

## **‘Displaced’ Muslim Women in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret***

**Sherine Fouad Mazloum**  
Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt

### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore the complex representation of Muslim women characters in two texts by two Muslim writers who live or have lived in Britain namely Monica Ali and Leila Aboulela. Since the two writers come from Asian and African/ Arab backgrounds, the delineation of their “Muslim” female characters allows for a more comprehensive view of the daunting experiences of migrant ‘ordinary’ women who find themselves triply displaced as women/ Oriental / Muslim. Both novels reflect the empowerment of the female characters Nazneen and Najwa who grapple with their migrant experience. This paper seeks to read the two novels as offering alternative forms of knowledge of Muslim women's ‘displaced’ experiences. It acknowledges that the two novels trace the processes of transformation of the female protagonists in a metropolitan context, but focuses on how this process entails several reflections on their experience as triply displaced. The paper relies on Spivak’s concept of displacement and uses its insights to reflect the case of Muslim women’s displacement. The paper refers to Talal Asad’s discussion of the idea of Islamic tradition to highlight its argument that Islam is part of the tradition that influences Muslims’ subjectivities whether they embrace the religion or not. Hence, to work out their displacements, both protagonists undergo a process of empowerment and agency during their journey of finding a place in the world.*

**Keywords:** Spivak’s displacement, Muslim women, Leila Aboulela, Monica Ali, contemporary British fiction.

Both Monica Ali and Leila Aboulela write their fictions in post 9/11 context which repeatedly shows Islam “as the Western world’s other” (Nash 5). Nash points out that critique of traditional beliefs in diasporic ethnic communities in favor of “the liberal western values” (Nash 27) is common among migrant fiction. Many critical views stress *Brick Lane*’s tendency to critique Bengali values in favor of liberal western values. To name just a few, Marx, Cormack and Brouillette focus on western feminist readings of *Brick Lane*. John Marx uses *Brick Lane* as an example that women change in the process of globalization. However, his observation that “*Brick Lane* considers Nazneen and Hasina as working in a comparative field whose complexity exceeds the binary of North and South” (17) draws attention to the need to reread such a complexity. Alistair Cormack claims that *Brick Lane* “is particularly of interest as an examination of the double bind that female migrants face, treated as alien by their host nation and as commodities by the men in their own communities” (700). Sarah Brouillette reads *Brick Lane* as a gentrification tale in which Monica Ali portrays women’s liberation from traditional gender roles becoming the provider for her daughters at the end (428). On the other hand, Eva Hunter suggests “Najwa’s limitations [in *Minaret*] reflect Aboulela’s own aversion to and misunderstanding of Western culture” (92). Other critical views on Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005) have tended to interpret the two novels within the larger framework of the debate between secular feminists and Islamic feminism. Tancke sums up the argument concerning the two novels pointing out that Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* along with Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* are novels “emblematic of the current cultural and political tendency to problematise facile visions of multiculturalism and to instead draft a more complex account of multicultural reality; they exemplify the parallel trend in British fiction to question exclusively celebratory accounts of multicultural coexistence” (4). He adds “Similarly to *Brick Lane*, Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* is set against a backdrop of blurred cultural allegiances and post-9/11 Islamophobia. It differs from *Brick Lane*, however, in the way in which Islam features prominently in the female protagonist’s sense of self. *Minaret* does not involve a stereotypically “Western” emancipatory tale, conflicted though one of these might be, as does *Brick Lane*” (8). Tancke’s contention is similar to other reviewers and critics who seem to categorize the two novels as representing two opposite stories of Muslim women with Ali’s character opting for western feminist modes of agency and the other adopting an essence of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, both novels reflect the empowerment of the female characters Nazneen and Najwa who grapple with their experience of tripled othering as Muslims, colored (Asian/African) and female in the western metropolis city of London. This paper seeks to read the two novels as offering alternative forms of knowledge of Muslim women ‘displaced’ experiences. It acknowledges that the two novels trace the processes of transformation of the female protagonists in a metropolitan context, but focuses on how this process entails several reflections on their experience as triply displaced.

Both Nazneen and Najwa undergo a process of empowerment which allows them to come to terms with the challenges of migrant experience. Despite different interpretations of this process of empowerment, both Nazneen and Najwa experience displacement and their empowerment stems from their agency and their engagement with their newly acquired systems of knowledge. The aim of this paper is to examine the two female protagonists', Nazneen and Najwa, transformation in light of Spivak's concept of displacement analyzing the process of empowerment as an attempt to deconstruct the assumed binary opposition that categorizes *Brick Lane* as the triumph of secular feminism and *Minaret* as the representative of "Halal fiction" (Ghazoul). This paper considers both female protagonists to be part and parcel of a displaced experience that is far more complex than the simple choice of west over east paradigm. Talal Asad's discussion of Islam as a shaping social force in the lives of practicing and non-practicing Muslims is used to shed light on Muslim women migrant experiences as the complex product of multiple factors with the cultural encounter with the West as one of these factors. Exploring Nazneen and Najwa's complex interactions across and through displacement, ambivalence and ambiguity allows transcendence of the polarities configured by the reception and categorization of these two novels. Hence, this paper will discuss the concept of Spivak's displacement and its relevance to the current analysis of Muslim female experience in the two texts, it will highlight Talal Asad's ideas on Islamic tradition and point out how they provide new understanding of Muslim women representations in Ali and Aboulela's fictional accounts and finally show how the two texts could be read as two facets of the ordinary Muslim women migrant experience in a metropolis city despite attempts to consider them as representative of a polarity showing the triumph of secular feminist western views versus an Islamic feminist alternative. The underlying argument rests on the idea that the complementary reading of Nazneen and Najwa as different yet ordinary Muslim women living in the west would allow transcendence of the stereotypical categorization of Muslim women as the Westernized emancipated model or the Orientalist subjugated/passive fundamentalist. The paper is divided into four parts including an overview of Spivak's concept of displacement in relation to the two female protagonists' triple displacement; an analysis of the two protagonists' complex relation with their bodies and clothes especially the veil and finally the significance of Asad's discussion of Islamic tradition in offering new insights into the two Muslim female protagonists processes to find a place in the world.

