

ഇശൽ
വൈത്യകം
ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 46

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 31

print issue 46

June 2026



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Department of Cultural Affairs

Government of Kerala-India

June 2026

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2026 ജൂൺ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

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മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ

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കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638

ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

Ishal Paithrkam

E-ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

Two issue per year

Bilingual

Issue: 46

Online issue: 31

June: 2026

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Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Publisher

The Secretary, Mahakavi

Moyinkutty Vaidyar mappila

Kala Academy, Department of

Cultural affairs, Government

of Kerala, Kondotty Post

Pin: 673638

India

Ph: +91 483 2711432

Printed at

Kerala state C APT

Kozhikode

www.mappilakalaacademy.org

www.ishalpaithrkam.info

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Writing Islam and Performing Faith in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

Dr. Minu Fathima

The novel *Minaret* (2005) by Sudanese-British writer Leila Aboulela offers an alternative view of Islam by way of its nuanced treatment of the often unaddressed question of faith and religious belief among Muslim women, notably immigrant Muslim women, struggling to cope with alienation and liminal existence in the west. This paper examines the literary representation of Islam and faith-based subjectivities in the novel, tracing the protagonist Najwa's struggle to craft a simultaneously modern and religiously compliant subject hood. It looks into the connection between the performance of religious actions and the creation of a pious moralistic self to foreground the role of religion, especially Islam in the dynamics of migrant identity politics. As there is a resurgence of religion in the public sphere in present times, this enquiry can add to the study of religion as an indispensable category of analysis in contemporary identity politics. Drawing from the works of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Meredith Mc Guire (2008), this paper expands the understanding of piety, performativity and empowerment to locate agency beyond the binaries of subordination and resistance, in everyday practices of lived religion. The affirmation of faith and surrender to religious beliefs as depicted in the fiction of Aboulela and the centrality of Muslim religious identity in the lives of the female characters of the novel, I argue, attempt to challenge and

redefine the western normative belief that religiosity is always a result of the imposition of external forces that are invariably oppressive or politically charged.

Keywords: Piety, Performativity, Empowerment, Lived Religion, Migrant Identity Politics

Introduction

In recent years, in the context of increasing interests in literary expressions by Muslim women, Aboulela has amassed considerable readership and critical attention as a postcolonial African-Arab writer of novels, short stories, essays and radio plays in English. Centered on the ethical dilemmas faced by immigrant Muslim women in the west, her works often foreground a nuanced portrayal of the challenges of migration and displacement viewed through the lens of religion and gender. By looking at Islam as a chosen way of life in Aboulela's novel, this paper stresses how identities are narratively constructed and performed over time. Understanding the everyday life experiences of women in the context of the negotiations they make between the sacred and secular can provide possibilities of theorizing the intersection of conflicting discourses produced by religious, cultural, and political practices in the construction of Muslim women's identity. As the focus of this paper is on how religion is experienced and expressed by Muslim women in the context of their everyday lives, my analysis is informed by Meredith McGuire's (2008) concept of "lived religion", a term she employs for "distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (p. 12). This concept of 'lived religion' is extended here to probe how women of faith negotiate and perform the complex relationship between religion and gender in their everyday lives.

In recent years, in the context of increasing academic interests around literary expressions by Muslim women, Aboulela has amassed considerable readership and critical attention as a postcolonial African-Arab writer of novels, short stories, essays and radio plays in English. Both her novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) fictionalize the lives of Sudanese Muslim women living in foreign lands

and address related issues linked to cultural alienation, struggles of adaptation, homesickness and estrangement. In her novels, the feelings of dislocation culminate in the main characters' spiritual awakening, journey towards self-discovery and empowerment through an active engagement with religion. What makes her novels stand out is her Muslim characters' progressive commitment to Islam and the construction of faith-based subjectivities that help them to navigate alienation and displacement. Aboulela's works can also be seen as momentous contributions towards the body of literature that narrates East-West encounters, but in a manner that is notably different from mainstream stories of Muslim women's victimhood and subjugation, a recurring trope in Muslim women's escape narratives.

