

ENCOUNTERING WESTERN FEMINISM IN LEILA ABOULELA'S
FICTIONAL WORLD

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requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. This thesis is my original work, prepared under the guidance of my Supervisor.
2. This work has not been submitted or published elsewhere for any academic degree or qualification.
3. All the sources and information consulted in this study are properly cited and referenced.
4. I take full responsibility for the authenticity of the work presented in this thesis.

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Abstract

In contemporary times, Arab feminism has emerged as a critical discourse that demands equal rights for Arab women by challenging patriarchal authority and gendered power structures. The second-wave of Western feminism has generated significant global influence by universalizing women's issues and promoting a single feminist framework for women's liberation. Arab feminism has not remained outside of its influence. However, the realities and experiences of Arab women are shaped by distinct cultural, social, religious norms and expectations of Arab society, resulting in diverse issues and understandings of liberation that are not adequately addressed yet. The prominent Egyptian author, Leila Aboulela has introduced a new framework of Arab feminism that effectively considers the distinct social, cultural and religious realities of Arab women, while highlighting the limitations of Western feminist ideals in Arab contexts. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the way in which Aboulela's fictions challenge the dominant Western ideology and perspectives of women's liberation by delineating their authentic realities, their ambitions and understandings of liberation which are deeply intertwined with cultural and religious norms and values. This research emphasizes that a separate and unique feminist model, independent of Western influence, is required for Arab women that will adequately address their concerns and issues based on their geopolitical and social contexts. Also, this study claims that Leila Aboulela has set an example of a distinct model of Arab feminism where Islamic values and genuine feminine desires of family and community life co-exist with independence and empowerment.

Key words: Arab Feminism, Western feminism, Arab women, Islamic feminism, Islamic values, women's liberation, empowerment, cultural and religious norms.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Feminism is a global movement that seeks to ensure gender equality for all sexes by challenging gender discrimination and hierarchy, rooted in cultural, social, and political structures. From time immemorial, women have been marginalized and they are denied basic human rights and equality. In response to this long-term marginalization, the feminist movement emerged to overthrow patriarchal structures, encompassing a wide range of goals to achieve freedom and equality (Moon 1). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western feminism became highly influential throughout Europe and America. This movement focused on gender equality, individualism, secularism and reproductive rights that developed through multiple waves (Prakanshi 1-2). The history of Western feminism is divided into four waves. The first-wave is characterized by women's fight for legal and voting rights. Then, the second-wave of feminism started in the 1960s and is characterized by bringing a radical change in the social and political agendas, "including workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, sexuality, and gender roles" (Moon 1). The third-wave of feminism is marked by fighting for women's reproductive rights while the fourth and the fifth waves of feminism emphasize on intersectionality, digital activism and protest against sexual harassment. So, individualism, economic independence, secularism, sexual autonomy and reproductive rights became the core principles of Western feminist ideology.

Now, the earlier strands of feminism were heavily critiqued for their tendency to universalize Eurocentric feminist perspectives of women's liberation. However, through the emergence of the third-wave of feminism, it started to move beyond these Eurocentric frameworks. Then, particularly, the fourth-wave of feminism started to emphasize intersectionality and transnational

feminist perspectives, as well as de-colonial identities. In this context, Grewal and Kaplan argue that transnational feminist practices “acknowledge differences in women’s lives as well as links between transnational power structures” (26). However, despite some of these theoretical shifts, Western feminism still risks failing to acknowledge the diversified perspectives of women worldwide. Therefore, we need to understand the significance of scattered hegemonies such as geopolitical, cultural and economic power structures around the globe. Thus, the employment of transnational feminist practices is indispensable for addressing different regional feminisms.

Arab feminism is a contemporary movement that advocates for equal rights and opportunities for Arab women, addressing the major issues they face, like gender discrimination, sexual abuse, domestic violence, right to education etc. Arab women have long been misrepresented in the literary works as the Oriental women are mythicized and objectified as mysterious, exotic, submissive and sensual figures who exist merely for male’s satisfaction and desire. That is why Western society still perceives Arab women as inferior and submissive. Furthermore, Arab society differs from Western society in several aspects. For example, Arab society conforms to a set of cultural, social, moral and religious codes, norms and values that are totally different from Western society. For instance, Arab society strictly adheres to religious codes and laws and maintains them. On the other hand, Western society is secular and prioritizes individual freedom. That is why, following the Western model for women’s liberation may appear contradictory for Arab women.

In this context, Leila Aboulela presents her powerful voice challenging the Western feminist ideology by demonstrating the true realities, experiences and aspirations of Arab women while framing an alternative framework for their liberation rooted in their religious and cultural

beliefs and norms. For example, veiling is a contemptuous practice for many Western feminists since they perceive it as an oppressive religious obligation that conceals women's identity and curtails women's autonomy over their bodies. However, through the female protagonists of *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Aboulela proves that veiling is not a form of coercion for Arab women but it is a source of comfort, empowerment and religious self-determination for them. Furthermore, Aboulela also countered Western feminism's perception of family, marriage and motherhood as obstacles to women's freedom and autonomy and their radical call for rejection of these institutions. Her protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, find their fulfillment, empowerment and purpose through the traditional gender roles of a female. She proves that feminism should not deny genuine feminist consciousness of women by universalizing their model for liberation. By representing an alternative feminist model for Arab women, Aboulela challenges Western feminism and calls for an inclusive, context-specific or transnational feminist approach for the liberation of Arab women.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Feminist discourses are largely influenced by Western feminist ideas and values across different historical eras and waves of feminism. Western feminism is predominantly characterized by secularism, individualism, economic independence and sexual autonomy. Feminist movements across the world such as South Asian, East Asian, American and Latin American feminism are highly shaped by the dominant ideologies of Western feminism.

Basically, the Arab feminist movement is a relatively recent phenomenon that has remained unexplored in academic research. The prominent Arab feminist thinkers have long struggled to establish equal rights and opportunities for Arab women following the Western feminist models.

At a superficial level, they have challenged the androcentric social structures of Arab society. Additionally, some of them highlighted the neo-colonial imposition and perceptions of Western feminist ideals that often illustrate Arab society and its cultural, ethical and religious values as being inferior, backward and oppressive to women, implying that Arab women need to be rescued by following the Western culture and their feminist ideals. Though they attempted to encounter Western feminist influence on Arab women, they are still entangled with it. It is because they remain focus on challenging the Arab traditions, religious or cultural restrictions on women. Therefore, the problem is that when feminism becomes transnational, it must take into account its specific geopolitical, cultural and religious contexts to remain meaningful as well as relevant. Since the Arab world has its distinct cultural, religious and social contexts, it requires a new feminist framework that incorporates its traditions, respects its cultural, religious, ethical values and seeks to emancipate women from patriarchal oppression within the context. Recent Arab feminist studies have less research works on how Egyptian feminist writers like Leila Aboulela have redefined Arab feminism by integrating religious faith, cultural values, familial and communal life into the framework of women's liberation.

1.2 Rationale

The Western Feminist discourses have not liberated themselves from the misconceptions regarding Arab women as they still remain influenced by an Orientalist framework that denigrates Arab women and perpetuates myths about them. Moreover, their tendency to universalize a single model for women's liberation is inadequate for Arab women. Since women around the world define independence in diverse ways, Western feminism's core concepts of liberation such as secularism, individualism, economic independence, sexual autonomy etc. may fail in certain

cultural and geo-political contexts. Moreover, as Arab women have historically been misrepresented in both the Western literary and theoretical arenas, this research is necessary to unveil the realities of Arab women. By recognizing and comprehending the realities of Arab society as shaped by different cultural, social and religious contexts, we can get more nuanced insights about how Arab women perceive true liberation. This study seeks to explore the extent to which existing Arab Feminist frameworks may inadequately address the feminist concerns of Arab women. Therefore, it provides the rationale to construct a context specific approach that acknowledges their societal, cultural and religious identities and values while addressing their true experiences and aspirations of empowerment. In this context, Leila Aboulela has vividly portrayed the realities of Arab women, highlighting how faith in religion and distinct social and cultural values shape their lives. Their values include deep faith in religion, dedication to communal and family life, their adherence to norms of avoiding pre-marital sexual relationships etc. These norms, values and beliefs are integral part of their lives and they cannot liberate themselves by simply abandoning them. At the same time, Aboulela's fictions counter Western feminism by showing how Arab women seek freedom and autonomy within their own cultural and religious grounds. Therefore, this study provides rationale for analyzing Leila Aboulela's fictions to examine the way she portrayed the experiences, realities and aspirations of Arab women while acknowledging the limitations of Western feminism and contributing to the development of a distinct Arab feminist model.

