

Reversing Stereotypes: Muslim Women's Identity and Experiences in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*
and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf



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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oliur Rahman Sun', is displayed on a light gray rectangular background.

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kashfia', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Kashfia Israt

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Dedication

I dedicate my thesis paper to all the Muslim women who feel both empowered and stigmatized for their religious identity across the world.

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
neither the cause of your disarray
nor the path to your liberation
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze
It will not save us from our attackers
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun
Untangle your hands from my hair
so I can comb and delight in it,
so I can honour and anoint it,
so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love. (Mohja Kahf, 1998)

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a close textual analysis of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) to investigate how these novels challenge stereotypical representations of Muslim women in Western discourse. Guided by Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism," the study examines how the selected novels subvert the monolithic portrayal of Muslim women as passive, oppressed, and backward as depicted in Orientalist literature. Drawing insights from Stuart Hall's arguments of "cultural representation" and "stereotyping," the study shows that Muslims, particularly Muslim women are not victim of their religion, Islam, rather, due to their religious identity, they often encounter violence, stigma, and are 'othered' in the face of Islamophobia and Xenophobia in Western societies. The study further draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of "dialogism" and "polyphony" to analyze how these novels offer a dialogic narrative which presents diverse voices and multiple perspectives on Muslim women's identity formation. By focusing on it, this study argues that *Minaret* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* subvert the monophony and authoritative narratives of Orientalist literature. Overall, the study draws attention to the essentiality of considering the diverse perspectives of Muslim women to reverse stereotypes and understand the complex experiences Muslim women encounter in both Western and native cultural contexts.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Orientalist Representation, Subversive Narratives, Leila Aboulela, Mohja Kahf

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Orientalism as a Western discourse of defining, ruling, and dominating the Orient, is “nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths” because “what is commonly circulated by [cultural discourse and exchange within a culture] is not ‘truth’ but representations” (Said 6, 21). Similarly, Orientalist discourse of Muslim Women which reduces Muslim women to a fixed, and oversimplified image, is a stereotypical representation by the West. This Orientalist discourse considers Muslim women, especially the visible marker of their religious identity- veil or hijab as markers of oppression, backwardness, and powerlessness. Popular culture during the 1970s played a major role in essentializing the Orientalist stereotypes to depict Muslims and Arabs as exotic, backward, or dangerous. In *Orientalism*, Said has elaborately explained how Western literature, art, and media portrayed the Middle East and Islam as static, monolithic, and inferior to the West. He specifically comments that the “othering” of Islam has eventually contributed to a broader cultural perception of Muslims as inherently threatening and incompatible with Western values: “Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a terror” (59).

In the study of “Media representation of Muslims and Islam from 2000 to 2015” Saifuddin Ahmed and Jorg Matthes show that in the West, Muslims are “negatively framed, while Islam is dominantly portrayed as a violent religion” (219). Some studies show that even before 9/11, alongside literature, films and television shows extensively have portrayed Muslims as villains, sheikhs with oil riches, or terrorists (Shaheen). After 9/1, Orientalist narratives about Muslims have further been reinforced causing widespread Islamophobia across the Euro-Western

world which limits Muslims to one-dimensional image and that is dangerous, terrorist and backward.

Mahmudul Hasan argues that Orientalist literature plays a key role in the construction and reinforcement of these stereotypical narratives. It is divided into two categories based on time period and specific focus - "classical Orientalist literature" and neo-Orientalist literature. Classical Orientalist literature are those produced during the colonial period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the focus on overall non-white "other". Neo-Orientalist literature are those produced after the second world war, particularly from the late twentieth centuries, and especially after 9/11 with the specific focus on the Muslims and Middle East. This neo-Orientalist literature writes extensively and exclusively about Muslim women's sufferings and oppression by Islam and Muslim culture with an outcry for going to a saving mission. Abu Lughod comments on these literary texts which repeatedly tell the world the stories of Muslim women's oppression and vulnerability. She also highlights how these texts show the world how earnestly the "oppressed Muslim women" strive to abandon their religious and cultural values and practices in order to embrace Western culture by heart and soul as a means of gaining liberty and progression (96). Abu Lughod argues that such a narrative is an attempt by the imperial powers to legitimize 'going to war for [Muslim] women' mission in the lands of the Muslim. Thus, it gives the message to the world that these helpless women need to be saved from the oppression of Islam and their patriarchal guardians. To ensure their liberty and autonomy, the discourse advocates for the intervention by the so-called civilized West (Abu Lughod 55).