Resurgence of Religion in the Public Sphere

What makes Aboulela's approach different is the fact that, in her narrative world, as in her real life, Islam is not a set of doctrines or dogma coded in empty rituals. It is a deeply felt impulse that holds a special place in the life of her characters. For them, as Chambers (2011) perceptively suggests, "Islam is far less an ideology than a code of ethical behavior and a central marker of identity in the fragmentary world of migration, asylum, and family disintegration" (p. 88). Aboulela looks at the ethical, moral and psychological dilemmas faced by her characters in their daily life as ordinary Muslims from an entirely new perspective, lending transparent the multiple ways in which Islam translates into ordinary life. This is done by detailing how faith permeates the day to day mundane activities of her characters through a nuanced understanding of the personal decisions, psychological traumas, cultural adjustments and complex nostalgia that make up the tangible and palpable aspects of everyday life. As a result, this paper primarily focuses on the manners in which Aboulela fashions her narratives to centralize the salience of religion in the lives of her characters who unapologetically embrace their Muslim identity and enact an Islamic way of life. Through a study of this, the paper intends to raise a different set of questions regarding women's involvement with faith and our understanding of key concepts like freedom, agency and empowerment as explained by Mahmood (2005) in her study of Muslim women in non-western societies.

This new kind of approach that foregrounds an embodied nature of religion in daily lives, beyond a temporal and textual understanding of Islam calls into question the underlying assumptions of the religious/secular binary by which religion is expected to become a subsidiary and diminished factor in an individual's life. Asad's (1993) critical scholarship on religion has long established religion as "the historical product of discursive practices" rather than as a fixed and pre-existing set of principles and practices that are transhistorical in nature (p.29). As such, the study of this novel is undertaken with a view to discuss how the practice of faith in settings removed from the homeland inscribe new ways of interpreting religion and how they influence the lives of Muslim women to realize a "certain kind of virtuous life" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 193). This is based on Saba Mahmood's (2005) theorization of forms of enactment of faith by Muslim women for whom religion has a meaningful presence in all aspects of daily life (p.4). In this regard, the readers can discern a blending of the sacred and the secular in the delineation of the main characters in the novels. Such depictions, this paper argues, are crucial to be included in the conversations for gender justice through the practices of mediation and debate, making Islam a discursive space open to reformulation. Stressing the need to consider the ideals of Islam as emergent rather than static, Said et al. (2006) opine that "like other religions, Islam is not only an abstract set of theological propositions, but also a historical dynamic that finds expression in the lived experiences and circumstances of people" (p.2).

Scholars who study the recent revitalization of religion in the public sphere have identified a shift in academic and political discourse from ethnic and national identities to religious ones in the context of globalization and immigration (Yuval-Davis, 2014, p. 38). The popular notion of religion as a matter of private belief has been unsettled in different parts of the world in light of key developments like rampant globalization, migration and subsequent erasure of religiously homogeneous communities across the world. These events that "underline the omnipresence of religion in global politics", albeit in a narrow and negative way, have highlighted the need to critically examine established ways of thinking about religion, gender, and the public sphere (Reilly,

2011, p. 1). In the face of sustained critiques of political secularism there is an urgent need for a space to discuss the omnipresence of religion in the public sphere encompassing the interrelation between religion, gender and the state.

Analysis

“I’ve come down in the world. I’ve slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn’t much room to move...I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back” (Aboulela, 2005, p.1).

Aboulela opens her novel *Minaret* with these words, uttered by Najwa, the protagonist and narrator of the novel. The opening lines introduce the readers to the main character’s reflection about a drastic change that has happened in her life and her uncomplaining acceptance of its consequences. *Minaret* traces the life story of the central character Najwa, who, when the novel begins, is working as a maid to an affluent Arab-British family in London. The story is clearly divided between two phases in Najwa’s life- her affluent, aristocratic and westernized life in Khartoum, Sudan and her subsequent downward journey to a lonely life in exile as a domestic help in Britain. The main character Najwa, slides between these two worlds as the narration goes back and forth between Najwa’s entitled life as a member of an elite, politically affluent family in Sudan and her almost anonymous existence as an immigrant in Britain.