### **Spivak's Displacement and Displaced Muslim Women:**

Our postmodern age is characterized by an increasing sense of displacement. Najwa associates her sense of displacement with her color and her migrant position, "For the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused. For the first time, I was conscious of my shitty-coloured skin next to their placid paleness"(Aboulela 174). Displacement in this sense is linked to lack

of stability, lack of a home country, and a coloured skin. Najwa, the dark-coloured Sudanese living in London echoes Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" which regards migration as "a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize" (5). Bhabha's concept sets the basis for postcolonial theorization on migration and highlights how Aboulela and Ali's texts are interpreted as examples of migratory experience and how the issue of colour contrasts and alienates both Nazneen and Najwa from the surrounding whiteness of the English. On the other hand, the two protagonists have no real connections with their original nations, Bangladesh and Sudan respectively. Throughout Nazneen's thirty five years – she is born in 1967 and lives in London from 1985 to 2002- her only connection with her homeland is her sister's Hasina's letters. The parts of *Minaret* which actually take place in Sudan show Najwa as an onlooker, an outsider who spends her days in the American club listening to Bob Marley and eating "pizza, pepsi, chips and tomato ketchup" (Aboulela 46). Najwa's alienation is caused by her "[coming] down in the world" (Aboulela 1). Before becoming a maid, she used to feel more comfortable in London than Sudan, "Our First weeks in London were OK. We didn't even notice that we were falling....Omar and I could not help but enjoy London" (Aboulela 56).

As Muslim women and third world migrants, Nazneen and Najwa are triply displaced. Spivak explains in her article "Displacement and The Discourse of Women" that Derrida builds on Nietzsche's formulation of women's capacity for masquerade and uses the woman figure as a model of uncertainty to criticize phallogocentrism. However, the woman remains "a substitute"; the hypothesis or "the supposition". Spivak dwells on the notion of woman "originary displacement" in Nietzsche and Freud but she also makes use of Derrida's notion that although all human beings are displaced, in a discourse that privileges the center, women alone can be diagnosed as such. Spivak contends that the feminist project has privileged woman in a way that reproduces her displacement. What Spivak warns against is that even in a deconstructionist discourse that aims to expose essentialism, women are still the excess subject to the projection of male failures. The feminist project of the subaltern seeks to rewrite the social text. This rewriting, according to Spivak, is not an establishment of new meanings but an attempt to expose the errors in the established system of meaning. In "Bonding in Difference", an Interview with Alfred Arteaga, Spivak states that deconstruction entails the exposure of errors by "constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced.... [it is] a persistent critique of what one cannot not want" (24).

On the one hand, the western discourse of power has created versions of truth about women that subjugate and marginalize them<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, discourses on Muslim African and Asian women have created versions of truth about Islam and Muslim women that dehumanize them.<sup>3</sup> The Islamophobia fetish is contested and exposed through an analysis of the Muslim migrant subaltern woman's displacement. Spivak's model allows "the displaced figuration of the 'third- world woman' caught between tradition and modernity

(Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 304) to speak though it does not guarantee that she will be heard (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 247). Since the subaltern is a “divided and dislocated subject whose parts are not continuous or coherent with each other” (Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 276), the place of free will of this constituted sexed female subject is “dubious” (302). The argument on displacement is closely linked to the ability to exercise free will and to be heard. These two abilities are part of the transformation processes that involve Nazneen and Najwa. Analyzing these processes expose how “truths” about Muslim migrant women experience are constructed as part of the larger patriarchal discourse, whether Western or Islamic, which silences women.

Nazneen and Najwa’s migrant position places them in constant otherness which gradually allows them a special form of knowing. Their fictional narratives problematize the relationship between their bodies, their Islamic/orientalist culture and their newly acquired form of knowledge. Both characters think of themselves as limited and even stupid and they constantly look to the men around them for guidance. Najwa contemplates her position reflecting her inability to be independent, “I wished I could feel like an emancipated young student driving her own car with confidence.... In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of students were girls- that should make me feel good about myself. But I preferred it when Omar was with me,” (Aboulela 10). Despite her apparent limitation, Najwa bears the change of fortune with admirable strength. Her wisdom is constantly shown especially when contrasted to Tamer’s idealistic impulsiveness. Reflecting on the fact that there are no differences between men and women in the grave, Najwa is stressing not only a religious belief but also an emancipatory philosophical note, “All through life there were distinctions-toilets for men, toilets for women; clothes for men, clothes for women- then, at the end, the graves were identical. Similarly, Nazneen is “an unspoiled girl from the village....Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied” (Ali 22-23). The narrative constitutes her as a sexed female subject following Spivak’s concept. Gradually her knowledge allows her to see beyond the oppositional framework of Karim, her lover, who is always looking for an opponent to engage with. Commenting on the withdrawal of The Lion Hearts, the opponents of Karim’s activists’ group in the novel, The Bengal Tigers, Nazneen suggests “Make another march”; She adds “Why you have to do it against someone?” When she declares “make it into a celebration. Some singing, some dancing” (Ali 346), she is presenting an alternative insight to the east/ west polarity which reproduces violence. An insight which this paper claims comes from the two female characters’ displaced positions which allow them to expose the stereotypical constructions of systems of meaning reenacted by Western and Islamic patriarchal discourses.