1.3 Background

Basically, Arab women's struggle for freedom, empowerment and autonomy has long been rooted in historical, political and literary discourses. In the literary arena, Arab women had a rich

past. During the pre-Islamic period, many female poets and singers were famous for their artistic and creative intelligence. For example, Al-Khansa was a renowned poet and singer in the pre-Islamic period. Aisha, wife of Prophet Muhammad (S.M.), published her religious interpretations. Ubaida Al-Tamburiya, Sakina and Queen Zubaida were also famous poets in the Abbasid era.

However, in the social and political contexts, the condition of Arab women was highly unfavorable and restrictive. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed described historical female subordination in Arab society. The Mesopotamian society was highly patriarchal with the legal system, such as 'The Code of Hammurabi' and Assyrian laws promoted absolute male authority in their society. Patriarchal double standards were institutionalized in the society which reinforced gender hierarchies. Males in the family exercised power over women and children. The males arranged marriages, sold women for debt and even punished them violently. Besides, divorce was granted to men while women faced significant barriers to getting a divorce. Moreover, if women committed adultery, they were given death sentences, whereas men could have multiple partners, concubines, and slaves. The laws regarding veiling distinguished respectable women from slaves and prostitutes. However, some upper-class women could own and manage property, sign contracts, do business (Ahmed 12-20). By the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., the societies of the eastern Mediterranean were mostly Christian, with some Jewish communities. They were highly influenced by the Byzantines. Though Christian values opened women to some limited opportunities for independence, the Byzantine and Greek societies maintained patriarchal authority (Ahmed 25-26). Then, in the pre-Islamic age, women were allowed to have more independence and autonomy over their sexuality and marriage. They also followed a matrilineal system of marriage. Nonetheless, with the rise of Islam, polyandry got banned while males were allowed to practice polygamy (Ahmed 42-43). However, Islam recognized women as equals to men before

God. They used to take part in public life. For example, women actively participated in wars in the Islamic period. However, after the death of Muhammad, the women were secluded and their activities were restricted.

Next, in the post-Islamic period, particularly in the nineteenth century the spread of education increased among Arab women. So they took part in the Nahda or cultural renaissance. After that, Arab women started contributing in the literary arena though they highly faced gender bias for publication (Mocbil 86). In 1867, Warda Al-Yaziji published *The Rose Garden*, which is considered the first printed poetry book by an Arab woman. In this century, new genres of fiction like short stories and novels were introduced by the Arab female writers and they were published from the West which covered the personal and social issues of women. Then in the twentieth century, Arab women finally began to form a sense of sisterhood. The feminist writers openly supported each other for which the tradition of Arab feminist literary criticism was established (Mocbil 90).

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Western feminist theory, post-colonial feminist theory, Islamic feminism, contemporary Arab feminist thoughts and the alternative feminist model presented by Laila Aboulela in her fictions. Western feminism is largely shaped by the works of prominent feminists of the twentieth century such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous and Betty Friedan, who endorsed a secular individualist feminist model that emphasized women's autonomy in gender roles and advocated for their independence from domestic, social, cultural and economic structures defined by patriarchy. For instance, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf has advocated for both intellectual and financial freedom for women in order to ensure their true

liberation which can be gained through writing and pursuit of knowledge. She is one of the earliest Western feminists of the twentieth century who conceptualized a woman's role beyond serving the family and extended it to serving the broader society or world through her intellect. Then, some feminists of the mid- twentieth century proposed more radical ideas that viewed the roles of wife and mother as obstacles to the path of women's liberation and autonomy. For example, Simone de Beauvoir considered motherhood and domesticity to be the impediments to women's independence and personal growth. In her book, *The Second Sex*, she explained that motherhood and domesticity often curtail women's social and economic independence. According to her, when a woman becomes a wife and a mother, she has to meet the expectations of a mother and wife which limit her potential to contribute to the public sphere. Moreover, the independent woman suffers from an internal conflict as she tries to equally fulfill the expectations of her family along with professional goals (Beauvoir 654). So Simone de Beauvoir called upon women to reject marriage and motherhood in order to assert their agency and autonomy.

The American feminist, Betty Friedan, also expressed her concern about the way conventional family roles curtail women's personal growth. In *Feminine Mystique*, she argues that housekeeping has become the most ideal job for American middle class or suburban women, who give little priority to their personal or intellectual growth. Therefore, she too, like Virginia Woolf called upon women to pursue education, individuality and agency beyond domesticity, in order to find a purpose in their lives and achieve their personal fulfillment. However, unlike Simone de Beauvoir, she did not oppose marriage, motherhood or family life for women. She highlighted that abandoning family life in favor of full engagement in work is another entrapment of women's true liberty. There are many working women who do not feel satisfaction in dedicating themselves fully to their profession. Nevertheless, Betty Friedan particularly focused on the white middle class of

the United States, who felt unfulfilled despite having enough material comfort. Her work failed to address the broader global feminist issues, especially the struggles of third world women.

Consequently, non-Western feminists around the world started to criticize Western feminism for its tendency to universalize women's experiences. They claim that Western feminism has overlooked the diverse and different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of women around the world, especially in non-Western contexts. That is why, post-colonial feminism emerged in response to the imperialist framework of Western feminism. For instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argued that Western feminism mimics the colonial pattern of conceptualizing the non-Western women. They assume that third-world women are sexually constrained, uncivilized, poor, illiterate, and traditional and family oriented. So they reinforce colonial power dynamics within the context of feminism by positioning themselves as modern, civilized and self-conscious women who can also control their sexuality (337). She refers to Beverly Lindsay who urged people to see women as an apolitical group and asked us to consider the different cultural and historical contexts of third world women (339). Moreover, Manha Waheed and César Cabezas pointed out that the superiority complex of Western feminists and their belief that any foreign culture or tradition is harmful to women, often lead them to assume they are saviors, while in reality they reinforce the dynamics of oppression against non-Western women. According to these critics, white ignorance of non-Western cultures and the structuralist dominance of Western feminism are contributing to generating misconceptions about women from non-Western cultures (15-16).

Similarly, in the Arab context, the prominent Arab feminist, Leila Ahmed strongly criticizes Western feminism for incorporating colonial discourses as well as ethnocentrism which

framed Arab societies as backward and oppressive to females. They urge Muslim women to embrace Western ways by abandoning their own culture in order to achieve freedom. She believes Arab women can challenge androcentrism within their own culture (244-245).

Another prominent Arab feminist, Nawal El Saadawi, argues that Western framing of “the situation for women in Islam seems to be objectionable, because it is oppressive, sexist, and patriarchal” (135). It provides a misleading information that “the Christian West is living under a nonpatriarchal, nonsexist, nonracist system” (Saadawi 135). She maintains that Western women are also struggling with patriarchy which is concealed. Also, she has argued that fundamentalism is a universal problem which does not lie with Islam or Arab society (137).

Furthermore, Saadawi explained that women in the ancient Arab civilization held an honorable place. However, with the establishment of patriarchal class systems women lose their position. However, in the nineteenth century, Arab women fought with their pens against all types of oppression including the oppression of women by their men inside the family (Saadawi 255-256). Then, Saadawi also talked about the issue of inequality in the employment sectors for Arab women. She claimed that the patriarchal and capitalist society is exploiting the poor and Arab women are the worst victim as they are the lowest paid and they work hard both inside and outside the home (Saadawi 257).

In the Middle-Eastern context, a distinct form of feminism emerged which is known as Islamic Feminism. The Islamic feminists seek to establish gender equality by representing the authentic values and ethical doctrines of Islam which affirm that all men and women are equal before God. Like Nawal El Saadawi, Fatema Mernissi, a prominent Islamic feminist, has criticized Western society for holding cultural supremacy and their attempts to impose Western culture and

life-style on other societies (17). She glorifies Islamic values by highlighting the oppressions faced by women in the pre-Islamic era. At that time, women did not have any right to inheritance. They were treated like objects or property as their owners were the male heirs. During wars, the women of the defeated clans became slaves of the males from the conquering clans (Mernissi 121). However, Mernissi argued that Islam has given women the right to inheritance. Islam also acknowledged women as free and autonomous individuals just like men. They are also given the right to declare and participate in wars. For example, the Prophet's wife, Aisha used to take part in battles. She also led the camel war against Ali (Mernissi 41). Nevertheless, according to Mernissi, it is the males who could not accept the relinquishment of their domination over females (194). That is why they manipulated the sacred texts in such a way so that patriarchal authority could perpetuate oppression and suppression of women under the pretext of religious legitimacy.