This inferior attitude towards Islam as a religion and its socio-cultural practices not only has helped “to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience,” but also the repetitive and constant representation of such images about Muslim women blurs the multifaceted aspects of Muslim community, particularly Muslim women’s diverse experiences (Said 1-2). Such one dimensional perspective of Orientalist literature, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, gives rise to “monologism” - a form of discourse with a monolithic viewpoint constructed and dominated by one group of people who usually hold an authoritative position. Bakhtin believes that in the formulation of a discourse or meaning making process, there should be a dialogic approach which incorporates multiple voices which he calls as ‘polyphony’. In contrast to that, the monologic approach of Orientalist literature often discards myriad perspectives or voices of other Muslim women who celebrate their religious identity proudly and consciously, let alone feeling oppressed by it.

Considering the reductive approach of Orientalist literature , this thesis intends to explore such two literary texts - Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* and Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* which provide the multiple voices and diverse viewpoints regarding Muslim women’s identity and veil practices. Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* highlights the story of Khadra Shamy, a Syrian immigrant going through transformative experiences as a young Muslim woman in 1970s Indiana. The narrative involves a complex journey of Khadra’s self-discovery within a devout Muslim family, and the cultural and religious challenges she and other Muslim women like her mother Ebtehaj, grandmother Teta, neighbor Zuhura face in America. On the other hand, Aboulela’s *Minaret* revolves around the story of a Sudanese Muslim girl, Najwa who reconciles her religious identity as a refugee in London. Her plight of discovering religion as a means of purpose in life reverses the stereotypical assumption of Orientalist discourse which considers

Muslim women's identity as an imposition on them. Along with the story of Najwa and Khadra, both the novels offer multiple perspectives of other Muslim women as well who view veil or Islam from different angles shaped by their sociocultural, political backgrounds, which altogether constitutes the novels' dialogic approach of showing the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's identity formation and experiences across nations. The texts, thus, challenge the stereotypical assumption of the Orientalist discourse which lies on a single story of Muslim women's oppression and sufferings caused by Islamic culture in general. Along with other contrasting viewpoints, both the texts also depict the plights of several Muslim women who prefer hijab willingly and consciously as part of expressing modesty and religio-cultural identities. To them neither Islam nor veiling seems oppressive.

Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to highlight the heterogeneity existing within Muslim community which reverses the stereotypical representation of Muslim women by the hegemonic discourse of the Occident.

1.2. Chapter Outline:

The first chapter highlights the contemporary debates regarding Muslim women's representation in the literary fields along with a short introduction of the selected novels. This section also includes the significance and main objectives of the study. Additionally, it briefly discusses how these objectives have been fulfilled by using a multidisciplinary theoretical framework comprising of Edward Said's idea of "Orientalism", Stuart Hall's theory of "cultural representation" and "stereotyping," and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "polyphony" and "dialogism." After that, the first part of the second chapter provides a brief discussion on the existing literature that promotes the Orientalist discourse of Muslim women, whereas the second part focuses on the scholarly works on the selected two novels. Focusing on Said's "Orientalism", and Hall's idea of representation and stereotype, the third chapter shows how both the novels subvert the stereotypical representation of Muslim women and the Western assumption of veil in Orientalist discourse. The fourth chapter draws on Bakhtin's notion of "polyphony" and "dialogism" to analyze how the selected novels offer multiple voices and perspectives of Muslim women and veil to emphasize their diverse and complex experiences across the world. Lastly, the fifth chapter draws a conclusion by summarizing the key arguments of the thesis.