The sexual engagement with men of the world, Karim and Anwar, allow Nazneen and Najwa access to information and knowledge beyond their understanding. Karim in *Brick Lane* and Anwar in *Minaret* represent forms of patriarchal knowledge but being displaced coloured individuals in the metropolis underlie their confusion and expose them as failures. They project their failure on Nazneen and Najwa fulfilling Spivak's interpretation of women as substitutes. However, the two women characters outgrow their lovers through their ability to perceive things differently. In an article entitled "To Know What's what: Forms of Migrant Knowing in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", Angelia Poon points out how Ali's text shows that "only through the acknowledgment of the instability and relativity of knowledge that any foundation of political action or moral praxis may be built" (428). Chanu, Nazneen's husband, embody the quest for absolute and certain knowledge which he tries to seek in London by studying different disciplines but which he confesses that he cannot attain except back home in Bangladesh. His sense of displacement is highlighted in his conversations with another displaced character Dr. Azad. Both Chanu and Azad are in search of "a place in the world" (Ali 264). They reflect another form of male migrants' failure. Both Azad and Chanu experience the going home syndrome which will supposedly provide the stability of knowledge. Dr Azad explains how migrants construct a concept of home which has all the truths to help them face the confusions and challenges of the host country, "They don't ever really leave home," he says. "Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there" (Ali 32). Both Chanu and Azad try to forge a constructed fictional place through their conversations, "They did what friends do, talked. From time to time their conversational paths intersected. More frequently, they talked around each other" (Ali 247). However, it is Nazneen who is aware of their illusionary quest for a place in the world, "It no longer amazed Nazneen that these fictions should be so elaborately maintained. What worried her now was the possibility of their collapse. The fence that they formed, though rotten, was better than nothing" (Ali 246). Chanu and Azad embody the displacement and disillusionment of migrant's experience which perpetuates Orientalist and Imperialist discourses. The same argument is reflected in Anwar's inherent inferiority in *Minaret*. Commenting on one of the Western converts to Islam whom Najwa praises; Anwar perpetuates the Orientalist discourse of inferiority "You say that because as Muslim our self esteem is so low that we're desperate for approval. And what greater stamp of approval can there be than a white man's?" (Aboulela 159) Both novels acknowledge the resurgence of imperialist/orientalist discourse post 9/11. Poon points out that knowledge claims became necessary post 9/11; however, "the tendency to reach clear cut principles of religious fundamentalism and totalizing knowledge systems" are constantly being challenged by *Brick Lane*. Poon adds that the only thing Ali asserts is "the instability of knowing" (429). The same argument extends to *Minaret*. The two novels span over periods of time which witnessed the rise of racial, ethnic and religious antagonism. *Brick Lane* focuses on the unfolding of events over two decades from 1985 to 2002. Similarly *Minaret*, despite its technique of shifting time and place, covers the periods from 1984 to 2004. They show that

misconceptions in systems of knowing are inherent in patriarchal discourse. Phallogocentrism in this sense is not the outcome only of Western civilization but is echoed in Islamic fundamentalism as well. What Nazneen and Najwa represent is a way out of these polar meanings that can embrace difference. Hence, it is one of the attempts to reach Bhabha's middle ground. A reading of how the two female characters expose the fixity of established discourse emphasizes the instability of knowing which enables agency.

The two novels underlie the instability of knowing. Both Nazneen and Najwa do not refer to a stable home land that has all the right answers whereas Chanu, Karim, Tamer and to an extent Anwar seek a 'truth' which privileges one side of the polarity whether it is a fixed concept of home, Islam, or activism. Najwa and Nazneen reflect the deconstructionist tendency of Spivak's concept and evade the binary opposition represented by some postcolonial studies which argue that the Occidental epistemological production of knowledge is set against an Oriental inability to produce Knowledge or the essentializing fundamentalist claim to truth. Spivak warns against forms of western knowledge that "[decouples] secularism with Judeo-Christian traditions" and "de-transcendentalize all other religions but the religion that governs ...[western] idiom" (*An Aesthetic Education in The Era of Globalization* 394). Spivak points out that secularism informed by Judeo-Christian concepts have been rendered as universal (396). That is why she urges the exposure of this alleged universality to allow race specific, class-specific and gender specific voices to hold up a just world (396). Asad highlights a similar point to Spivak when he discourages the "notion of Europe as the true locus of Christianity and the Middle East as the true locus of Islam"; he further objects to religion "being represented as the essence of a history and a civilization" (Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" 4). Hence, both Spivak and Asad argue against essentializing forms of knowledge and acknowledge the possibility of exposing errors in systems of knowledge.

Spivak's argument highlights two important points for this research. First, that Western discourse of democratic secularism is closely linked to religious and cultural discourses of power. Second, that a post-occidental discourse requires a realization that knowledge formation of western modernity occurred within a metropolitan-peripheral framework that affected how we as Muslims conceive European/Western origins and hegemonized western conceptual authority. Spivak understands that the subaltern cannot speak and that it is the role of the intellectual to try to voice a different set of social values to resist those of the dominant forces. Spivak's argument allows us to consider Ali and Aboulela's novels as an attempt to voice such an alternative set of social values. Giving voice to their 'different' Muslim women characters, Ali and Aboulela try to show how Muslim women can find their chosen place in the world despite attempts to hegemonize them whether within western or Islamic fundamentalists' frameworks. They show that both frameworks essentialize and categorize Muslim women.