In London, to support herself, Najwa works as a maid in an Arab Muslim household where she becomes romantically involved with Tamer, twenty years her junior and the devout younger brother of her employer, Lamyia. Despite the wide gap in age and social status, their shared deep-rooted religiosity and affinity towards a disciplined Islamic way of life make them soul mates. However, the differences in age, class and status become obstacles to their union. In the end, Tamer and Najwa are separated as she ends her relationship with him on his family’s request. But she is not devastated by this and the novel ends in a promising note as Najwa looks forward towards the prospect of going for pilgrimage to Mecca.

Like Aboulela’s previous novel, *The Translator* (1999), this novel also narrates the story of traumatic displacement of the central

character Najwa. Her father's unexpected fall from political power, her mother's subsequent trauma and death, her brother's imprisonment and her failed relationship with Anwar, her college mate and later Tamer plunges Najwa into depths of despair and loss; from which she recovers by her increasing connection with faith and the Islamic way of life in which she finds relief and empowerment.

The series of catastrophes in her life leads Najwa to seek refuge in religion as she re-discovers the beauty of her faith in London at a time of deep personal loss and disillusionment. Amidst the alienation and loneliness in a new land, the only relief and solace is religion. She starts attending gatherings at the Regent's Park Mosque and gradually develops a spiritual identity that strengthens her core and re-shapes her life. Aboulela's novels, like other diasporic works, narrate the exilic encounters of the protagonists caught up in the complexities of living in non-western setting, but differs from them in her treatment of the protagonists' religious actions and its transformative impact upon the individual self. As a result, her heroines embrace religion to re-orient and re-shape their lives after traumatic experiences in their personal lives. For them, Islam offers a sense of belonging and comfort. They renew their relationship with religion in their host countries by attending the mosque gatherings and interacting with fellow Muslims who come from different geographical and cultural locations in order to recreate a sense of home.

In her conversation with Sethi, Aboulela (2005) confesses that for a person like her who grew up in a westernized environment with very little outward expression of religious identity, the anonymity and security that a multicultural setting like London offered instilled the confidence to follow an Islamic code of dressing. Her decision to wear the headscarf was made easier in a non-Muslim setting as she was away from her other Muslim friends whom she says would not have supported her in her decision. Aboulela reveals that her life in the west offered her space and anonymity, "I didn't know anybody. It was 1989 and the word "Muslim" wasn't even really used in Britain at the time; you were either black or Asian. So then I felt very free to wear the hijab" (Sethi, 2005)). For Najwa too, it is the anonymity that a non-native location offered along with the individualist autonomy she could

freely exercise in a new location that prompted her to be more assertive about her religious identity. This newfound awareness, often the result of intense self-reflection, results in her decision to opt for a more Islamic way of dressing (Aboulela, 2005, p.245).

In the novel, the strong religious convictions and views of the protagonist Najwa come out through the author's portrayal of Najwa's lifestyle and her use of language. The novel is about Najwa's gradual spiritual awakening from the superficial, entitled life she spent as an affluent politician's daughter in Sudan to the more realistic, and difficult life of a Muslim African immigrant in London where she is gently lead back to her faith by a strong community of believers including her female friends Um Waleed and Wafa. The way the narrative is structured around Najwa's strong religious conviction and her way of reasoning and justification, show the protagonist's complete reliance on the divine who determines everything in her life. The turbulent incidents in Najwa's life are almost always resolved by her unflinching faith in Islam which suggests how for many believing women, Islam is the main feature of their lives and frame of reference to which they can connect instinctively. The episode in the novel where Tamer's sister Lamy misplaces her pearl necklace and indirectly accuses Najwa of stealing it, Najwa's instant reaction is to seek refuge in prayer. "Allah, please get me out of this mess. Stop this from happening. I know you are punishing me because I tried this necklace on in the morning, in front of the mirror" (Aboulela, 2005, p.113). When the necklace is found later, Najwa attributes this to divine intervention and sees this as a miracle. She tells herself, "Rely on Allah, I tell myself. He is looking after you in this job or in another job" (Aboulela, 2005, p.114).