Then, in *Quran and Women*, Amina Wadud, exposed how traditional Quranic interpretations justify male domination over females. For example, she has discussed that the *Quran* neither differentiates between males and females on the basis of human worth nor does it claim that women are inferior to men. Wadud argued that the holy *Quran* recognizes women as equal individuals since the relationship of Allah and humans is not based on gender terms and both sexes are treated in the same manner (34). Besides, the *Quran* never professed that reproduction is the primary role of females nor did it restrict women from participating in the social, political or intellectual spheres (64). For instance, the *Quran* has references to honorable women like Bilqis, Queen of Sheba. There is no indication in the *Quran* that critiques her capability as a female to govern a nation (40). Rather, she was depicted as a powerful and honorable Queen. In addition, Wadud also revealed the way Quranic misinterpretation perpetuates patriarchal domination. For example, the sacred texts were revealed by the prophets who were males. No woman was called a

prophet. That is why, it is assumed that males are superior to females which is why Allah only chose males as prophets. However, females held a lesser position in those societies; therefore, if females were made prophets, people would easily disregard them. That is why, males were chosen as prophets by Allah (65). Furthermore, people misinterpreted some Quranic verses for justifying male domination over females. For example, one Quranic verse (4:34) is misunderstood by the interpreters who said that males can beat their wives if they are not obedient to them. Nevertheless, Wadud claimed that the verse is about resolving marital issues between married couples. The *Quran* asked to resolve issues by talking and then to separate. The Arabic word ‘daraba’ is translated to ‘beat’ which also means to ‘separate’ or ‘move away’. Therefore, according to Wadud, the *Quran* never dictated women should obey their husband and it is not part of any core principles of Islam (74-77).

Another notable Islamic feminist, Riffat Hassan, also claimed that the study of feminism in the Islamic context is necessary not only to liberate Muslim women but also the Muslim men who blindly followed the traditional patriarchal interpretations of the holy *Quran* and *Hadiths*. Islam promotes justice and equality for all regardless of sex and she urges Muslim women to reclaim the authentic doctrines of Islam in order to overcome the obstacles that impede their freedom (89).

Now, Leila Aboulela’s fictions deeply resonate with the propositions of Islamic feminism and also reflect the call for social and cultural awareness of Arab feminism, urging Arab women not to blindly emulate the Western feminist models. These theoretical models provide the foundation for Leila Aboulela’s new definition of Arab feminism that encapsulates the essence of women’s liberation within moral, spiritual and communal empowerment.

1.5 Objectives

This section defines the research aims of this study. The research objectives are divided into general objectives and specific objectives that outline common goals of this research.

1.5.1 General Objectives

The general objective of this study is to critically analyze how Leila Aboulela has challenged Western feminist perspectives and ideals in her selected literary texts. This study also seeks to examine how Arab feminist ideas differ from those of Western feminism by analyzing the fictional writings of Leila Aboulela.

1.5.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To analyze how the Orientalist representation of Arab women perpetuates misconceptions regarding their identities
2. To analyze how Aboulela challenged the dominant concepts of Western feminism, particularly their perceptions of freedom, agency and empowerment, through her literary depiction of Arab women
3. To investigate the realities and aspirations of Arab women that are largely shaped by their social, cultural and religious values, as represented in Aboulela's selected literary texts

1.6 Research Question

The single research question in this study is:

How does Leila Aboulela construct an alternative framework of Arab feminism in her fictional writings?

1.7 Research Methodology

This research follows Qualitative research method, using textual analysis as a primary tool to examine ‘Arab feminism’ through the fictions of Leila Aboulela. This study will focus on how Aboulela challenges Western feminist ideals of women’s liberation in Arab contexts. In general, the study will deploy close reading of the primary texts written by Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* and *Minaret*. To do so, this research will go for a qualitative textual analysis of Arab women’s condition, experiences and how their desire for independence is rooted in religious and cultural feminist consciousness through close reading and thematic analysis of selected literary works by Leila Aboulela. The research will also investigate the way the Orientalist framework continues to perpetuate the stereotypes of Arab women. To do so, this study will draw on selected examples of Western literary fiction across different time frames to illustrate how Western literature contributed to reinforce myths and stereotypes that illustrate Arab women as inferior to Western women. This research will focus on the literary works that explicitly represent Arab women and the analysis will employ close-reading and textual analysis. Also, this analysis does not aim to provide a comprehensive survey of the literary depiction of Arab women in Western literature. Afterward, this analysis will thoroughly examine the characterization of the protagonists of the primary texts and will analyze how they navigate issues like veiling, familial responsibilities, religious practices etc. which are often critiqued by Western feminist perspectives. These critiques

will be critically reinterpreted through Arab and Islamic feminist frameworks to illustrate how Aboulela's female characters claim agency and empowerment through these contested issues.

Moreover, the research will also follow a comparative study by examining Western feminist discourses and their representation in the literary works alongside Aboulela's representation of women's liberation within Arab contexts. In this case, the study will incorporate secondary materials like journal articles, critical essays, books etc. from both Western and Arab feminist discourses to strengthen the analysis. Overall, I will follow a contextual interpretive approach to assess the extent to which Aboulela's representation of 'Arab Feminism' in her fictions challenges the dominant feminist ideologies and contributes to the establishment of an alternative framework that effectively addresses Arab feminist issues.

1.8 Scope and Limitations

This study aims to provide critical insights into Arab feminism and Leila Aboulela's efforts to construct a separate feminist framework for Arab women by encountering Western feminist ideologies. Arab feminist thought is diverse, pluralistic and multi-faceted, encompassing Islamic, secular, radical and liberal feminist perspectives. For instance, the Islamic feminists like Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud advocated for a reinterpretation of the *Quran* and other sacred texts to establish gender equality by rejecting patriarchal interpretations. On the other hand, Nawal El Saadawi, Huda Sha'arawi, Mona Eltahawy have drawn heavily on Western feminist approaches, particularly on liberal or radical feminist frameworks that emphasize unveiling, sexual autonomy and rejection of gender roles for Arab women's liberation. Due to the plurality of theoretical perspectives of Arab feminism, this study does not aim to evaluate all strands of Arab

feminist perspectives. Rather, it selectively engages with Arab and Islamic feminist perspectives that are most relevant to the analysis of Aboulela's fictions.

Furthermore, the Middle East is a vast region, encompassing a number of countries. Therefore, Arab culture is highly diversified, with regions having distinct histories, cultures, practices, norms and values. As Arab feminism has originated in Egypt, existing literary works solely focused on Egyptian, Saudi Arabian or Islamic history of women's struggle. There is comparatively less research on women's conditions in other Arab countries like Morocco, Sudan, UAE, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine etc. Women in these regions do not share the same histories, cultures, beliefs or values unlike those in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Consequently, it is difficult to outline a singular Arab feminist framework that captures the true realities of women across different Arab regions.

Nevertheless, despite limitations, this study opens scope for future researchers and theorists in the field of Arab feminism and Arab feminist literary studies. The theorists may explore regional feminist frameworks within Arab feminism such as Egyptian feminism, Moroccan feminism etc. for addressing diverse issues of Arab women living in different regions. Alternatively, the theorists may look for potential shared goals for women's liberation across different Arab nations while remaining attentive to the regional or local particularities. The future researchers may also undertake comparative studies regarding women's issues, experiences and struggles in different Arab regions which would address these concerns more effectively by offering a nuanced understanding of Arab women's freedom, agency and empowerment. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches like sociology, development studies, and religious studies can be integrated with literary discourses to provide deeper critical insights in this field. Future

researchers may conduct more extensive research on Leila Aboulela's fictions to further explore how she has contributed to developing a convenient feminist structure for Arab women. The researchers can also figure out whether Arab feminists should align closely with Islamic feminism or adopt a hybrid approach combining the notions of both secular Western feminism and Islamic feminism.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Leila Aboulela's fictions have drawn considerable critical attention because of her unique portrayal of Muslim women who integrate religious faith, cultivate moral or ethical values and attain freedom and empowerment within their own social and cultural contexts. Scholars like El-Zorkany in her study, "Muslim Women Empowerment in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*", discuss that Aboulela has represented Islam in her fictions as a source of strength, peace and spiritual guidance for Muslim women. The author addresses the oppression and marginalization of Arab women through incorporating the themes of diaspora and assimilation in her fictions (118). El-Zorkany also maintains that Aboulela's protagonists are empowered through religious faith. They have not only resisted patriarchy but also the cultural supremacy of the West by countering their Islamophobia and stereotypical representation of the Oriental women (130). El-Zorkany's study largely equates women's empowerment in Aboulela's fictions with religious and spiritual transformation, while giving limited attention to the broader theoretical framework of Arab feminism and its geopolitical, social and cultural dimensions.

