocratic secular rule over democracy that gives room to Islamist, whom they see as an apocalypse.

Muslim women are often portrayed as victims in various narratives, with one pervasive depiction highlighting their perceived oppression through the practice of veiling. Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, veiled Muslim women have been the subject of cultural and political scrutiny in the West, and consequently, the need for saving Muslim women from the veil was perceived to be a necessity. However, this western obsession with the veil invited reactions from some of the writers. For instance, according to Abu-Lughod, Muslims "have to resist the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign

of women's unfreedom," (4). In her *The Muslim Woman: The power of Image and the Danger of Pity*, she writes:

> Isn't it a gross violation of women's own understandings of what they are doing to simply denounce the burqa as a medieval or patriarchal imposition? Second, we shouldn't reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. Perhaps it is time to give up the black and white Western obsession with the veil and focus on some serious issues that feminists and others concerned with women's lives should indeed be concerned with. (Abu-Lughod 4)

Similarly, Ahmed criticises Western feminists' tradition of attacking the veil and looking at it as a sign of female oppression. She says,

> However, universalism could also be read as a fantasy of proximity. For, at one level, reading the 'veiled woman' as an oppressed woman who is sexually controlled involves a fantasy that one can inhabit the place of the other that one already knows what 'the other' means and therefore needs Or, to put it differently, the emphasis on the universal wrong of the 'purdah' (and the assumption of women's right 'not to wear the veil'), involves the fantasy that one can 'get inside the skin of the other' (and speak for her). (166)

For Randa Abdel Fattah, the literary world abounds in stories about Muslims, but never for Muslims, and these stories continue to dominate the most celebrated literary spaces where the Muslim woman 'native informant' who bravely 'bares all' to confess her journey from false consciousness to the good liberal (preferably atheist) subject. These representations and stories of Muslims in Western popular fiction invariably feature a plethora of oppressed women, accompanied by cover images of women in face veils, their haunted eyes beseeching their 'white saviour' author and reader to rescue them**.** Sharing her personal experiences and insights about what it means to write from a racialized minority position, Randa writes:

> This insatiable appetite for stories about Muslim women as vic-

> tims or escapees is part of what motivated me to write my first novel when I was fifteen years old. From a childhood of books populated with characters and stories that bore little resemblance to my own life to my teenage years growing up in the context of the First Gulf War—in which I was called a raghead, nappyhead, tea-towel head, sand nigger, camel jockey, wog, terrorist—to witnessing the extraordinary popularity of books such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) by Betty Mahmody or Jean Sassoon's *7 Princess series*, I felt compelled to try and offer a counter-narrative (Abdel-Fattah, *'The Double Bind'* 99).

The post 9/11 was a critical period when stories on Islam and Muslim women experienced an exponential increase in sales and popularity contributing profusely to the formation and solidification of certain discourses about Islam and Muslim women. To quote Saba Mahmood:

> Since the events of September 2011, the Euro-American publishing community has produced a series of best-sellers that tell harrowing tales of Muslim (and at times Non-Muslim) survival under misogynist culture practices, that are supposed to characterize most, i f not all, Islamic societies… Islam's mistreatment of women serves both as a site for diagnosis of the ills that haunt this faith and a strategic point of intervention for its construction. (*Retooling* 117)

Critics have contended that these hegemonic writings on women act in service of the empire. Referring to the imperialist interests invested in these texts, Hamid Dabashi, for instance, in his controversial and much-debated essay, *Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire* dubs the transnational writers who serve empire through their writings 'native informers' and 'comprador intellectuals' whose role is "to package (the atrocities taking place in their countries of origin) in a manner that serves the belligerent empire best: in the guise of a legitimate critic of localized tyranny facilitating the operation of a far more insidious global domination—effectively perpetuating (indeed aggravating) the domestic terror they purport to expose" (Dabashi).