This naturalization and normalization of a devout Muslim way of life with its rewards go against many western representations of Islam which sees women as victims of patriarchal control imposed on them by an unrelenting religious ideology to which they cannot connect. Such representations in the narrative that highlight Najwa's religious logic, religious way of life and thinking foreground the way Aboulela's characters are always conscious of their identity as Muslims and how this identity is ingrained in their lives through a spiritual

way of life laid down in the sacred texts, followed by many Muslims in different parts of the world.

The importance given to sacred spaces like mosques and sacred rituals like prayer and fasting accentuate the Islam-oriented theme of the novel *Minaret*. This, in turn, suggests the naturalness and significance of Muslim identity and demystifies many preconceived images of Muslim rituals and experiences for the readers. Najwa's association with the mosque goes instills in her confidence, peacefulness and a feeling of love for others that she was never able to experience. Her feeling of incompleteness and her inability to pray during her student days in Khartoum were allayed and soothed when she started finding solace in the mosque and prayer in London. It is in the sacred ambience of the mosque that Najwa realizes, "few people are themselves in mosques. They are subdued, taken over by a fragile, neglected part of themselves" (Aboulela, 2005, p.2). It gives her a sense of protection and offers her belonging and care, where she feels spiritually nourished and cared for. She feels thankful that she is no longer lonely in a foreign land as she feels "happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant" (Aboulela, 2005, p.184). The mosque here functions as a refuge that offers serenity and companionship of fellow believers.

The spiritual camaraderie and pleasure Najwa and the other mosque attendees experience during the last ten days of the holy month of Ramadan is described in a way that acquaints the reader with the relatively unfamiliar details of the female-mosque goer's experiences. "In the last ten nights, it was even more crowded, the recitation more powerful, all of us listening to the same verse, enjoying the same mood" (Aboulela, 2005, p.187). In the mosque she feels as an equal with everybody irrespective of her social status and class. As an immigrant struggling to cope up with the isolation in a foreign location, Najwa immediately connects with other worshippers though their whereabouts were unknown to her. Najwa states, "we had come here to worship and it was enough" (Aboulela, 2005, p.188).

For Najwa, the community of women believers in the mosque offers timely support and helping hand in coping with her loneliness

and estrangement. They act like family for Najwa when she is alone and lost away from her familiar settings of her homeland. In their affirmative and supportive role, the women's group of believers in the novel resembles the female mosque goers Saba Mahmood studies in her anthropological work *Politics of Piety* (2005). In depicting the religious lives of practicing Muslim women in Britain, Aboulela follows Mahmood's interrogation of the secular liberal feminist notion of agency and empowerment that dismisses the agency of religious and practicing women of faith. It is the normalization and naturalization of the hegemonic secular-liberal conceptualization of agency that render women like Najwa devoid of voice and as victims of patriarchy. In this sense, it could be argued that Najwa is trying to embrace the act of self-realization and individual empowerment through dutiful acts of religiosity.

Aboulela's mosque members' repeated enactments of bodily practices like praying, fasting, veiling and Quran recitation aid them to perfect virtues like piety, humility and compassion, that simultaneously provide them with avenues of submission and agential power. In this sense, Aboulela's oeuvre offers a striking variation from the liberal feminist discussions of human agency arbitrarily defined in terms of "acts that challenge social norms" and not in terms of "those that uphold them" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 5). Aboulela's novel thus narrate the lives of Muslim women who choose Islam as life-enhancing and as a source of empowerment. In this regard, there is a marked departure from the more popular Muslim women's narratives like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel: My Life* (2007) and other popular escape narratives that thrive on dramatizing the lives of women who disown religion as a form of enslavement.