In line with this, most of the scholars have examined Leila Aboulela's fictions from Islamic feminist perspectives. They argue that the protagonists of Aboulela embody resistance by remaining faithful to Islamic principles while simultaneously opposing patriarchy and Western cultural dominance. For example, in "The Study of Islamic Feminism; Mapping in Laila Aboulela's *The Translator*," Mufti and Khan have analyzed *The Translator*, through the lenses of Islamic feminism. They claim that through the character, Sammar, Aboulela has shown how Muslim women have been devoid of their Shariah rights. Like El-Zorkany, they too opine that

Aboulela challenges the Western Islamophobia by revealing that Islam grants equal rights and opportunities for women. However, the blending of Islam with different cultures has distorted the true essence of Islam. This distortion results in deprivation of Muslim women's rights and freedom across the Arab world (100).

In addition, faith, identity and rights of Arab women as well as issues of Western misconceptions about their cultural and religious beliefs became points of contention, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attack. In this regard, Nawel Meriem Ouhiba opines that after 9/11, Muslims around the world, especially the Muslim women faced stereotypes and prejudices from the West. Across literature, digital media as well as in social media platforms, women are portrayed as either victims of the religion or lucky survivors (26). She further discusses how identity becomes a complex issue for diasporic Muslim women in the Western world. In this context, Aboulela's representation of her protagonist, Sammar in *The Translator*, serves to reverse Western stereotypes as she depicts her as a devout Muslim woman who practices the veil in a society that opposes it (36). Therefore, it can be noted that Muslim women in Aboulela's works challenge dominant Western perceptions that equate women's empowerment with secularism and unveiling. Her narratives represent nuanced portrayals of Muslim Arab women who can assert their freedom to uphold their faith, identity and agency in adverse situations.

Some scholars have examined Islamic feminism through applying prominent Post-modernist theories and ideologies to understand how power dynamics and cultural dominance of the West have influenced the development of Islamic feminism in the Arab world. For instance, in "Revisiting Labeling Theory: An Islamic Feminist Approach to Aboulela's *The Translator*," Al-Abed and Hamendi explained Islamic feminism by applying Michel Foucault's theory of power

dynamics, Derrida's theory of binary opposition and Edward Said's Orientalism or the existence of 'others'. Foucault claimed that power controls how people think about themselves and their own bodies. Based on this idea, the Islamic feminists seek to reveal how the power of Western feminism is manipulating as well as imposing its own concept of freedom and identity on the Arab women. Then, according to Al-Abed and Hamendi, Derrida's binary opposition theory claims that in binary terms, always one side is better than the other one. The Islamic feminists use this theory to show how Western feminism believes that their ideas and views are the best for women's emancipation, while ignoring diverse views and practices of women from different countries of the world. Moreover, Edward Said also criticized how modern movements like feminism tend to dominate the Oriental culture and socio-politics, implying them as 'others' (30). Then, based on these theoretical frameworks, Al-Abed and Hamendi further explain how Aboulela has criticized the propensity of the Westerners to label and stereotype the Arabs. They say that such labelling affects everyone including the people who think about Islam and the Orientals in a positive light. For instance, in *The Translator*, Rae was a Scottish History Professor who has a keen interest in Islam and Arab culture. However, he is ironically labelled as the 'Oriental' despite his Western identity. In the case of Sammar, she is labelled as an Arab, Muslim and Widow (31-32). However, according to Al-Abed and Hamendi, Aboulela has successfully portrayed how an Arab woman can overcome these labels by embracing her faith and cultural identity (33). So, it is quite discernible that Aboulela has established a link between cultural labels and neo-colonial power structures by revealing that while the first world countries claim that they promote freedom and justice, ironically, they are also involved in fostering alienation and racism against the Orientals. She not only upholds the empowerment of Muslim women in resisting Western impositions but also exposes the underlying power structures that impede their agency.

While Aboulela's works have been praised for her portrayal of Muslim women's empowerment, some scholars also criticized her female characters. For example, Ashraf Ibrahim Zidan, in his conference paper presented at the International Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities, agrees that Leila Aboulela's fictions align with Islamic feminism, where she successfully depicted the true spirit of Islam by countering the misconceptions of the West, especially regarding the practice of veiling among Muslim women. However, he also criticized Aboulela's female protagonists for being weak and self-involved as they focus more on providing details rather than taking any actions (31). Nonetheless, many critics also criticized Leila Aboulela for promoting Islamic fundamentalism and female subordination. For instance, Sadia Abbas comments that Aboulela's novels glorified those Muslim women who choose their own subordination (150). While her criticism is significant in underscoring ideological tensions between religion and the concept of women's liberation, it may also risk overlooking forms of feminine desires shaped by socio-cultural and religious contexts. Then, in "Leila Aboulela and the ideology of Muslim immigrant fiction," Hassan remarks that since feminism is a secular and Godless ideology, it cannot be reconciled into a religious framework. Feminism is about liberty and individual agency which cannot be determined by divine will (313). Hassan's argument represents that feminism is inherently a secular ideology, ignoring the possibility that religion can co-exist with feminist discourses. For instance, the Islamic feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud have shown that reinterpretations of the sacred texts in a nuanced and non-patriarchal way can advance and uphold women's liberty.

Nonetheless, as a Third World Country, Sudan experiences extreme gender inequality where females are subjugated by patriarchal dominance and deprived of their basic rights and freedom. Alkhatib points out that Sudanese women have long been deprived of their rights,

including their freedom of speech or the freedom of living their own lives as they wish to live. They silently follow the orders of the patriarchal authority. It can be their fathers, husbands or sons, who take every decision of their life and choose their fate. Alkhatib argues that Leila Aboulela has drawn attention to this silenced and passive marginalization of Sudanese women in her fictions (1282). Moreover, extending this discussion, some scholars also analyzed Leila Aboulela's novels through the perspectives of 'gendered otherness' of the Arab women. In this regard, Hasiba Maouzuzi explained that Leila Aboulela is one of the pioneers of the genre 'Arab Anglophone women literature' and she has deeply illustrated 'gendered otherness' for Arab women (293). According to him, Aboulela has represented 'gendered otherness' through the protagonist of the novel, *The Translator*. First of all, Sammer's otherness is enforced both in Sudan and Scotland by patriarchy. Then, it is reinforced by her culture and religion as well as by Western stereotypes (294). According to Maozuzi, this othernesses shaped Sammer's gender identity as a female to be emotionally weak, irresponsible and dependent (302). Her cultural and religious beliefs made her dependent on marriage and male company. In Sudan, her identity is shaped by how society treats a widow. Her every decision is taken by her mother-in-law, Mahasen. Also, she is either too modern or too Western for them. Then, in Scotland, she is treated as a mysterious, exotic and submissive other from the Orient (296-297). Therefore, Maouzuzi suggests that Sammar's experiences of otherness reveal how Arab women are facing 'gendered othernesses' within their own societies as well as from foreign lands. According to him, 'gendered othernesses' must be resisted by the Arab women to assert their own identity and liberation (302).

Next, some studies have also explored how Aboulela's fictions are influenced by some Western feminist fictions. Al-Sakkaf has compared Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. He argued that Aboulela's *The Translator* is inspired from *Jane*

Eyre as Aboulela herself said in an interview that *The Translator* is a Muslim *Jane Eyre*. Like Jane Eyre, Sammar shows strong faith and self-determination in the novel (125). By depicting this character, Aboulela reveals that female strength comes from balancing one's faith and culture with self-determination. Womanhood is a source of strength and they even have the power to influence men with their strong personality (129).