Drawing on the theory of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as articulated in their Empire (2000), Dabashi argues that the classical case of imperialism had now mutated into an imperial mode of domination, corresponding to cultural, social, and economic globalisation, a mode that is in fact rooted in American constitutionalism which according to him, thrives on the stories it tells itself about liberty and democracy, or about 'the end of history' or 'the clash of civilizations'. These stories need exotic seasonings and the native informants provide them. They are the by-products of an international intellectual free trade, in which intellectual carpetbaggers offer their services to the highest bidder, for the lowest risk." (Dabashi). The works that proliferated in the wake of 9/11 and flooded the market, according to Dabashi, perform this task. According to him, "[t]his body of literature, perhaps best represented by Azar Nafisi's Reading *Lolita* in Tehran (2003), ordinarily points to legitimate concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world and yet put that predicament squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op, militarily stipulated in the US global war mongering" (Dabashi). Dabashi observes that the US propaganda is so tactfully rife that they often create a 'collective amnesia', a systematic loss of collective memory which helps America to manufacture consent for its ruthless foreign interventions. This erasure of collective memories, Dabashi argues, is accompanied by creating:

> selective memory—two pathological cases that in fact augment and corroborate each other" which is now "fully evident in an increasing body of memoirs by people from an Islamic background that has over the last half a decade, ever since the commencement of its 'War on Terrorism,' flooded the US market (Dabashi).

Narratives Subverting the Hegemonic Discourses

Literary works in the post 9/11 scenario, written predominantly by transnational women writers, contest the dominant narratives on Muslim women. For instance, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf,

and *Minaret* by Leila Abulela are works that challenge the dominant discourses propagated by the Islamophobic narratives discussed earlier. These novels written by transnational women writers, feature Muslim women characters who challenge the Orientalist stereotypical representations of a victimised Muslim womanhood on the one hand and the orthodox notions of Muslim womanhood idealised by the conservative Muslim community on the other and offer counter-narratives. These works often cut across the double bind representations of the Muslim women by depicting Muslim women characters fighting hegemonies of both kinds and exercising a broad spectrum of agencies.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf by Mohja Kahf revolves around the coming of age story of Khadra Shamy, who was born in a devout Muslim family consisting of her parents and brother who migrated from Syria to Indianapolis in the 70s. Her parents, devout practising Muslims, are part of a 'Daawa Center' whose mission is to propagate the 'true religion'. Growing up in the fictional town of Simmonsville, Indiana, which welcomed her family by crash of glass, beer bottles and 'a pile of gold shards at their doorsteps' (Kahf, *The Girl* 6). She manages to find her place in society through negotiations with her host community as well as her own religious texts. Khadra is always in conflict on various issues taught to her by her family regarding the position of women in society. Besides, she finds herself a constant target of resentment against Islam and Muslims while living among the people of the host country. Fed up with both, she journeys from Indiana to Saudi Arabia to Syria to Philadelphia back to Indiana which prompts her to look at Islam from a broader perspective and reread the religious texts in the light of modern contexts that helps her reinvent her identity and self-perception. She experiments with her religion, defies the norms of her own society and flouts the repressive cultural codes of the community before finally arriving at her interpretation of a more accommodative and more inclusive religion. The novel undermines many of the Western stereotypes on Islam as well as Muslim women and presents a religion

of Islam that embraces multiple views and promotes tolerance. The novel can belong to the category of works which Nouri Gana refers to as "remarkably counter-narrative, reactionary, and corrective in their overall propensity" (1577).

The story of migration, exile, hardships, and spiritual enlightenment in Britain is told in Leila Aboulela's Minaret. It narrates the tale of Najwa, a young lady who is sent into forced exile in Great Britain. After her father's execution on the charge of corruption she and her family land in London leaving behind the life of affluence and comfort that she once knew in Sudan. Her mother dies of leukaemia five years after fleeing Sudan with her son and daughter. In addition to this, Najwa's brother, Omar, is sentenced to sixteen years of imprisonment for drug trafficking and assaulting a police officer. Economically shattered and emotionally broken with none to assist her and support her, she decides to work as a maid in a house to come back to life. As she loses everything in her life including the possibility of making a family, she manages to find herself again through her faith. In the midst of excruciating travails of life, Najwa, with the help of the pious women community of the mosque and her religious practices, finds security, strength and liberation in her life. According to Geoffrey Nash,

> rather than conform to the stale Orientalist discourse of much Western writing on Islam, fictional or otherwise, Aboulela adopts a subtle transgressive discourse which engages with Orientalist and postcolonial tropes in such a way as to project herself [...] as a representative for Islam (45).