1.3. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore how Aboulela's *Minaret* and Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* challenge stereotypical representations of Muslim women prevalent in Western discourse, drawing on Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism." It also aims to examine how these novels employ Mikhail Bakhtin's principles of "dialogism" to present diverse narratives of Muslim women's identity formation, emphasizing the complexity and plurality of their experiences. Lastly, by integrating multiple voices and perspectives, the thesis explores how novels resist the reductive and authoritative portrayals of Orientalist discourse, offering multidimensional understanding of Muslim women's lives.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How do Aboulela's *Minaret* and Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* subvert the stereotypical representation of Muslim women in Orientalist discourse, with the insights of Said's "Orientalism"?
2. How do the principles of "dialogism," and "polyphony" as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, operate within these novels to present diverse narratives of Muslim women's identity formation?

1.5. Research Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative study of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* which has been conducted through a close textual analysis. Firstly, the study focuses on the role of literature in the stereotypical representation of Muslim women in the Orientalist discourse. Based on Edward Said's ideas of "self-other" binary, stemmed from *Orientalism*, and Stuart Hall's concepts of "cultural representation" and "stereotyping", the study examines "Islamophobia", "Orientalist Gaze" towards Muslim women as depicted in the novels by pointing out the complexities in their identity formation and overall experiences both in the Euro-Western and native contexts. Secondly, guided by Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogism." and "polyphony," this thesis focuses on how the selected novels contribute to subverting the Orientalist discourse of Muslim women by incorporating multiple narratives or view points of Muslim women's identity formation. This dialogic approach of the novels challenges the monolithic perspective of Orientalist narrative which not only reflects a single voice and reductive perspective, but also often slides other voices or viewpoints of Muslim women.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Literature as a Tool of Promoting Orientalist Discourse

This section provides an overview of how various Orientalist texts over time have been contributing to reinforce stereotypical representation of Muslim women's experiences and identities in the Western discourse through repetitive narratives of their hardships and vulnerability within Muslim community. Books, memoirs, autobiographies from 1990s to 2010s written by both non-Muslim and Muslim authors have been reviewed with the references from acclaimed scholars and authors.

To begin with Jean Sasson, an American author writes about Muslim women's sufferings in the Arab world. In the Western discourse, she is widely celebrated as the voice of Middle Eastern women. Her notable New York Times Bestselling Princess Sultana series, portray harrowing accounts of oppression faced by Muslim women in Saudi Arabia. Each text focuses on systemic abuse in Islamic patriarchal societies from a new angle with meticulous details. Through Princess Sultana's narrative, Sasson highlights issues like forced marriages, honor killings, and the silencing of women under Islamic culture.

The first book on this series, *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992), introduces Princess Sultana, an elite Saudi woman, and her life of privilege overshadowed by systemic oppression of patriarchal norms under Islamic culture. Second one, *Princess Sultana's Daughters* (1994), similarly explores the struggles of Sultana's daughters under Islamic norms as they encounter cultural restrictions, societal expectations and family traditions. *Desert Royal* (1999) narrates Sultana's ongoing fight against misogyny within her royal family and Saudi society. Regarding *Desert Royal*, Abu Lughod highly criticizes Sasson's portrayal of

Sultana “who wishes to expose to the world what is really going on in her society” (92). Lughod continues with a sarcastic tone that though Sasson’s “likable heroine who has a weakness for whiskey and extravagant shopping at Bergdorf Goodman”, blames Middle Eastern men as her sole oppressor(93). Pointing to the incidents of “forced sex” that capture the essential unfreedom of women in Muslim culture, Lughod finds, the most sensual part is when Sultana and her two teenage daughters visit a Paradise like palace where they discover “a ‘harem’ of sex slaves, ‘purchased’ from their families in Asia (93-94).

Ironically though, during 9/11, Sasson pauses her writing about the Saudi princess, Sultana, only to turn her focus on other Muslim Lands particularly on Iraq, and Afghanistan. For example, *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* (2003) and *Love in a Torn Land: Joanna of Kurdistan* (2007), extend this critique to broader geographies, including Iraq and Kurdistan. Mayada depicts Mayada’s harrowing imprisonment and horrific abuses during Saddam Hussein’s regime. *Love in a Torn Land* narrates the story of Joanna Al-Askar, a Kurdish woman who risks everything for love and survival amidst the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. Her other works, such as *For the Love of a Son* (2010) tells the heart-wrenching story of Maryam, an Afghan woman searching for her abducted son, highlighting oppression of Muslim her husband.