In summary, the contemporary research and analysis of Laila Aboulela's fictions have been centered on Islamic feminism. Some scholars have emphasized how Aboulela used Islamic feminist ideals to counter Western stereotypes for Muslim women as well as Arab culture and society. Furthermore, few researchers have examined Aboulela's fictions from post-colonial or post-modernist perspectives to highlight why the emergence of Islamic feminism was necessary in giving voice to Arab women. Some scholars also demand that Aboulela's female characters are passive, weak and promote female subordination in the pretext of the divine's will. However, there has been little discussion so far on how Aboulela has pioneered a distinct feminist movement for Arab women in her literary works by blending the perspectives of Islamic feminism, which emphasizes women's empowerment within an Islamic framework, with Arab feminism, which celebrates Arab women's socio-cultural identity. It has been less explored that many women around the world do not want to conform to Western models of feminism which promote secularism, individualism and sexual autonomy as means of women's emancipation. That is why, Aboulela represents an alternative model of feminism that calls for women's liberation, while also remaining rooted in their own culture, community, religion and moral values. Aboulela's female characters are neither just strong and bold nor weak, passive and self-serving but they are revolutionary figures who seek their freedom within the boundaries of their beliefs, ethics, morality and comfort. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the ways Aboulela has countered the dominant

ideologies of Western feminism by introducing an alternative framework of Arab feminism in her fictions.

Chapter 3

Discussion and Analysis

The representation of Arab women in the literary arena has been a complicated as well as a controversial issue. From time to time, Western literary writers are highly influenced by Orientalist discourses that exhibit colonial attitudes. Said claims that the Westerners perceive “the Orientals as irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40). In the case of women, the Western authors often depict them as mysterious, sensual, exotic and subservient in Western literature. Most of the time, either they are portrayed as silent sensual objects of male gaze, who do not possess any intellect, individuality or agency or they are depicted as treacherous, seductive and promiscuous. Such tendencies can be traced back to the Renaissance period, particularly in the works of the playwright, William Shakespeare. Though Shakespeare did not directly represent Arab women in his plays, *Antony and Cleopatra* subtly reflects the Western assumptions of Middle-Eastern women. In this play, while Cleopatra is depicted as a powerful Queen of Egypt, she is also framed as a sensual, exotic and extremely seductive woman, who uses her sensual charms as a political tool to entrap men. For instance, In Act II, Scene II, Enobarbus comments about Cleopatra that “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety. Other women cloy/ The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry/ Where most she satisfies. For vilest things/ Become themselves in her, that the holy priests Bless her when she is riggish (lines 276-281). The Romans also denigrated her by showing the superiority of Antony and reducing the status of Cleopatra as Philo claimed that Antony descended “to cool the gypsy’s lust” (line 10). Furthermore, as a character, Shakespeare often depicts Cleopatra as an emotionally volatile, weak, immature and lovesick woman. At times he portrays

her as psychologically vulnerable rather than strategically composed. For example, when Antony wanted to leave Egypt because of his political responsibilities at Rome, Cleopatra tried to detain him. She was prioritizing their personal relationship over state affairs, which undermined her political vision and authority as a queen. Thus, Cleopatra's strong political vision, intellect and strong leadership qualities as a queen are overlooked here. Instead, she is eroticized and portrayed as a lascivious, weak and immature woman whose power lies in her beauty and sexuality.

This tendency of stereotyping the Oriental women continued in the literary representations of modern period. For example, in *Salammbô*, Gustave Flaubert constructs the picture of Arab women in a highly erotic and exotic way. The female protagonist of this novel, Salammbô, is objectified as a silent alluring and sensual figure who only exists for fulfilling men's lust and desire. She adorns herself with heavy ornaments across her whole body. She is even portrayed with a Python around her neck and body, which made her a more exotic, alluring and mysterious figure. Flaubert said:

She wore for ear-rings two tiny balances of sapphires, supporting a hollow pearl filled with liquid perfume, which percolated through minute perforations and from moment to moment fell in a drop, which moistened her bare shoulders. Matho with fascination watched it slowly trickle down. An indomitable curiosity attracted him, and like a child who puts its hand on an unknown fruit, tremblingly he touched her lightly with the tip of his finger on the upper part of her bosom; at the touch her flesh, slightly cold, yielded with an elastic resistance. This contact, although scarcely perceptible, shook Matho to the depths of his soul. An insurrection of his whole being impelled him towards her. He desired to envelope her, absorb her, drink her. (264-265)

In a similar way, in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald gave a vivid description of Gatsby's lavish party, where some exotic Arab female dancers were entertaining the guests as some objects for spectacles. According to Fitzgerald, the gypsy girl was dancing "in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform... the orchestra leader varies his rhythm obligingly for her, and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous news goes around that she is Gilda Gray's understudy from the Follies" (40). These literary representations demonstrate how the Oriental stereotypes are ingrained in the Western minds as they have always reduced them either as objects for pleasure and spectacles or as mysterious and erotic figures devoid of individuality and autonomy. Such portrayals form a cultural lens through which certain feminist perspectives represent Arab women as weak, passive, subservient and culturally backward. Nevertheless, this notion has been successfully challenged in the works of the acclaimed Egyptian writer, Leila Aboulela.

The Translator by Leila Aboulela offers a nuanced portrayal of a Muslim woman who courageously embraces her identity, love and faith in a Western context. Here, the female protagonist, Sammar challenges Western cultural superiority by showing how she feels comfort by maintaining her own native culture and religion. For example, Sammar confidently practices veiling in Scotland though Muslim women's practice of veiling is a subject of controversy in Western societies. Many Western feminists and social thinkers consider veiling as oppressive and disempowering for women. For example, Marnia Lazreg remarks that women should not wear veils because they reduce them to mere physical bodies and deprives them of their personal autonomy over their bodies (123). However, some Islamic feminists argue that veil embodies empowerment for the Arab women. Lama Abu-Odeh claims that veil is mostly adopted by the working women or the students, who frequently have to move outdoors and public places. In Arab

countries, when women move outside they often become the victims of sexual harassment including vulgar comments, impertinent gazes or unwanted physical touch from the men. Even if they try to protest against these harassments, they are mostly blamed by others for not being properly covered. So when a woman is veiled, she gets confidence and power to resist such sexual harassments (1530). Ouhiba comments:

The previously constructed image of the veil as the oppressive marker for women has already started to lose its hold, rather the veil and hijab today are supposed to ensure modesty, decency, chastity, and, above all, respect and worship...woman is a precious creature, that she is to be protected, honored and valued, like a precious stone her beauty should be respected, hidden in security and safety so as not to be abused by unworthy eyes (30).

Nevertheless, Leila Aboulela has shown how the practice of veiling should be considered a personal choice of women. Sammar feels confident and beautiful with the hijab which implies that veiling can nurture self-confidence, dignity and spiritual comfort for some women. According to Aboulela, “she covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing hijab” (9). Then, when Rae asked her why she likes hijab she explained that she likes hijab because it is ‘secretive’ (107). It implies that like Sammar, there are many women in Arab countries, who do not feel comfortable and confident in unveiling or exposing their bodies in public spheres. It also does not depend solely on the Arab contexts. In Western societies, women are less likely to be harassed for uncovering their hair or bodies compared to Arab societies. Still, women like Sammar, feel both physically and spiritually comfortable by covering themselves. Ouhiba further claims that through the character, Sammar, Aboulela implies that “a satisfying life in the

veil is very possible and that the idea of being silenced, or voiceless and oppressed because veiled is no more convincing” (33). In *Minaret*, the protagonist, Najwa also develops a profound fascination with wearing hijab. She says, “I wish I were with them. I see teenage girls wearing hijab and I wish I had done that at their age, wish there was not much in my past to regret” (Aboulela 90). So, it is clear that veiling cannot be simplistically equated with oppression or unveiling cannot be a marker of freedom. Therefore, Aboulela has encountered certain Western misrepresentations of the practice of veiling which claim that veiling undermines women’s autonomy over their bodies.