Thus, this novel offers a counter-narrative to the dominant discourses propagated through 'victim/escapee' stories and 'insider narratives'. It is a fine example of a novel in which the author defies the liberal secular discourses on the subjectivity of pious Muslim women and Islam writes back to the liberal secular centre (Hafis 3).

Redefining Muslim Woman's identity

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf by Mohja Kahf, and *Minaret* by Leila

present a different kind of Muslim identity which reverses the dominant trend of Muslim woman representations in fiction. The protagonists as well as other minor Muslim characters are powerful enough to challenge the debilitating forces around them and capable of demystifying the varied myths about Islam and Muslims. Growing up into a devout Muslim woman after negotiating with her religion and the values of the host community, the protagonist of the novel, Khadra, draws her strength from her religion and faith. In the process of defining her identity, she oscillates between her stances and undergoes conflicting experiences. She marries and divorces, conceives and aborts, veils and unveils in her adult life. While doing all these, she draws her strength from her own religion and scriptures. Taher, her uncle had taught her the critical roles played by the woman leaders in early Islam. Besides, her growth into adulthood takes place in Syria mentored by her grandmother Teta, a strong and revolutionary woman. All these contribute to the formation of Khadra's Islamic identity which is counter traditional on the one hand and accommodative on the other. As Koegeler-Abdi puts it, "[t]hroughout the novel, Kahf posits a particularized, fluid Islam as an integral part of Khadra's Arab and American subjectivities. Her spiritual journey spirals back and forth between Eastern and Western interpretations of Islam, input from her local family, university, Muslim feminist sources as well as zealous, revolutionary forms of Islam and finally secularism" (18). Like the woman clad in a bright headscarf, a pair of jeans and a black top on the book's cover image, the novel seeks to present the emergence of a new Muslim woman who enjoys the multiple privileges of life. Usually, the cover images of many 'airport novels', restrict the Muslim women to "stereotypes of the sexually mysterious woman with titles and common marketing themes such as exposing the oppression of women and the struggle for freedom, together with an obsession with the veil" (Clyne 29). For Zine, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a novel "that decolonises the epistemological spaces in which one comes to know of Islam and Muslims, and reclaim … the space to

name (her) own identities and realities" (quoted in Sulaiman *et al.* 56).

Through her novel, Mohja Kahf presents a Muslim woman protagonist, Khadra, who critically negotiates her faith by contesting some of the cultural practices held sacrosanct in the religion, besides challenging the prejudiced approaches of the host country towards Muslim women in general**.** Unlike the traditional harem women presented in the mainstream media, Khadra wears jeans and the veil and rides bikes through the streets of Indiana. Without seeking the approval of her family or her community, she veils and unveils and finally ends up following veiling. Further, with the help of Ijtihad which is usually practised by the male clerics of the community, she decides to abort when she is divorced from her husband Juma, a very conservative Muslim. Besides, she continues her education despite objections from her family. She even questioned the hypocritical stands of her family on many occasions.

The other Muslim women characters in the novel who break the pertinent stereotypes of Muslim womanhood include Khadra's mother Ebtehaj. In fact, the novelist portrays Ebtehaj, who dreams of becoming a doctor but sacrifices it for the sake of her family and her missionary work at the Da'wa Centre, as a formidable woman; she has a say in her family and is respected by the family members including her husband. Teta, the grandmother of Khadra is a modern Muslim woman. Despite criticisms from her neighbours and other members in the community, she does not shy away from going ahead with her career. Another character Zuhura, who is murdered by the racists, was also articulate and assertive. She was an active member of the African Student Association in her University and fought for the rights of Muslims. Hanifa, the sister of Hakim is the first Muslim woman to participate in a car racing tournament.

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* revolves around the two phases of Najwa's life as an irreligious fashionable woman in Sudan and as a practising veiled woman in Britain. The veil usually found as a repressive marker of women's subjugation becomes a source of strength and

liberation for her. She rediscovers the beauty of faith when she comes into contact with a group of women at the Regent's Park Masjid. In fact, her life in Britain was not free from trials. Her father was executed and her mother passed away after being bedridden with Leukaemia. Her brother was imprisoned for crimes he committed and she had to let go of her love for Tamer who supported her. Despite all these difficulties, her attachment to Islam gives her a newfound identity and lasting peace of mind. When she puts on a veil for the first time she feels excited:

> I wrapped the tobe (hijab) around me and covered my hair. 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 offer (246).