What *Minaret* and *Brick Lane* attempt to show is that the subaltern Najwa and Nazneen have no “originary essence”, to use O’Hanlon term, to relate to. Instead their existence is that of fragments and their consciousness is constructed through their awareness that there is no “essential belonging” (O’Hanlon 81). In discussing the politics of knowledge production, Edward Said in *Orientalism* has argued that “because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (3). Zine contends that Said’s argument means that discussions of Muslims or Muslim women have already been discursively determined. As a result, there is no pure space from which to create counter-narratives that capture the complexity which recurrent archetypes obscure and deny (Zine). In the process of exposing errors in systems of knowing, both Nazneen and Najwa come to unlearn what they have known in their earlier days. Najwa’s consciousness is shaped by realizing the lies that she lived in Sudan. Her father is a corrupt official “Mr Ten Per Cent” (Aboulela 44) and her brother is a drug addict. Nazneen’s realization that her mother committed suicide and did not die in an accident like she was told makes her question the Bengali culture and her belief in fate. Nazneen’s whole life revolves around her firm belief that her life is in the hands of God and hence she has no choice. She is told that her own introduction to the world was a miracle ordained by God. During her son’s illness, she contemplates her options and resorts to the declaration pronounced years back by Banesa, the mid wife, “Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow” (Ali 16). Nazneen’s fatalism is a perpetuation of Orientalist discourse referred to by Said in his *Orientalism* as part of the colonizer’s power over the colonized. Nazneen is depicted as a woman who is convinced that “it [is] her place to sit and wait” (Ali 101). Such an essentialist concept of Islam is not only part of western discourse but of Islamic fundamentalists’ discourse as well. However, Nazneen’s journey of knowing allows a critique of both the fatalist cultural tradition of Bangladesh and western essentialist thought. Similarly, Najwa’s consciousness does not perpetuate traditional Muslim stereotyping despite critiquing western misconceptions of Islam. Adopting Islamic faith in Najwa’s case is an exercise of free will not the surrender to fate. This is especially evident in the times she reflected on how she believes that she must pray but she cannot. Choosing to become a devout Muslim is the decision she takes when she feels ready to adopt a new way of life. The two protagonist’s processes of knowing are shaped by two decisive factors: their bodies and clothes.

### **Muslim Women and The Body:**

Toril Moi shows that woman’s subjectivity is rooted in her body. Explaining De Beauvoir’s understanding of the concept, Moi writes

For Beauvoir, the body is our medium for having a world in the first place. We perceive the world through the body, and when the world reacts to our body in a more or less ideologically oppressive way, we react to the world. Our subjectivity is constituted



through such ongoing, open-ended interaction between ourselves and the world. We constantly make something of what the world makes of us. (391)

The body says Moi, "is perhaps the fundamental ingredient in the make-up of our subjectivity. Yet subjectivity can never be reduced to some bodily feature or other". Subjectivity is "open-ended interaction" with the otherness of the world (391). In "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman", Spivak points out that a woman's body is part of her displacement. It is the site of coercion and marginalization which reproduce her otherness. Spivak writes "within the historical understanding of women as incapable of orgasm, Nietzsche is arguing that impersonation is woman's only sexual pleasure" (170). Whereas Spivak links the coercion of women's body with the inability to speak, Moi associates exploring the body with the ability to interact. Regaining the body is an integral theme in both feminist and postcolonial feminist studies. Judith Butler draws attention to the fact that subordination is both "the condition for and instrument of agency"; therefore, the conditions and processes that secure the subject's subordination entail her becoming a self-conscious agent (10). Hence, the ideas of the female body as a trope, a site for subordination and agency, and a vehicle for a simultaneous interaction within the woman and with the outside others applies to Nazneen and Najwa's negotiations with their bodies despite the difference of the outcome of these negotiations. On the one hand, Najwa covers up her body by the veil while Nazneen revels in the experience of gaining control over her body embodied in her ice-skating at the end of the novel.

Nazneen's sexual relations involve masquerading, indicative of Spivak's argument. Her body is a sexed object manipulated by both Chanu and Karim who see her as a substitute for home. The narrator constitutes Nazneen's body in terms of patriarchal/colonial discourse as a symbol of the nation and a substitute for men's lack. "How did Karim see her? The real thing, he said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her" (Ali 354). Nazneen's problematic relation with her body is stressed during her nervous breakdowns: "beyond the body there was nothing: that was where she wanted to be" (Ali 324). During her nervous breakdowns, she constantly refers to herself as 'she' highlighting her displacement and mimicking her husband's habit of addressing her as "she" in order to "emphasize her fragility". Gradually, the third person reference is explained as a sign of defying him: "'Oh, she is [...] listening. But she is not obeying'" (Ali 341). The idea of empowerment through regaining control of one's body is further stressed by reference to aunt Mumtaz back home. Aunt Mumtaz's performance of allowing her body to be inhabited by a jinni and the claimed authority she exercises over the villagers is an example of masquerading which allows freedom and agency. The jinni as patriarchally-ordained "spirit" (Ali 397) allows the aunt freedom and agency.

Both Nazneen and Najwa gain insight into their displaced positions through their sexual affairs with Karim and Anwar respectively. The context of the sexual affair reflects

the sinful feelings each of them feels as a result of the heritage of Oriental/Islamic tradition. However, the affairs raise the question of freedom and free will while acknowledging the sinful aspect. Therefore, Nazneen's internal focalizer reflecting on her sexual affair with Karim says

They committed a crime. It was as crime and the sentence was death. In between the sheets, in between his arms, she took her pleasure desperately, as if the executioner waited behind the door. Beyond death was the eternal fire of hell and from every touch of flesh on flesh she wrought the strength to endure it. [...] she gave herself up to a power greater than these two, and she felt herself helpless before it. When the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could such a weak woman unleash a force so strong? She gave in to fate and not to herself. (Ali 299-300)