Performing Faith and Cultivating a Moralistic Self as an Alternative Coping Mechanism

As inferred from her novels, Aboulela's narratives are deeply influenced by her religious sensibilities in such a way that it guides all aspects of her characters' lives. In discussing religion as an integral component of identity, Aboulela follows a different trajectory from

that of the much sought after writers like Nafisi and Hirsi Ali for whom Islam is not a choice but a confinement imposed on them by a patriarchal culture. In focusing on religion as lived experience rather than as a homogenous entity, Aboulela foregrounds the diverse, complex and evolving nature of beliefs and practices. This gives us a better understanding of the complex ways in which “religions are the products of considerable human creativity, cultural improvisation, and construction from diverse elements” (McGuire, 2008, p. 185).

Mahmood’s (2005) experience and ethnographic research with a large number of Egyptian women from diverse social, cultural, economic and educational background in *Politics of Piety* adds nuance to the complexities of Muslim women’s religious identity by interrogating the analytical tools developed by a privileged discourse of western liberal feminism regarding agency and empowerment. Similarly by chronicling Muslim women’s everyday lives and highlighting the role of faith in shaping their identities, Aboulela follows a practice-oriented interpretation of religion to uphold and enact an Islamic “discursive tradition” that problematizes the liberal “naturalization of freedom as a social ideal” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 10).

By voicing the stories of those women of faith who are often dismissed as acting under ‘false consciousness’, Aboulela subverts the normative ideas of subject and agency defined in terms of a liberal secular framework. Her novels are led by protagonists, who, in mainstream narratives are normally excluded from the trajectory of liberal progressive modernity as they are women whose worldview is inspired by Islam, and is shaped, as argued by Hassan (2011), in part by their minority and immigrant status (p.181). By painting a particularly detailed picture of her characters’ religious life and by inscribing the pervasiveness of faith in their daily transnational lives that help them to cope up with the ethical dilemmas of building up new life in a new country, Aboulela challenges the Western stereotypical view that Islam is singularly responsible for the oppression of Muslim women and that religion is always imposed upon Muslim women much against their choice and free will. Instead, the emotional depth and the negotiations maneuvered by her characters foreground an alternate conception of religiosity that tells a different story than the overused tropes

of submission and indoctrination.

Though the role of religion in public life is still viewed with apprehension, there is no denial of the fact that religion plays a crucial role in people's everyday life and identity construction. Aboulela's acknowledgement of the emancipatory potential of religion in her novels aligns with recent feminists' views of accommodating religion as necessary for true democracy and citizenship. In giving a voice to religiously inspired modes of living, Aboulela echoes views forwarded by Aune (2015) and other feminists who advocate the "religious inclusion perspective" in their contention that "secularism in separating religion from the state, renders religious perspectives invisible and religious people disenfranchised" (p.168). Aboulela's depiction of the everyday social contexts in which her characters live and act gives us a new way of thinking about the role of lived religion in the public and private spheres. Aboulela's narratives highlight religious women's agency by directly addressing criticisms about the vexing relationship between gender and religion, in a way that affords acknowledgement and legitimacy to the everyday religious experiences of Muslim women. As Asad has pointed out, the meaning of agency has historically and culturally evolved over time and therefore cannot be applied as a universal reference point of the liberal politics of modernity (19).

Aboulela's novels circulate in a market within a critical paradigm where readers look for authenticity and expect insights into the life of the Muslim 'other'. In this sense, Aboulela, like other Muslim writers, is weighed down by what Rehna Ahmed (2012) calls the "'burden of representation' in a climate of fear and perceived threat" about the increasing presence of Muslims in the west (p.52). The responsibility they bear as 'insiders' expected to furnish the readers with authentic accounts of Muslim life, argues Ahmed, "endows them with a particular potency to challenge but also, alternatively, to reproduce and confirm such discourses" (p. 52). Such expectations place on these texts the burden of being authentic representations of the immigrant Muslim experience in the context of political events that have given more visibility to Muslim communities in the West.