Tamer, a male character, also defines his identity through his association with Islam. Najwa and Tamer often find a connection between them through the identity marker of a 'Muslim' instead of 'Arab' which is similar to the case of the Egyptian women discussed by Saba Mahmood in her work titled Politics of Piety (2004). Peter Morey explains that:

> At one point, Tamer and Najwa directly discuss their sense of identity. Rejecting any notion of being Western, they both settle on 'Muslim' as the identity marker they are most comfortable with — this is in contrast to Lamya whom Tamer believes considers herself Arab (110).

This is a crucial distinction and one remarked upon in Saba Mahmood's analysis of Egyptian Muslim women, when she notes the Western critical tendency to read Islamist movements as 'a recording of [Arab] nationalist sentiment in religious idioms'. Both Mahmood and Aboulela reject the secularist reading as an inaccurate understanding. (5)

It is clear that Najwa does not permit herself to be influenced by Western liberal ideology. Hence, despite her love for Anwar, a Marxist activist, Najwa deserts him because she does not like his liberal way of life.

It is, therefore, explicit that Najwa has grown out of her earlier

conception of freedom. Instead, she develops a sense of being fortified by the ideals of Islamic fraternity and spirituality. Hence, Salaita argues that for the characters, "Islam provides comfort, community, and access to identity" (445). The women of the mosque who belong to different cultures, British, Pakistani, Syrian and Sudanese, gather for Quran lessons in a way that forms an Islamic sisterhood. This collective is formed around Islamic symbols and spaces. The Quran is the common thing that binds them across all barriers and differences of culture. Their faith gives them a sense of belongingness and a feeling of solidarity which help them tackle the difficulties in life. Najwa's association with the mosque fraternity gives her an identity that cuts across the barriers of language, nation and culture.

The Veil—Subverting the Dominant Approaches

The veil/the headscarf/hijab/purdah—the varying dress codes adopted by many Muslim women across the globe in accordance with varying local practices—have always been a contentious issue in the discourse of Islam. The liberal-secular positions on the headscarf preoccupy themselves with the supposedly patriarchal dimensions underlying the practice. Muslim women adhering to such Islamic norms are often seen by the liberals as, to use the words of Saba Mahmood, "pawns in a grand patriarchal plan." (Politics of Piety 75). Mahmood also points out that it is women's clothing, not men's, which is taken to be a sign of social coercion (75). Catherine Bullock states that the "hijab is linked to assertions about women's inferiority within Islam"(13). The 'veil', according to Deborah Scroggins, is assumed to be a blatant badge of female oppression, (3) forced on unwilling women by various methods–bribery (Jan Goodwin 262) or threats of and actual violence (Deborah 3). However, many women in Muslim countries wear hijab willingly and with conviction. The liberal discourses totally sideline the pietist aspects of the practice as well while for a majority among those who observe it, it is an important Islamic injunction in terms of female modesty and piety (Mahmood 2005). Criticising the practice

of attacking the veil by the mainstream media and thinkers without considering the diversity of cultural and social backgrounds of Muslim women across the world, Abu Lughoud in her work titled *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) states:

> Is it not a gross violation of women's own understandings of what they are doing to simply denounce the burqa as a medieval imposition? One cannot reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. And we should not underestimate the ways that veiling has entered political contests across the world (40).

The first and foremost thing that Mohja Kahf attempts to challenge in her *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is the different notions associated with the question of veil. Khadra, the protagonist of the novel undergoes different shifts in her attitude to the veil before she finally chooses veiling. Instead of blindly endorsing the veil, Kahf destabilises the dominant binaristic way of looking at the veil invariably as either a tool of suppression or a means of emancipation. In the novel, Kahf seeks to make a critique of both the liberal secular notions as well as notions of the practitioners of strict religious codes. She presents the veil as a dress code that represents different shades of meaning. In the novel, the veil becomes a shifting symbol of varied things such as idealism, revolution, freedom and identity. Kahf's protagonist Khadra finds liberation in experimenting between veiling and unveiling. Her unveiling is not to deny the teachings of the Quran but to look at veiling from a broader and fresh perspective, though. One cannot see a "Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil" (Kahf, *The Girl* 48) when she describes her first experience of wearing the hijab.