Nazneen's sexual affair allows her empowerment but problematizes the theme of fate and free will which is integral to the novel; this is further emphasized by reference to Hasina's story. Hasina, Nazneen's sister, has made her choices in defiance to traditions. She chooses her husband and she chooses to escape from him when he starts beating her. Because of poverty and social pressures, she becomes a prostitute. Hasina's free independent character is reflected in her letters written in broken English. When she is dismissed from the factory for having an affair with her landlord, she is forced to become a prostitute fulfilling the allegations against her. Her story reflects the ordeal of Bengali women's lives that are ruined by rumors of sexual affairs: "*I thinking this one thing all day. They put me out from factory for untrue reason and due to they put me out the reason have come now as actual truth*" (Ali 169). It also reflects the theme of fate versus free will. Hasina contends that she is responsible for her fate, "*Everything has happen is because of me. I take my own husband. I leave him. I go to the factory. I let Abdul walk with me. I the one living here without paying*" (Ali 166). Rather than a victim of Fate, Hasina holds herself accountable: "Fate, it seemed, had turned Hasina's life around and around, tossed and twisted it like a baby rat, naked and blind, in the jaws of a dog. And yet Hasina did not see it. She examined the bite marks on her body, and for each one she held herself accountable. This is where I savaged myself, here and here and here" (Ali 340-341). It is quite problematic to determine whether Hasina's story shows that women have no chance of freedom in an Asian Bengali context. However, this reading sounds viable when contrasting Hasina's story to Nazneen. Despite Razia's warning to Nazneen at the beginning to shop in Sainsbury's rather than in the Bengali shops: "if you go to our shops, the Bengali men will make things up about you. You know how they talk. Once you get talked about, then that's it. Nothing you can do" (Ali 59). This echoes the effect of rumors on Bengali women's lives in Hasina's story but Nazneen enjoys more freedom in the western city of London. Both Najwa and Nazneen experience freedom through anonymity. Since no one knows them, they can be free to do what they want and do get away with their sexual affairs. Nazneen enjoys roaming in London streets unnoticed "They could not see her any more than she could see

God” (Ali 56). Regardless of being the silent subaltern other, Nazneen is free and her newly acquired agency is definitely the result of her newly acquired knowledge. The narrator accentuates the agency entailed in freedom, “Anything is possible. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub...I walked mile upon mile, probably around the whole of London...I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do!” (Ali 59). Similarly, Najwa’s anonymity allows her freedom. Alone in a London restaurant, Najwa is self-conscious of her freedom “It wouldn’t be done in Khartoum for a woman to be alone in a restaurant. ‘I’m in London’, I told myself, ‘I can do what I like, no one can see me’”(Aboulela 128). Reflecting on sexual freedom, she remarks that years back “getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack, dealt a blow to my mother’s marriage, and mild modern Omar, instead of beating me, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was killed freedom” (Aboulela 175). It is quite ironic that Anwar tells Najwa that by losing her virginity, she has become part of the majority. Najwa echoes Anwar’s argument, “He was right. I was in the majority now, I was a true Londoner now.... ‘I know you’re Westernized, I know you’re modern,’ he said, ‘that’s what I like about you – your independence’” (Aboulela 176). Unlike Ali, Aboulela shows that sexual intercourse has further subordinated Najwa and that it is through faith that she gains her independence. In *Brick Lane*, the contrast between social values in the west versus those in the east extends to the other characters not simply the protagonists. Thus, the narrative commenting on Chanu who longs to go back home though he does not pray and he drinks says “back home if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London, if you don’t drink you risk the same thing” (Ali 90). Freedom is associated with doing things that would have been prohibited or at least unacceptable back home. The emphasis is on how this freedom allows Nazneen and Najwa better understanding of their positions unlike the male characters who remain imprisoned within the migrant dilemma.

Working out their relationship with their bodies is part of the process of Nazneen and Najwa’s agency but Najwa chooses to cover her body. The body as a site of domination and subversion is part of the system of meaning of both Western and Eastern discourses. Nazneen and Najwa’s experience with their bodies echoes Davies’ contention “the body emerges as a site of mundane acts of resistance and rebellion as well as compliance” (Davies 12). Domination in body politics happens when “the female body is symbolically deployed in discourses of power [...] which justify social inequality and power hierarchies based on gender and other forms of bodily difference” (Davies 10). Hence, the body becomes the site of domination and resistance. When Najwa decides to cover herself and wears the veil, she is subverting the Western system of meaning which associates the veil with subjugation and domination and at the same time exposing the Islamic/oriental patriarchal manipulation of covering women bodies since they are the site of sexuality, temptation and disgrace. By insisting that leaving Anwar and wearing the veil is her own free willed choice, Najwa is

offering an alternative way of 'knowing' Muslim women. This fulfils Aboulela's aim in writing which she repeatedly refers to in her interviews.

### **Muslim Women, Clothes and the Veil:**

The debate over Muslim women and their emancipation and empowerment is closely linked to the discussion of the issue of clothes especially the veil or hijab or head scarf. Western and Islamic feminists' debates over the issue of Muslim women covering their bodies show the issue of covering as either the emblem of Muslim women's oppression or a sign of piety and adherence to Islamic faith. Sayyid argues that western women have associated authenticity with unveiling and saw that veiling is a violation of feminine subject position (9). This has perpetuated a western gaze to Muslim women; this gaze continues to be upheld by western women who claim to be defending the liberation of all women. This assumption reproduces the orientalist discourse of othering. Besides, such a limited assumption about the veil perpetuates essentialism and reductionism. Mahmood's statement about "the profound inability within current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary" (155) echoes Sayyid and others. Similarly, Leila Ahmed draws attention to the increased attention to the veil as a sign of Muslim cultural authenticity as well as an epitome of Islamic inferior treatment of women (Ahmed 14).