Aboulela's novels and short stories are noteworthy for the

nuanced ways in which they grapple with the range of issues diasporic Muslims confront in their daily lives; including the challenges they face while living in non-Muslim, predominantly secular societies in the west. Of these various challenges, the most arduous one to mediate is having to live as a practicing Muslim of faith in a location far removed from the familiar religious atmosphere at home. Both her novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret* therefore highlight the complexities of devout Muslim women's everyday life punctured by cultural dislocation and a crippling sense of nostalgia for home with its intimate religious ambience and flavor. They are also women for whom their religious identity is a defining feature and an integral part of their immigrant lives, whose mediation of British Muslim identity "unhinges the naturalized triad of race, religion and nation" (Hassan, 2011, p.181). The conflicts her characters face often stem out of their efforts to compromise their motives and actions with the principles of Islamic beliefs and practices, how to remain faithful to their religion, how to balance the sacred and secular, while living in a location that is not conducive to the outward expression of their religious views.

While most Muslim writers like Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali, Azar Nafisi, and Hanif Kureishi have amassed huge popularity for their depiction of Islam in a way that confirm and reproduce a view of Islam as incomparably tradition bound and oppressive to women, a new generation of writers like Aboulela and Mohja Kahf rewrite this hegemonic western narrative of Islam with a view to reshape the study of gender in Muslim societies. This commitment to one's religious identity and willingness to represent the varieties of migrant experience from the perspective of a believing woman is what makes Aboulela's narrative different and decisive in the contemporary literary scene. As Nash (2012) contends, "To actually embrace the religious mindset of the Muslim Other, debilitating though it might be in terms of one's cultural credibility- 'committing profession suicide' as a character in one of Aboulela's novel puts it- was and is still a possibility her work testifies" (pp.26-27). Compared to a generation of writers like Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, who stuck to postcolonial and secular themes, the present generation of writers like Aboulela, have started to address issues related to Islam with greater complexity and

nuance. These women who are erased from the hermeneutical spaces of history and religion are claiming the religion for themselves in a way that is more pluralistic and inclusive.

As Aboulela herself clarifies, her intention to write is prompted by the two crucial parts of her identity, her nationality and her religion; a decision that can be seen as a political statement whereby she subverts a set of misconceptions the West have about Islam and the Third World countries. In the essay “Moving away from Accuracy”, Aboulela (2002) states that her decision to write is prompted by her desire to forward an alternative and valid way of life, “To prove that Khartoum is nicer than London, more beautiful than Edinburgh ... I don’t think so. Not to prove, but to express, to show, that it is a valid place, a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war, not a backward place to be written off” (p.204).

Conclusion

Said in *Orientalism* (1978) has demonstrated the “total absence of any cultural position” making it possible to discuss Islam and Muslims other than the hegemonic literary discourse on Islam so eagerly embraced by Orientalists (p. 27). This always already existing cultural and ideological stereotypes earlier popularized by Orientalists are now being normalized by native informant writers., Aboulela uses her narratives against this popular trend to bring about a positive change in the way the West views Islam and Muslims so as to have a more equal relationship based on understanding and respect. In this manner, her writings are important interventions in a literary landscape where the possibilities of defining Muslim women’s identities are markedly constrained by preexisting stereotypical categories. As the author’s life embodies movement between cultures, languages and nationalities, her works can be studied for the inspired ways in which they highlight the global movement towards plurality, diversity and inclusion.

Notwithstanding critiques of unrealistic Islamisation of goodness and an apparent endorsement of submissiveness and silence on pressing issues, this novel can be seen as post secular text disentangling itself from the secular tradition of the English novel to focus on

cross-cultural hybrid spaces and experiences. Creating space for scholarship on pietistic subjectivity by restoring agency to religiously observant women is significant in itself and has far reaching impact on discourses of gender, subjectivity and Islam as it challenges hegemonic assumptions about the docile female Muslim subject.

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