However, Leila Aboulela also maintains a balanced and nuanced view about the practice of veiling. For example, in *Minaret*, though Najwa likes to wear hijab, her narrative of the Eid party at mosque also reveals ambivalence regarding the practice and implication of hijab. In Najwa’s words:

We are pleased to see each other without our hijabs and all dressed up for the party, delighted by the rare sight of each other's hair, the skin on our necks, the way make-up brightens a face. We look at each and smile in surprise. It is not only the party clothes; some of us are transformed without our hijabs. For a split second I cannot connect the tight trouser suit, the geometrically cut blonde hair, the perfectly applied make-up with the young woman who is usually covered in sombre black, pushing her hyperactive toddler in a pushchair. Today she is as glamorous as a guest on a television talk show. She smiles at me and now I know another side of her, that she is chic and sharp. Even her nails are painted today...It is time for Um Waleed to talk. She talks about how Ramadan was special and now it is over...Without her hijab, in a tight crimson party dress, her hair tinted, her face brimming with make-up, she looks so Arab, so unsubtle that I think this is how she is, her

secret self. She is not by nature a puritan, not by nature reserved or austere. It is only faith that makes her a Qur'an teacher with hardly any pay, pleading with us to learn, to change. It is not her personality that makes her cover her soft ample body in a huge abaya. The alarmed look in her eyes is not really alarm - it is her own excitement over life...I almost squeal - of seeing a friend for the first time without her hijab. This one is all peaches and cream, this one is like a model, this one is mumsy with or without her hijab, this one in her smart jacket looks like she wants to chair a board meeting. This one with the glasses and unruly hair looks like a student and she is one, but this one looks like a belly dancer and she is definitely not. She is the staid wife of a lucky doctor with four daughters kept well under control. This one looks like a tomboy. I can imagine her, when she was young, playing football with her brothers; now she's a nursery teacher. This one looks Indian, as if the hijab had made me forget she was Indian and now she is reminding me - in the sari with her flowing hair and jewellery, she is relaxed, traditional...the hijab is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed. (163-165)

Therefore, Aboulela has represented both positive and negative dimensions of wearing veils. It can be a marker of religious solidarity among women. On the other hand, it can unite not only the Arab women but also all the Muslim women across diverse cultural and geopolitical backgrounds in the world. Nonetheless, she also draws attention to some subtle challenges of wearing hijabs. For example, as Najwa opines that hijab is like a 'uniform', it hides a woman's true self. Without a veil, a woman may appear as a glamorous model, a dancer, a mother or a tom boy as Najwa describes but hijab conceals these individual traits of women. However, Aboulela does not want to depict the obscurity of the veil as complete eradication of personal identity. Through the instance of Um Waleed, Aboulela also breaks Western misconceptions about hijab

that it is forced on women by the patriarchy. She shows that Um Waleed wears hijab not because of any social pressure but because of her deliberate religious devotion. So, while there are some challenges of wearing veil, it should be respected as a woman's personal choice. Aboulela conveys through her fictions that when a woman chooses to adopt the practice of veiling for her own religious faith and devotion like Sammar, Najwa and Um Waleed, then it does not become oppressive rather it becomes a symbol of women's autonomy and spiritual agency.

Next, Western feminism often asks women to renounce marriage, motherhood and familial life in pursuit of individuality and freedom. As Simone de Beauvoir claims, marriage is "the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being" (415). She also explains that marriage is forced upon young women by their families whereas men are not forced into marriage. In middle class families, young girls remain the parasites of their father's home and then after marriage, they are offered to be the housekeeper of a stranger's home. Some young girls get willingly married as they aspire to marry the man above their status to get economic prosperity (Beauvoir 419-420). Moreover, Western feminists demand that a woman should contribute in the public sphere and build her own career for her ultimate liberty. Betty Friedan comments:

If women do not put forth, finally, that effort to become all that they have it in them to become, they will forfeit their own humanity. A woman today who has no goal, no purpose, no ambition patterning her days into the future, making her stretch and grow beyond that small score of years in which her body can fill its biological function, is committing a kind of suicide. For that future half a century after the child-bearing years are over is a fact that an American woman cannot deny. Nor can she deny that as a housewife, the world is indeed

rushing past her door while she just sits and watches. The terror she feels is real, if she has no place in that world. (341)

Besides, in the nineteenth Century, the theme of 'New Woman' was largely celebrated in the feminist literary fictions. The 'New Women' embodied courage and determination in pursuing women's identity, education, career and freedom. This concept echoed the demands of the Western feminists' idea to abandon marriage and motherhood for their ultimate liberty. For example, in *A Doll's House*, the protagonist, Nora took a bold step to leave her husband and children to seek her self-identity and freedom. She emerges as a 'New Woman,' who has the courage to defy the norms and expectations of a society that prioritizes marriage and motherhood over personal identity and freedom. Therefore, Western feminism starts to emerge as a rebellion against traditional gender roles that reduced women to housewives and mothers. Many Western feminist thinkers critique motherhood for limiting women's reproductive choices. In "Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory," Tatjana Takševa argues that Second-wave feminism has criticized gender roles, marriage, nuclear family and motherhood as a chained system of oppression to females. That is why, it emphasizes women's right to make their reproductive choices and it also highlights how women are not only sexually or psychologically exploited but they are also exploited through the caregiving works of a wife and mother. Then, Simone de Beauvoir criticized motherhood as she remarked that to gain complete freedom, maternity became one feminine function that impedes women's liberty (655). The rejection of motherhood became more prominent in the third wave of feminism. For instance, In "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women", Jeffner Allen comments:

A mother is she whose body is used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men.... Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within

which females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity. (315)

Moreover, some Marxist feminists also compare motherhood with unpaid labor. Karl Thompson opines that the capitalist family structure enables men to profit from unpaid domestic labor (Marxist Feminist Perspectives on Family Life). Therefore, in this way, Western feminist scholars have critiqued marriage and motherhood as impediments on the way of women's liberation.

Apart from the feminist scholars and theorists, the feminist writers of nineteenth and twentieth centuries too illustrated the darkest sides of marriage, motherhood and domesticity, exposing the way in which these institutions strip women of their identity and freedom. For instance, in *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin depicts how marriage and motherhood became a form of entrapment for the protagonist, Edna Pontellier. She was depicted in the novel as a happy housewife with two children. However, during a summer in Grand Isle, she suddenly realized that she is not content in her marital life. She had a few extra-marital affairs but ultimately she chose a solitary life with freedom, rejecting marriage as well as the traditional gender roles of a house wife and a mother. After her renunciation, she could finally attain full freedom unbound by the expectations of marriage and motherhood. According to Chopin, "She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life, but they could not claim possession of her body or soul" (302). Similarly, in the short story, "To Room Nineteen," Doris Lessing also shows how domestic life and gender roles as a wife and mother can erode a woman's sense of self and identity. In this story, Susan was a happily married woman, living in a big house with four children. As her husband got a steady job and provided securely for the family, Susan chose not to continue her job. Nevertheless, though she had marital comfort in her life, she lacked personal freedom and

autonomy. Ultimately, she was getting tired of her life doing domestic chores and looking after her children. That is why, she decided to withdraw from her family life and chose to live all alone in a room of a hotel, where she found solace and a sense of freedom. Next, the short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” also depicts some harrowing aspects of motherhood. Here, Charlotte Perkins Stetson has shown how post-partum depression after pregnancy can cause madness in women. This story illustrates how a woman’s creativity and autonomy are curtailed because of domestic confinement and the pressure to meet the expectations of wifehood and motherhood. So, these literary works of Western feminism reveal a consistent criticism of women’s gender roles within the family and they call for rejecting these traditional roles in order to attain self-identity and freedom.

However, Leila Aboulela has constructed a new framework of feminism for Arab women that does not compel them to renounce marriage, motherhood, familial and communal life for the sake of freedom, identity and autonomy. She points out that Arab women have a different perception about marriage and family life. Many of them do not consider marriage as an oppressive institution or social compulsion, but they consider it as a blessing. They do not think marriage means patriarchal domination but they perceive it as a divine relationship between male and female based on love, mutual respect and equal partnership. Her female characters often show their desperate wishes to get married and to start a family. For example, in *The Translator*, when Sammar became a widow, she felt lonely and depressed for want of a company. She even decided to marry Ahmad Ali Yasseen who has two wives as Mahasen chides:

An educated girl like you, you know English . . . you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for? He started to talk to me about this and I silenced him. I shamed him, the old fool. 'He's religious,' Sammar had choked the

words, 'he feels a duty towards widows . . .' He can take his religiousness and build a mosque...In the past, widows needed protection, but the situation is different now" (13).

Though Sammar was settled in Scotland and she was an independent working woman, she still feels the necessity of a male's company. Through Sammar, Aboulela wants to emphasize on the fact that marriage is necessary to have companion, love, mental support and sharing of happiness and sadness, not just for financial support or shelter for women. Both men and women feel fulfilled by the company of each other. Many critics have criticized the character, Sammar, in *The Translator*, for being dependent on male companionship. Hasiba Mazouzi criticized Sammar's dependence on male companionship by saying "without a man, Sammar feels her life empty, and without the company of a man, she is lonely" (296). However, it is also noteworthy the way she represents feminine desires in which fulfillment is derived through marriage and family life. It is because families also provide women with identity and roles which some women choose to value more than their career achievement. For instance, Sammar's mother-in-law, Aunt Mahasen, was portrayed as a strong, assertive and outspoken woman who strongly maintains her family (Mazouzi 300). Sammar aspired to be such a woman who could confidently look after her family just like her mother-in-law. Therefore, it can be said that her wish to get married does not align with the Western feminist claim that women want to marry for upgrading their social status and financial security. Instead, Aboulela has shown that marriage and family can also provide women with certain social recognition and emotional fulfillment.