> The sensation of being hijabed was a thrill. Khadra has acquired vestments of a higher order. Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. … hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked (Kahf , *The Girl* 112-113)

In the beginning of the novel, Kahf presents two extreme polarities in the spectrum of approaches to veil. On the one hand, it stands for oppression and on the other it represents a signifier of idealism and liberation. For instance, for Aunt Khadija "covering up is a strong thing"(25). While trying Khadra's scarf for prayer, she asks Khadra to imagine herself without the veil as standing naked in front of a bunch of people as if she were back in slavery times in an auction table. Similarly, Khadra feels a special fondness for being in

> the forest of women in Hijab, their Khimars and Saris and jilbababs and thobes and deppattas fluttering and sweeping the floor and reaching out to everything (55).

On the other hand, the boss of the magazine Alternative America, considering her natural kinship with the veil as a Muslim**,** asks Khadra to make some stories on the repressive experiences of the veil-clad women. Likewise, the extreme form of prejudice on the veil is shown through the experience of Zuhura, an African American Muslim who is killed by the members of the Ku Klux Klan. Zuhra, in fact, was a strong, independent and free-thinking woman who even questioned some of the practices of her own community.

> Zuhra was not accustomed to being brushed aside. … She was likely to question you, man or woman, even if you had an air of authority, and she did so with an attitude that assumed her objections would be addressed" (43).

Her dead body is found along with the shredding of the veil after being raped which shows that it was an attack on veiling apart from being a racist crime. Kahf shows that this provoked Khadra to think more about the veil and her identity. Khadra herself encounters forced unveiling when a bunch of boys attacks her and take off her veil at school. Khadra insists on holding on to her torn pieces of the veil and covers her head with them as a token of her challenge and rebellion: "She didn't want to give anyone in this building (of the school) the satisfaction of seeing her bareheaded" (125). Khadra's acceptance of the real meaning of veiling happened after a number of experiments with it and her shifts

to different positions. While in Syria visiting her relatives, Khadra's outlook towards hijab undergoes a shift and she unveils herself for the first time in public. But, it is not done in the radical feminist spirit to rebel against the codes of Islamic rules or as a denial of the teachings of Islam but she does it to let the love of God penetrate into her head and hair in the form of sunshine and to prove that there is no barrier between her and her God.

> Khadra paused… The scarf was slipping off. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. She closed her eyes and let the sunshine through the thin skin of her eyelids, warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her eyes, and she knew deep in the place of yaqin that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. Alhamdu, alhamdulillah. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. …Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Herself, developing (309).

For Khadra, this was an enlightening experience. She tells about this,

> "How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom" (309).

Earlier, when she wore the black veil during her teenage, it amounted to a revolutionary response to the "traditional Islamic scholarship, with its tedious, plodding chapters on categories of water purity and how to determine the exact end of menses" (150).

At the time of wearing the black scarf, she and her friends were in solidarity with the Iranian revolution and the ideas of martyrdom. It seems that Khadra wants to be like this 'one scarf-wearing woma' who took, with other men, some American hostages during the revolution (119). Khadra's black veil, in this period, is an expression for her anti-imperial stance. Later, when she visited Mecca for Hajj, she is shocked to find a different version of Islam there and shifts from black hijab to white hijab. It was following her acceptance of the proposal for marriage from

a Kuwaiti man which indicated the end of a 'neoclassical phase' (195). Towards the end of the novel, her scarf is tangerine as mentioned in the title of the novel. The tangerine scarf is given to Khadra by her father's aunt, Teta, and hence symbolising her wish for going back to her own roots. Teta is a strong influence in shaping her broader attitude towards her religion including veiling. Her meeting with a poet is an important event in her life. It teaches her the importance of not veiling her face and expression. He insists 'veiling is important, definitely' (302) in spite of the revealing nature of her veil. Despite her rhythmic shifting between veiling and unveiling, she finally cannot help preferring veiling, "(s)he was beginning to see that, of the covered and uncovered modes, she preferred the covered" (373). Surprisingly, Khadra confesses that her experimental journey with veil finally makes her closer to God. As Areen Khalefah states, the veil, in the case of Khadra, stands for "idealism, freedom and revolution, political issues and eventually for love" (159). Similar views that stress on Khadra's veiling as a spiritual act rather than a ritualistic act is shared by other critics also. Analysing Khadra's veiling, Sulaiman and Suraiya write:

For Khadra, if veiling becomes a barrier between her and other human beings, then it is not the purpose of the veil. If veiling is meant for modesty, it is then more important for one to keep her modesty, and the veil becomes an extra piece of cloth that identifies her as a Muslim who upholds modesty. Additionally, if a veil is a tool to express one's identity, then unveiling becomes a process of giving up to the hegemonic thought of the West, which always defines the Muslim veil as a symbol of oppression. In this sense, veiling becomes a tool of dissidence, and Khadra chooses to keep herself veiled (Sulaiman *et al.* 62)

Leila Abulela'a *Minaret*, aside from destabilising many discourses of the dominant narratives on Muslim women, revolts against the liberal-secular stance on Hijab as a repressive apparatus imposed on Muslim women by the essentially male-oriented Islam which pushes women to invisibility and periphery (Faisal). The novel has two distinguishing

parts: Najwa's life before she wears the veil and the period after she chooses to wear it. In her life in Sudan, she used to dress up in Western-style with short skirts and a fashionable hairstyle. But she is not very happy about that style of living for some unknown reason. She sometimes had an inner calling for a change. When Randa, her friend looking at the hijab-clad women on a magazine said, "[t]otally retarded … we're supposed to go forward, not go back to the middle ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything? …They're crazy …Islam doesn't say you should do that" (Aboulela 29). Najwa's reply was this, "what do we know? We don't even pray. Sometimes, I was struck with guilt" and then she is immediately reminded of the girls at the university who wear the veil (29). She admires those Sudanese young women who wear the headscarf or hijab and long flowing robes called thobe that cover all of their body except for their faces and hands and sees them as perhaps more Sudanese than she is.

They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt for the first time in my life self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses… If these provincial girls made me feel awkward, I was conscious of their modest grace, of the thobes that covered their slimness-pure white cotton covering their arms and hair (14).

But her approach towards the veil undergoes a radical change when she lives as a political refugee in London. This is a time of crisis when she faces varied trials in her life. This is, also, a time when she longs to go back to her good old days of Khartoum where she encountered many veil-clad ladies. She says,

> I remembered the girls in Khartoum University wearing hijab and those who covered their hair with white thobes. They never irritated me, did they? I tried to think back and I saw the rows of students praying, the boys in front, and the girls at the back. At sunset, I would sit and watch them praying. They held me still with their slow movements, the recitation of the Qur'an.

> I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. (134)

Najwa puts on the veil and is attracted to the women community of the mosque. They encourage her to be part of the women's Qur'an study group. Najwa finds the place secure, one that provided her with a sense of belonging: "In the mosque, I feel like I am in Khartoum again" (244). She prays, "My Lord, give us from Your mercy and blessings so that we can love what you love and so that we can love all those actions and words that bring us closer to you" (184).

Her first time wearing the veil is an emotional experience for her.

> Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore. I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, 'Oh, so, this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual.' (Aboulela 247)

She finds the 'invisibility' hijab provides her blissful and liberating. Her veiling and Quran lessons give her a feeling of spiritual regeneration.

> I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This was what I had envied in our gardener reciting the Qur'an, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I heard the Qur'an recited, there wasn't bleakness in me or numbness, instead, I listened and I was alert (243).

She is not unhappy about her inability to marry Tamer, the person she loves because her spiritual growth is such that she had had an "exfoliation, clarifying, deep-pore cleanse" (247) that help her withstand any odds in life. According to Mike Philips:

Najwa journeys from pride and confusion to humility and peace. When she adopts the hijab she begins to see the world from a new perspective. 'These men Anwar condemned as narrow-minded and bigoted …were tender and protective towards their wives. Anwar was

clever but he would never be tender and protective.' Najwa's conversion is not an easy surrender to tradition. Instead, it is a hard-won dedication to service, a kind of restitution for her former life (Phillips).