Aboulela attempts to show veiled women, like herself and Najwa, enjoying a different kind of empowerment. This is part of her project to represent an alternative meaning to the western stereotyping of Muslim women. Al Karawi and Bahar sums up the issue of the veil in this novel:

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* provides the reader with an opportunity to explore how the veil is a metaphor or trope whose diversity can only be understood by unpacking the lived experiences of the Arab Muslim woman in the West.... The narrative also reinforces the argument that veiled women are not muted personas nor are their identities simple products of patriarchal norms ...[V]oluntary veiling is believed to be an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture .... Aboulela's work, in showing the rootedness of religion in the lives of many Muslim women, thus fills a gap in Western representations of Muslim women. (256, emphasis added)

Similarly, Hunter, despite her criticism of *Minaret*'s limitations, asserts that "Aboulela's fiction challenges what Poole notes as one of the "consistent" features of the British press, its "negative formulation of Muslims", particularly as violent" (qtd in Hunter 96). However, Hunter also echoes western secular feminists' assumption about Islam. She adds that one important aspect of Aboulela's fiction is "perhaps to forestall Islamophobic

responses from readers who perceive her religion as linked to violence, she advocates for her female characters of faith an Islamic form of quietism, their withdrawal dovetailing with patriarchal views of the virtuous conduct required of women” (97). Steiner further emphasizes that Aboulela shows Muslims who are trying to practice their faith in an unsympathetic environment. She exposes racism and anti-muslim sentiment which “inserts her female characters into Orientalist/Africanist discourses” (41). Aboulela’s comments in one of her interviews about her reluctance to wear the veil in Sudan because her friends there would have ridiculed her as back-warded reflects how Sudanese elite internalized the western gaze and hence dismissed the veil as sign of submissiveness and confinement. Aboulela admits, “In Sudan, writers and intellectuals are usually liberal and left-wing and so on, and ... they want me to be the liberated woman, so they are appalled by this halal writer thing”(Interview with Leila Aboulela, 91). Together with Ali, Aboulela show that Muslim women are complex subjectivities that the west has represented as either “absent” or “distorted” (Sayyid 3).

Clothes acquire more significance in *Brick Lane*. Nazneen and her sister Hasina work in the textile industry. Nazneen patches jeans at home while Hasina works in a factory. Besides, Nazneen’s empowerment process is enabled through her new fashion project. In addition, the sari is a cultural dress that reflects Asian identity and tradition. Therefore, the issue of clothes is integral to *Brick Lane*’s preoccupation with Nazneen’s empowering process. On the one hand, Nazneen associates her freedom with clothes and believes that if she changes her clothes, her whole life will change; the narrator reflects “It was clear, that clothes, not fate made her life” (Ali 298). The narrative points out “Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes, her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels, then what else would she do but walk around the glass places on Bishops gate and talk into a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the streets fearless and proud” (Ali 297). Clothes here are empowering. On the other hand, Razia and Mrs Isalm outfits epitomize the east/west encounter and accentuate their displacement. They wear western style shoes that do not match their saris. Nazneen notices that Razia and Mrs Islam look strange wearing strange shoes which underlines the encounter of East and West: “carpet slippers on over black socks” for Mrs Islam (26) and “black lace-up shoes, wide and thick-soled” for Razia (27). This distortion is emblematic of the clash of civilizations that migrants experience and it is part of the bigger need to be accepted in the host country. When Nazneen at the end goes skating wearing her sari, the scene has many intertwined meanings. On the one hand, ice skating symbolizes the challenges presented by western life and its value systems. Nazneen’s reluctance to try ice-skating before is part of her uncertainty. Coming to terms with her displacement allows her to accept the challenge symbolized by ice skating and the fact that she keeps her sari on is an indication that she does not need to be the “westernized girl” after

all (Ali 385). Her newly acquired sense of 'knowing' means that her place in the world could be a reconciliation of both her Muslim/Asian and migrant positions. Another reading would interpret not relinquishing her sari at the end as a writing back; a counter narrative. In all cases, when she starts ice skating with her sari on, Nazneen is appropriating western systems of meaning to show her own power as a Muslim third world migrant woman who has a place in the world. Her agency is gained through economic independence, and the power she feels from knowing.

Agency and newly acquired perceptions allow both characters to emerge as stronger, independent women who come to terms with their triple displaced experiences. This could be further understood in light of looking at Islam as a tradition rather than a religious faith.

### **Muslim Women and Islamic Tradition:**

Both Najwa and Nazneen's processes of self-realization follow a pattern of movement from a "coerced body" to a "docile body" or "a disciplined body" to use Asad's terms. Asad refers to the body that is teachable by tradition in his "Thinking about Tradition, Religion and Politics" arguing "to be teachable is not only to be able to listen to another person (one's teacher) but also and especially to be able to listen to oneself, that is a skill to be acquired and perfected through tradition". Both Nazneen and Najwa learn to listen to their selves and outgrow their teachers: Karim and Anwar. Their listening ability allows them to critique the essentialized identities that Chanu, Karim, Anwar and Tamer represent. They are also able to save their coerced bodies through reconciling traditional and western systems of knowing. The female protagonists reach a middle ground whereas the male characters refuse to accept hybridity. Karim exclaims indignantly "to be cool, you had to be something else – a bit white, a bit black, a bit something ... you couldn't just be yourself. Bangladeshi" (Ali 263). Tamer, in *Minaret*, expresses another aspect of Muslims' migrant's existential dilemma: for he views himself as both a western and a Muslim while the way he looks "Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" inspires unease in the people walking in St John's Wood (Aboulela 100). It is his Muslim identity which he decides to accentuate; he says "My mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity" (Aboulela 110). Unlike Karim and Tamer, the female protagonists because of their fluid identities can constantly negotiate their displacements and exercise their agency. They are able to find a place for themselves in the west through their own choices. These choices are far more complex than the simple privileging of western over Islamic values.