However, it can also be argued that Sammar's return to her in-laws' house in Sudan placed an additional burden on her with duties and responsibilities. Her mother-in-law, Mahasen, was harsh and rude towards her. She even blamed her for son's accident in Aberdeen. She always complained about her for not contributing enough for the family despite her hard work. She also

had to look after her own child as well as her cousin's child. Her brother Waleed asked her, "Here you are holding Amir and Hanan's children. Didn't aunt Mahasen fire the maid as soon as you come back?" (150). However, Sammer dealt with her with modesty, respect and patience. Though there was hostility from her mother-in-law and she could hardly find any room for privacy, she did not want to return Scotland with her child, Amir. Her brother, Waleed as well as Mahasen insisted her quite a few times to return to Scotland with Amir for their better future. However, she firmly decided to stay with the family in Sudan. It is because she felt better surrounded by the relatives and neighbors. She can keep herself busy with doing chores and spending time with her relatives so that she can forget her painful experiences of her lover's rejection in Scotland. Though she lived as an independent, private life in Scotland without any hostility from in-laws or work pressure of household, she felt extremely lonely and depressed. When Waleed continuously insisted her not to resign her job in Scotland and return there, Sammar replied that it would be much more difficult to take care of Amir all alone in Scotland since Mahasen was also efficiently taking care of her child. According to Aboulela, "She wished she could explain how desolate it would be, her and Amir alone in Aberdeen. The long winter evenings, the small room they would live in, just them, the two of them, face to face, claustrophobic" (150). Therefore, Aboulela has countered Virginia Woolf's argument, that a woman needs a room of her own to pursue freedom by presenting that a desolated life in a single room might not what every female wants. Women like Sammar in Arab countries prefer communal life rather than a private life. The author also emphasizes here that living in an extended family can accelerate mental healing and comfort. In *Minaret*, Najwa also supports living in an extended family. When Shahinaz complained to Najwa about her married life, living with her mother-in-law, Najwa consoled her by saying that she and her children are having much time with Sohayl, Shahinaz's husband, by living together (Aboulela 97).

Furthermore, Aboulela also countered Western feminist perspectives that motherhood is an oppressive burden on women that curtails women's liberty. In *The Translator*, Sammar was walking following the path of Western feminism as she left her child, Amir with Mahasen in Sudan as she was suffering from post-partum depression. Furthermore, she was psychologically dismantled after her husband's sudden death by accident. Therefore, she chose to live all alone in Aberdeen, leaving Amir in a distant country. However, it did not help her to heal from her depression rather it worsened when she got rejected from her lover, Rae. Then, when she returned to Sudan and accepted Amir by embracing her motherhood, she was feeling better. She could make herself busy with taking care of him, which kept her away from depressive experiences of the past. So, motherhood is represented here as a source of strength and resilience.

In *Minaret*, Najwa was also depicted as an independent woman living in Britain. Like Sammar, she also longed for male companionship and marriage. She did not have a dream of a successful career or solitary life in an apartment but she wanted to get married and to work for the households. She would like to be a happy house wife that Western feminism perceives as passivity. Likewise Sammar, Najwa was also not dependent on any male figure for shelter or financial support. However, she dreamt of having a family rather than opting for any career. She said to Tameer, "When I was your age, I imagined I would get married, have children and do the usual things. I didn't imagine anything different. I had friends who wanted to be doctors, diplomats but I never had these ambitions" (Aboulela 176). Unlike the Western protagonists who get bored and unsatisfied with being a housewife, Najwa proves that many Arab women dreams of being a perfect house wife.

Furthermore, in both novels, Aboulela reflects on Islamic feminism, where the females are devoted to religion. Religion became a medium for them to gather mental strength and stability.

For example, Sammar was a devoted Muslim woman and whenever she was sad, depressed or lonely, she used to find her mental peace and solace through prayers and fasting. For example, during Ramadan, when she broke her fast, she “felt herself to be simple, someone with a simple need, easily fulfilled, easily granted. The dates and the water made her heart feel big, with no hankering or tanginess or grief” (37). Moreover, she left Aberdeen, because of her lover, Rae, who initially did not want to convert to Islam. She strongly adhered to her faith that a Muslim cannot marry a non-Muslim. She waited patiently for Rae, engaged herself in religious activities and her patience got rewarded as Rae converted to a Muslim in the end. On the other hand, in *Minaret*, Najwa was initially portrayed as a secular modern woman of a wealthy privileged family. She practiced religious activities but without heartfelt devotion. When she was in Sudan, she used to fast during Ramadan just to lose her weight, not for any religious devotion or spiritual commitment. She used to say prayers for good grades. She also used to wear the tobes of her mother because she liked to be covered (Aboulela 144). All of a sudden, a political coup took place in Sudan and Najwa got exiled in Britain with her mother and brother. Not only were they exiled in a foreign country, but also her privileged position collapsed and her realities got overturned. Her father got executed in Sudan, her mother died after some days and her brother got imprisoned in Britain. Therefore, she was compelled to transform herself entirely and she had to adapt to a simple way of life in a different culture. As she belonged to a wealthy family in Sudan, she was accustomed to a lavish lifestyle. However, after the political coup, she was forced to lead a simple life in a foreign country. Even she worked as a maid to earn her livelihood. Consequently, she found herself in a very difficult and challenging situation which caused her significant mental distress. However, when she began attending the mosque and devoted herself to Islam through prayers, she started to heal from her mental wounds. Najwa says:

I liked the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men. The absence of the sparks they brought with them, the absence of the frisson and ambiguity...I liked the talks at these gatherings because they were serious and simple, vigorous but never clever, never witty. What I was hearing, I would never hear outside, I would never hear on TV or read in a magazine. It found an echo in me; I understood it. No matter how much you love someone they will die. No matter how much health you have or money, there is no guarantee that one day you will lose it. We all have an end we can't escape. I thought such talk would make me gloomy, would bring me down, but I would leave the mosque refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy. Maybe I was happy because I was praying again - not like when I was young when it was just to boost my grades or to complement my fast in Ramadan - but with the intention of never giving it up. I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized that 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 a bleakness in me or a numbness, instead I listened and I was alert. (Aboulela 213-214)

Therefore, it is clear that by strengthening faith in Islam and engaging in the religious activities wholeheartedly, Najwa grew calmer and regained her mental strength back. So, Aboulela has demonstrated through her fictions that devotion to Islam functions as a source of spiritual empowerment and emotional resilience for Arab women.

Western feminism often celebrates sexual autonomy as a part of individual freedom. C. Wille et al. argue that sexual autonomy is a basic human right to protect and to maintain one's body, sexuality and sexual experiences. It helps women to explore sexual experiences free from

any societal expectations which is necessary for having healthy sexual relationships and reproductive health (1-2). Anya Russel extends this debate by explaining that second-wave feminism exposes that women are not only exploited politically or economically but their sexuality is controlled by patriarchy. Therefore, sexual liberation began in twentieth century so that women can freely take pleasure from intimate relationships without any societal, cultural or religious constraints (13). Ann Oakley explains that “the female’s sexuality is supposed to lie in her receptiveness and this is not just a matter of her open vagina: it extends to the whole structure of feminine personality as dependent, passive, unaggressive and submissive” (100). Then, in *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer argued that sexual autonomy holds great significance in women’s liberation. Women must have the right to express their sexual desires as well as must have the ability to reject male advances. Greer criticized Freudian idea that females lack a sexual organ. She also pointed out how the adolescent girls “adopt the role of the eunuch. Her seeking guidance is one essential symptom of her abandonment of her autonomy. She has always been subjected to more control and supervision than her brother, and now she is required to adopt the proper feminine passivity and continue her own repression by herself” (99).