In short, the veil becomes a source of strength for Najwa and helps her in shaping a new identity.

The novels under critical scrutiny in the present section often reflect how the dress code of the veil enables Muslim women to assert themselves as uncompromising followers of their faith, which provides them, while living in their adopted cosmopolitan lands, a sense of belonging to the global Muslim solidarity in spite of national, cultural and geographical differences. Hijab or veil thus becomes a unifying factor for Muslim women in the Western context. As Ahmad Khalifa observes,

> Because it is a strong visible identity marker, hijab collectivises space and enables Muslim women to associate with fellow Muslim women in Western space. It has a familiarizing attribute where it gathers Muslim women under one collectivising sign and gives them a sense of common sisterhood even though they hail from different countries and ethnicities. (81-82)

In *Minare*t, it is Najwa's adoption of the veil and her association with the women fraternity of the mosque that provides her refuge when she is continuously alienated from different situations of her life.

Agency of Muslim Women: Contesting Liberal Secular Understandings

The novels under discussion here dismantle the notions of the secular liberal discourses on the subjectivity and agency of the religiously observant Muslim women. Liberal definitions of agency foreground individual autonomy, willed action and the potential to create a change (Asad 1993). The notion of agency in this framework only captures those actions that result in the resistance/subversion of norms. The practising Muslim women as well as the Muslim women activists are always found by liberals as passive victims and 'pawns in a grand patriarchal plan'

(Mahmood 75). Hence, the liberal secular discourses ascribe agency only for those Muslim women who have either completely renounced their religion or in a perpetual fight with the religious principles. These novels arguably present that submission and docility are also means by which one can enact agency and pious Muslim women's agency spring from them. Critical insights in this direction by writers like Saba Mahmood deserve a mention here.

Making an ethnographic engagement with urban piety movement/mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood, a postcolonial feminist cultural anthropologist, in her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) elaborates on the agency of pious Muslim women. In studying the pious Muslim women of the mosque movement, Mahmood abandons the liberal notion of agency as she came to realize that she cannot adequately understand them from a liberal-secular position. Thus, she employs a different notion of the agency which is deeply indebted to Talal Asad, her anthropologist mentor, who says, "[i]t is essential …to consider how, by whom, and in what context the concept of agency is defined and used…." .(Asad 99). For her notion of agency, Mahmood is also indebted to the conceptions of power and subject formation put forth by the poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault- whom Talal Asad draws on- and Judith Butler, who both rejected, in general, the liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency. Foucault's conceptions of subject and subjectivity have at their heart what he calls the 'paradox of subjectivation': the very operations of power that secure a subject's subordination is also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (quoted in Mahmood 18). In other words, those capacities that define a person's agency are not something that remain uninfluenced by any power relations but rather are the very products of these operations of power. Mahmood writes,

> [s]uch a conceptualization of power and subject formation also encourages us to understand agency not simply as a synonym

> for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable (Mahmood 17-8).

Central to the pedagogical programme of the mosque movement are the repeated bodily performances and practices like praying, fasting and donning the hijab that equip them with virtues like the love of God, humility, modesty and presents them with agential capacities. Mahmood cites the example of a pianist whose docility of the body or teachability is a primary requirement of her mastering the art (Mahmood 29).

Aboulela, through her character Najwa in *Minaret*, showcases the agency of practising Muslim women by introducing her association with a Muslim women community in the mosque. This group at the mosque is similar to that of the urban piety movement or mosque movement in Egypt women discussed in Saba Mahmood's Politics of Piety that comprised women from different walks of life including homemakers, office employees, students, which, in fact, was part of "the larger Islamic Revival or the Islamic Awakening that has swept the Muslim world, including Egypt, since at least the 1970s" (3). Most of the women in Najwa's mosque group are Sudanese or Egyptians living abroad encountering cultural dislocation and racist prejudices. Similar to the Egyptian pious immigrant women living in Europe, Leila Aboulela presents the mosque women in *Minaret* gather every week in mosques to perform religious practices, discuss the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions. Mosque lessons are one of the important themes in Minaret. Najwa says:

> It being a Monday, I have my Quran Tajweed class at the mosque…The ladies' area is empty when I arrive. It doesn't surprise me. Soon the others will come for the class, and later more sisters will come accompanying their husbands for the Isha prayer. I put on the lights and pray two rakas' greeting to the mosque. Then I roll my coat like a pillow and stretch out (74).