To examine Islam as a tradition in light of Talal Asad's views allows for avoiding sweeping generalizations and focusing on the complexities and particularities in which Islam

is lived. Asad sees that the problem of Muslims who are trying to find a place in the west is always seen as one of assimilation into European value systems. He warns that this assumes that Europe's structure and identity are fixed "as a secular egalitarian society". Asad adds that similarly Islam is assumed to be an "illiberal religion" with a "sacred and absolute character" (Asad, "Do Muslims belong in the west?"). Asad asserts that people have presupposed notions of "West" and "humanity" as universal concepts that will make us act responsibly towards others. However, "to behave 'humanely'" is perfectly possible without the notion of western humanity. He adds "It is not necessary to have this grand concept of humanity in order to behave decently". Asad points out that Islam is "a way of living that is already in place" and therefore requires no "intellectual [justification] in order for it to proceed" (Asad, "Do Muslims belong in the west?"). Asad argues in "The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam" which he republished in 2009, "Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition that connect variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it) and the production of appropriate knowledges" (10). Asad's argument is suspicious of the notion of reification of Islam as unchangeable fixity. In this sense, he is like Spivak who draws attention, building on the work of deconstructionists, to the essentializing notion of Enlightenment Humanism. Asad proposes a reconsideration of Islam and Christianity since "forms of interest in the production of knowledge are intrinsic to various structures of power, and they differ not according to the essential character of Islam or Christianity, but according to historically changing systems of discipline" (7). He points out, in accordance with Spivak's argument that "we need to find concepts that are more appropriate for describing differences" (8). Asad sums up his argument

the process of trying to win someone over for the willing performance of a traditional practice, as distinct from trying to demolish an opponent's intellectual position, is a necessary part of Islamic discursive traditions as of others...A theoretical consequence of this is that traditions should not be regarded as essentially homogenous, that heterogeneity in Muslim practices is not necessarily an indication of the absence of an Islamic tradition. The variety of traditional Muslim practices in different times, places, and populations indicate the different Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain. (23)

Applying this analytic structure to the migrant Muslim women could disentangle Islam from the fixed essentialized representations that dominate western studies. Asad's idea of tradition helps to understand and question arguments from within as well as formulate productive questions from outside. Rather than talking about Islam as a distinct intellectual object, Asad suggests that "Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition" (20). Asad points out that tradition is related to the past and the future through particular practice in the present (20). Asad emphasizes that practicing Islam is different and is part of the everyday lives of

practicing and non-practicing muslims because it is part of their past and will continue to shape their future.

In his article “Thinking about Tradition, Religion and Politics in Egypt today”, Asad distinguishes two uses of the term tradition in his writings:

the first as a theoretical location for raising questions about authority, time, language use and embodiment; and the second as an empirical arrangement in which discursivity and materiality are connected through the minutiae everyday living. This discursive aspect of tradition is a process one learns and relearns “how to do things with words”... Tradition stands opposed both to empiricist theories of knowledge and relativist theories of justice .... Tradition stresses *embodied critical learning rather than abstract theorization*.... Critique is central to a living tradition... This is not a challenge of abstract theories but of embodied (and yet criticizable) ways of life.(emphasis in the original)

Asad is against “the kind of anthropology of Islam ... which rests on false conceptual oppositions and equivalences, which often lead writers into making ill founded assertions about motives, meanings, and effects relating to "religion” (The Archeology of Islam 18).

In this sense, both Spivak’s and Asad’s arguments show that neither Enlightenment humanism nor Islam is fixed entities that migrant muslims who live in the west embody. Building on the fluidity of knowing and the constant living of tradition, human beings can act ethically regardless of their colour, race, class or gender. Islam as a tradition allow “winning over” the others. Many Muslims today argue that religion is the main instrument of female liberation and empowerment rather than an obstacle preventing emancipation. These women base themselves on the conviction that Islam does not justify patriarchy, and that the Quran re-read from a gender perspective can liberate women changing their current status. Several scholars of Islamic feminism like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir Hosseini work to reinterpret Islam from a gender perspective.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Mahmood draws attention to the practice of pious women as part of the mosque movements in Egypt and other Muslim countries who do not challenge Islamic orthodoxy and patriarchal readings of Qur’an but who call for extending daily acts of kindness to others showing the human aspect of Islam. These are attempts to present various possibilities to empower Muslim women. Hence, Ali’s and Aboulela’s narratives could be read as part of these ongoing attempts. The emphasis on the ‘humane’ ability inherent in Islamic tradition exemplified in the mosque movement though applicable on Najwa<sup>5</sup> extends to Nazneen. Both of them show kindness and tolerance to others even those who wronged them. Hence, the issue of tradition discussed goes beyond the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity which Nash concludes is evident in Aboulela’s work. Nash writes “Tradition and ethnicity are by no means excluded, but they are subsumed into a pietistic faith which is at once unapologetic and universal in its address, and radical and specific in its argument with Western modernity” (Nash 136). It is their ability to live



non-violently and free of antagonism which makes Nazneen and Najwa come to terms with their triple displacement and emerge as capable human beings.

In accordance with Asad's notion, both novels critique Tamer and Karim for seeing Islam as a totalizing religion that has not changed over the years. This is evident when Najwa draws Tamer's attention to the impracticality and impulsiveness of his dream that the two of them "would go back in time. A time of horses and tents; swords and raids" (Aboulela 255). Najwa is aware that the heroic actions of Prophet Muhammed's time are not suitable for the contemporary London setting of their story. She reflects "he takes money for granted. It is obvious in the way he touches the notes. He can get more from the till, from the bank account his parents fill for him. He thinks they will always be around, will always give to him unconditionally. I was like that at his age" (Aboulela, 255-256). Similarly, Nazneen outgrows Karim's impulsive heroic behavior which longs for jihad in imitation of the conquerors of the prophet.