However, sexual liberty is not universally accepted by women. As Arab societies are highly influenced by religion, females here are trained from their very childhood to strictly follow moral and religious obligations, especially in cases of sexual relationships. Pre-marital sex is strictly prohibited in Islam for both males and females. However, the Arab society follows a patriarchal double standard for males who get complete freedom to have sexual liberty regardless of marital status whereas the females are strictly judged and controlled regarding their virginity. The non-virgin women face serious consequences in the Arab society. For instance, they get beaten up sometimes or get divorced for having pre-marital sexual relationships. Even ‘Honor killings’ have

been reported in certain Arab countries, where the members of a family kill a girl for violating sexual norms. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Nawal el Saadawi explains:

Arab society still considers that the fine membrane which covers the aperture of the external genital organs is the most cherished and most important part of a girl's body, and is much more valuable than one of her eyes, or an arm, or a lower limb. An Arab family does not grieve as much at the loss of a girl's eye as it does if she happens to lose her virginity. In fact if the girl lost her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen. A girl who does not preserve her virginity is liable to be punished with physical death, or moral death, or at least with being divorced if she is found out at the time of marriage. Such divorce is of course accompanied by a scandal, usually restricted to family circles, but which very often inevitably spreads far and wide. Yet such a girl may be completely Fine membrane innocent of any sexual relation, but incapable of proving her innocence. This is due to the fact that patriarchal class society has imposed premarital virginity on girls and ensured that the very honour of a girl, and her family, is closely linked to the preservation of this virginity. If virginity is lost, this brings almost everlasting shame which can only be 'wiped out in blood', as the common Arab saying goes. Virginity is a strict moral rule which applies to girls alone. (54-55)

So, it is clear that virginity holds a significant value for Arab women because of their religious, moral and cultural norms and regulations. That is why, unlike the Western women, who are not constrained by cultural or religious sexual norms and values, many Arab women feel less comfortable embracing sexual liberty. They are more comfortable in preserving their virginity before marriage because of their cultural and religious upbringing. For example, in the *Minaret*, Najwa was influenced by her lover, Anwar, to engage in sexual intercourse. Anwar believes in

modern sexual freedom and criticizes the practice of preserving women's virginity till marriage. Finally, Najwa overcame the religious and moral restrictions and had sexual intercourse with Anwar. However, though she willingly gave her consent to Anwar's approach, she was not feeling entirely comfortable with her sexual liberty. Moreover, since Najwa and Anwar were living in Britain, there was no possibility for Najwa get judged and condemned by the society as she said, "Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized?"... 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 heating me, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom (156). Besides, Najwa was trying to be a practicing Muslim woman. That is why, the Western feminist idea of having pleasure in sexual liberty caused a profound emotional conflict in her mind for which she felt guilt for losing her virginity. According to Najwa, "He said the soreness would go away. He said the guilt would go away. 'Like every other Arab girl,' he said, 'you've been brainwashed about the importance of virginity.' He was right about the soreness but the guilt didn't go away" (Aboulela 156-157). Next, in *The Translator*, it is noteworthy that though Sammar and Rae acknowledged and reciprocated their love for each other, they did not get involved in any intimate relationship. Here, Aboulela wanted to emphasize that Muslim women in Arab culture believe in platonic relationships, which are more grounded on emotional or spiritual connection than in physical desire. That is why, in the novel, Sammar did not show any sexual fantasy or desire for Rae. This is how Aboulela has illustrated that Muslim women are more comfortable in affirming their faith through platonic love and the Western feminist model of sexual liberty does not entirely resonate with Arab women for their distinct social, religious and cultural values.

In a nutshell, this discussion finds that Western literary and feminist representation of Arab women historically misrepresented and stereotyped them as backward, exotic, overly sensual and submissive, following the Orientalist framework. Sometimes they are also criticized as fanatics for their strong adherence to their religious practices like veiling. Furthermore, this study argues that Western feminism's tendency to universalize their liberation model for women is not suitable for the Arab context. Through the close reading of *The Translator* and *Minaret*, the study demonstrates that Leila Aboulela has inaugurated a new model of feminism which reinforces the idea that Arab women need a separate model of feminism that fits with their religious faith and cultural values. In this model, she blends the core concepts of Islamic feminism that women empowerment lies in strong faith and practice of Islam with culturally rooted feminine consciousness that longs for marriage, motherhood and communal life. The findings reveal that Western feminism disregards veiling, marriage and family life as constraints on the path of women's freedom. However, Leila Aboulela has countered their arguments by demonstrating that freedom cannot always be attained by rejecting traditions, norms and faith as not every woman desires to do so. For example, sexual autonomy does not resonate with Arab women for their religious and cultural obligations. The Arab women feel empowerment through their meaningful engagement with religious faith, cultural values, and communal as well as familial responsibilities. These aspects provide them with purpose, identity, dignity, autonomy and a sense of agency which cannot be solely attained through contributing in the public sphere or through building careers for financial independence. Therefore, this analysis reveals that Aboulela's fictions offer an inclusive and contextual understanding of the realities and aspirations of Arab women, effectively challenging the universality of Western feminist ideologies.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study stresses that Arab women are heavily misrepresented by the Western literary writers, theorists and critics. The fictional representations from the Renaissance to Modern period reveal persistent bias against Arab women, reducing them to objects of male desire. They were denied any intellectual agency or progressive consciousness, instead, they existed only to serve male's interests. However, the truth is Arab women are more than sensual, exotic, mystic, passive or submissive figures of the Orientalist framework. They are active individuals, capable of negotiating their faith, familial responsibilities and cultural and religious practices alongside their aspirations for liberation. Furthermore, cultural and religious norms, values and practices of Arab society are often condemned in Western society as they perceive those as pre-modern, extreme as well as barriers to the path of women's identity, freedom and autonomy. The practice of veiling is considered a hindrance to women's identity and autonomy in the Western society. However, through analyzing Aboulela's female characters, this study reveals that veiling is a personal choice and when it is exercised autonomously it becomes an instrument of self-expression, spiritual empowerment and personal safety. Veiling is not merely a religious practice imposed on women but veiling can also become an instrument by which women can decide to reveal or cover their body parts according to their personal comfort. It also helps them in maintaining their privacy and safety.

Furthermore, according to the Western feminist ideals, familial responsibilities and traditional gender roles are often perceived as obstacles in the pursuit of women's liberation. A number of literary fictions of second-wave feminism depict profound frustration, depression and identity crises of women because of traditional gender roles imposed on them in marital life.

However, the fictions of Leila Aboulela prove that Arab women do not wish to sacrifice their feminine desire for wifehood, motherhood and domesticity for the sake of freedom. The protagonists of the fictions of Aboulela show that traditional gender roles are not always oppressive to women. Women can be career-oriented to achieve independence but it cannot be denied that they may also have genuine feminine desires of companionship and motherhood. Many women wish to get married for want of love, support and company. Furthermore, it is also an indispensable fact that motherhood may also provide a sense of identity and purpose in women's lives. Through Najwa's desire for motherhood in *Minaret*, it is proved that motherhood is not always imposed on women but some women happily embrace it. In *The Translator*, though initially Sammar was not ready for a child, her later acceptance of her motherhood and her healing after developing maternal love for her child reveal that motherhood can also be a source of emotional strength and empowerment for women.

Overall, this study emphasizes the fact that women around the world have different meanings and perspectives of liberation. They have different feminist sensibilities and aspirations which needs acknowledgement. If we fail to recognize diverse global feminist perspectives, we will continue to mimic a single mode of women's liberation which often prove to be ill-suited for women from different cultural and regional contexts. This study shows that blindly adopting Western feminist model cannot simultaneously ensure independence and emotional fulfillment. Fictions of Aboulela demonstrate that economic independence, secularism, individualism, rejection of gender roles as well as familial responsibilities cannot liberate women in all aspects. Instead, they often result in creating emotional voids, dissatisfaction and a lack of purpose. The author emphasizes that women must be able to discern their needs, goals and aspirations in their life. Also, women should follow a balanced approach that negotiates between radical call of

rejecting gender roles and religious obligations and remaining true to one's feminine desires. Feminism must address diverse desires, needs and aspirations of liberation. In this regard, transnational feminist approach becomes indispensable to understand global regional feminist issues.

Lastly, this study concludes that Arab feminism must be more organized and responsive to the needs of Arab women. They must move beyond Western feminism by reinventing their own that properly addresses to their concerns while staying grounded to their cultural and religious identities. Independence will become meaningless to women if they lose their identity and connection to their social and cultural roots. Nonetheless, this research aims to contribute in the study of Arab feminism and opens avenues for the future researchers to develop a more convincing Arab feminist model that can bring positive changes in the lives of Arab women.

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