In fact, Islam offers them a sense of belongingness and binds them together as a force that re-shapes their lives. Also, the Islamic norms

are not repressive for them, but rather they are the ones who help them reach out to their self-realization.

Minaret sketches Najwa's evolution from a Westernised daughter of a corrupt political leader from Sudan to a staunch practising Muslim in Britain. In these different phases of her life, she exercises her agency that submission to Islamic faith legitimately provides her with. Najwa goes through different experiences of life where all men characters central to the novel often disappoint her. Najwa's father, her brother, her first lover Anwar and even her lover Tamer do not nurture her nor support her. But, she does not allow anyone to authorise her, neither does she wait for support from anyone. Instead, she overrides these situations by entrusting herself to Allah. Her resilience and indomitable spirit in coming back to life are backed by her faith and her spiritual strength. Her initiation into the spiritual awakening gives her a lot of clarity about her present, past and future, making her capable of exercising her agency. She tells about the first moments of her realisation,

> My guides chose me; I did not choose them […] the words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it. Refresh my memory. Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me why I am here, what am I doing. Explain to me why I came down in the world. Was it natural, Was it curable? (Aboulela 240)

In the most difficult situations of her life, she is composed and takes up the challenges life throws on her. When she is jobless and asked to withdraw from Tamer by Doctora Zainaba, she takes life in a sportive spirit and decides to strengthen herself. She decides to go back to University as a mature student, focuses on making the Hajj pilgrimage, and prepares to help her brother who will soon be released from prison. She tells about her plans,

> I can go on Hajj with this money, I can get a plane to Mecca, stay in a nice hotel not far from Ka'ba-I can enjoy myself. I can get a degree with this money, go to University with Shahinas and

> become a mature student. I can help Omar next month when he comes out of prison. Maybe he can be persuaded to become a student (264).

Najwa becomes stronger after attending the weekly Qur'an lessons at the mosque. Her easy acceptance of her break up with Anwar and later with Tamer and her coping with the failure of her dream of making a family are all ascribed to be deriving from the strength her religious bindings provide her. She actualizes all this by practicing Sabr (Patience) which according to Mahmood is a modality of agency in its own right, because it "allows one to bear and live hardship correctly as prescribed by one tradition of Islamic self-cultivation" (72).

Khadra draws strength from her faith after negotiating with religion and the values of the host community. In the process of defining her identity, she oscillates between her stances and undergoes conflicting experiences. She gets married and later decides to divorce, conceives and aborts, and alternates between veiling and unveiling in her adult life. While doing all these, she strengthens herself with her own religion and scriptures. Taher, her uncle had taught her the critical roles played by the woman leaders in early Islam. Khadra's agency is revealed in her fight inspired by Islam against her own community as well as the host community. She decides to divorce her orthodox husband when he is against her continuing education. It is Islam which inspires her when Khadra speaks against the traditional gender role of a homemaker: "The Prophet never asked his wives to do anything in the house for him" Khadra snapped (241). Similarly, when she is prevented from entering into the mosque for her morning prayer in Saudi Arabia, she tells her parents:

> Women have always gone to the mosque. It's part of Islam. […] What about Aisha? What about how Omar wished his wife would not go to the mosque for fajr but he couldn't stop her because he knew it was her right? What about the Prophet saying 'You must never prevent the female servant of God from attending the houses of God?' I told the matawwa that hadith

and he laughed—he laughed at me, and said 'listen to this woman quoting scriptures at us!' (168).

On the whole, fictional representations on Muslim women in the post 9/11 offer varied trends. Marking a departure from the dominant narratives, counter-narratives like Mohja Kahf's The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006), Leila Abulela's Minaret (2005) challenge the dominant perceptions of Muslim women and offer a subversive narrative. In these works, Muslim women are no more in the victim/escapee frame, nor are they waiting for the 'saving' from 'Muslim men' by the 'white men'. Instead, they perceive their identity from a largely liberative perspective and approach the veil as an emancipator that helps them exercise their agency in different contexts of life.

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