Both narratives reflect the human potentials that Nazneen and Najwa have and acknowledge their right and their ability to actualize these potentials. The novels negotiate the Islamic patriarchal paradigm which assumes that women are weak and submissive. In fact, Spivak's concept suggests that women because of their original displacement can negotiate constructed phallogocentric values and Islamic patriarchal values better than their male counterparts. The two novels are an attempt to get out of the polarity and extremity of masculine discourse which both Karim and Tamer remains entrapped in. Nazneen and Najwa's displacement allows for a transcendence of this polarity; it is not impossible to be a Muslim emigrant woman and stand your ground. Najwa's subjectivity will always retain her Americanized way of life but her commitment to Islamic faith becomes her own free choice which would not have been possible if she has not acquired knowledge and agency. Similarly, Nazneen chooses to continue wearing her sari despite her newly acquired agency. It is quite revealing that both Nazneen and Najwa's free choices entail not having men in their lives any more. Besides, both of them enjoy the freedom to choose because of their economic independence. Hence, Najwa's pilgrimage -haj- at the end is possible only because she has money from Doctor Zeinab; she is getting back the same amount Anwar took from her years back; "Now, in a strange way, I am getting my money back" (Aboulela 268). In spite of the undertone of poetic justice and God's mercy, economic independence is an integral factor in women's empowerment whether in Asia, Africa or Europe which stresses the capitalist reality we all live in despite our race or gender.

### **Conclusion:**

*Minaret* and *Brick Lane* could be read within the broader context of the debate whether Muslim women's liberation lies in following Islamic faith or in more secular ways. This paper argues that though the means are different, the intended outcome is the same.

Tracing the empowerment of the two female protagonists shows that Muslim women despite their differences have affinities to an Islamic tradition which allows them to act humanely. In a sense, the characters contest Islamic and western essentialist ideas by constructing their bodies and their everyday lives through their own voluntary choices. Therefore, an awareness of the complexity of Muslim women different yet simultaneously similar positions allows for a “middle ground” between the seemingly assumed polarities of Islamic versus secular and east/islam versus west. Spivak focuses on displacements of women warning against the privileging of identity and the essentializing tendency entailed behind this privileging. However, in a transnational world, Nagwa and Nazneen embody the dichotomy of privilege and essentialism; one which entraps not only the novelists but the critical reception of the two novels as well. One thing is concluded that migrant Muslim women attempt to forge a unified identity through the convergence of Islamic tradition and secular humanitarianism. In all cases, they need to be recognized as capable of ethical behavior and human understanding that connects human beings despite their differences and their otherness. This is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt contention in *The Human Condition* that being human is about being with the likes of oneself while simultaneously knowing those who are different. Indeed, Najwa and Nazneen enact this human condition.

### End Notes:

1. For examples of reviews and critical articles that praise *Brick Lane* as representing Nazneen's triumph by adopting secular western feminists' ways, see Natasha Walter review in *The Guardian* "Citrus scent of inexorable desire"; Natasha Walter finds that Monica Ali's fêted first novel, *Brick Lane*, lives up to its hype (13 June 2003). See also Chris Leehman's "Book Review on *Brick Lane*" (13 September 2003) in *The Washington Post*. Geraldine Bedell draws attention to the oppression of Nazneen as a Bengali young girl who is forced to marry Chanu who is twice her age and shows how the novel traces her liberation in Geraldine Bedell's "Full of East End promise", *The Observer* (June 15, 2003). On the other hand, examples of reviews on *Minaret* are many including Aboulela herself who repeatedly refers to her writings as representing a "Muslim who has faith". (See Aboulela's "Interview by Students, University of Aberdeen, School of Language & Literature." [www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/complit/leila.shtml](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/complit/leila.shtml) [www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/complit/leila.shtml](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/complit/leila.shtml). n.p.) The emphasis on Islam as the source of solace and power in Aboulela's novels in general and *Minaret* in particular is echoed in many reviews and critical readings. For example, Susan Fischer's review of *Minaret* is exemplary of the reception of the novel which places it within the framework of Islamic feminism. Fischer explains "In Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), the prescribed norms of Islam ultimately help the protagonist locate a sense of self as a refugee in London". (Susan Alice Fischer, 'Review: Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*' in *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, Volume 5 Number 2 (September 2007). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2007/sfischer.html>) (online reviews accessed on 24/7/2015)
2. Feminists such as Mohanty (1991) in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", in C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo & L. Torres (Eds) *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press), 51–80. See also Amos and Parmar (1984) in "Challenging Imperial Feminism" in *Feminist Review*, No. 17, July, 3–19. See also Lazreg (1988) "'Feminism and Difference' the perils of writing as a Muslim woman on women in Algeria" in *Feminist Studies*, 14(1), 81–107. These writers among others have critiqued Western feminism for its representation of subaltern Muslim women through the binary relations of the West/East power relations. They have pointed out that the construction of Muslim and 'Third World' women as an essentialized category of 'other' enforces the religious divide underscoring the 'clash of civilizations' thesis and shows Muslim women's lives and experiences in an assumed irreconcilable tension with dominant Western values and sensibilities.

3. For more information on how Muslim women and Islam are misrepresented by African writers who despite attacking imperialist discourse and its marginalization of African women consider Islam the second enemy, see Chinweizu (1987) *Decolonising the African Mind* (Lagos: Pero Press); Ogundipe-Leslie, (1989) *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press); Soyinka (1988) *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press); Ama Atta Aidoo, (1998) "The African Woman Today" in O Nnaemeka (ed), *Feminisms, Sisterhood and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press).
4. For writers on alternative interpretations of Islam and gender: See Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2004). *The quest for gender justice: emerging feminist voices in Islam*. WLUML. See also Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1999). *Islam and Gender: the Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. See Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld press. and Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading of the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press. And finally Warnock Fernea, E. (1998), *In search of islamic feminism*. New York: Anchor Book.
5. Mahmood writes a detailed account on the movement of sisterhood in mosques which became very prominent in the Arab countries especially Egypt during the nineties. This movement is reflected in the sisters at Regent Park mosque who help Najwa in her process of becoming a devout practicing Muslim. For further reading see Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005.

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