Perhaps due to her realization of the insufficient accounts of Sultana’s hardships, Sasson resumes her Princess series again in 2014 with *Princess: More Tears to Cry* which as usual reflects on Sultana’s life as she continues to expose injustices and advocate for women’s rights in a changing Saudi landscape. One year later another sequel *Princess: Secrets to Share* (2015) reveals untold stories of Sultana’s experiences and her determination to push back against oppressive traditions. Highlighting her escape from the oppression, *Princess: Stepping Out of the Shadows* (2019) chronicles Sultana’s efforts to confront evolving cultural challenges while her

relentless attempts to save and empower other fellow women who are still in the imprisonment of their Muslim culture and patriarchal guardians.

For its unidimensional depiction of Muslim women in Middle Eastern Islamic culture, Sasson's portrayal has faced criticism. Algerine Professor and author, Houaria Bouchentouf, and Serir Ilhem observe that after the Gulf War, the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, gained attention from Western journalists and American soldiers, becoming a new focus for orientalist views (71). Houaria and Iihem remark on Sasson's Trilogy: "*Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia, Sultana's Daughters, and Sultana's Circle* about the reality of being a female in Saudi Arabia by Jean Sasson have made a significant impact on the western shaping of Saudi and all Arab women's image" (72). While her narratives illuminate severe injustices, they lack a balanced perspective, failing to showcase empowered Muslim women thriving within or actively challenging their cultural frameworks. This omission risks reinforcing stereotypes, framing Muslim societies as inherently oppressive while overlooking diverse, nuanced realities. Bouchentouf in her 2015 book, *Misrepresentation of Arab Women* claims that the notation 'Islam is a symbol of oppression for women' is a constructed image by the West, which does not represent the experience of those who live and practice their Islam in the Arab World (120).

Sasson's focus on individual suffering, often rooted in graphic and dramatic storytelling, appeals to Western audiences, aligning with Orientalist narratives. Critics argue that such depictions ignore empowered Muslim women who successfully navigate and reform their cultural landscapes, perpetuating a singular, negative portrayal of Islamic societies. Along with these types of Orientalist or neo-Orientalist texts by non-Muslim authors which sustains "the idea that Muslim women invariably live in a state of gender apartheid in their families and

societies” (“Seeking Freedom” 91). Hasan observes that many female “writers of Muslim background or bearing Muslim names or surnames who ‘write extensively and stereotypically about Islam and Muslims”’ (“Seeking Freedom” 91). To name a few, Hasan mentions about Fatima Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1975), Latifa’s *My Forbidden Face: Growing up under the Taliban: A Young Woman’s Story* (2001), Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* (2007), Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel* (2007). All of these writings have highlighted women's oppression and hardships within Muslim-majority societies, particularly patriarchy, restrictive social norms, and the perceived subjugation of women in Islamic contexts. Many of these texts frame Islam and its associated cultural practices such as veiling, or hijab as inherently oppressive toward women.

Next discussion draws on another such an author with Muslim background who writes only about women’s sufferings in the context of Islamic societies. Jasvinder Sanghera, British author and activist is renowned for her advocacy against forced marriages and abuse, particularly within South Asian communities. Born into a traditional Sikh Indian family in the UK, Sanghera’s personal experiences inspired her to break free from societal expectations and dedicate her life to combating harmful practices in Muslim societies. Her writings primarily focus on forced marriages and sexual abuses of women in Muslim culture. Her bestselling memoir, *Shame* (2007), recounts her harrowing escape from a forced marriage and the cultural stigma she faced as a result. It is “a success story to inspire anyone” according to the Time Magazine. Sanghera’s second work *Daughters of Shame* (2009) builds on the previous work *Shame*, focuses on the lives of Muslim women affected by forced marriages and honor-based abuse. The book shares the struggles of survivors who turned to Sanghera and her charity, Karma Nirvana, for help. It attempts to expose the challenges Muslim women face within their

community in seeking freedom and healing. The third one, *Shame Travel* (2011) tells the touching tale of Jasvinder's journey to India in the mission of rescuing and saving her half-sister.

Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003) by Iranian author and Professor Azar Nafisi is another New York Times bestselling work which has been translated into 32 languages. This book condemns Iranian culture, especially veiling, which has been portrayed as a symbol of oppression and control upon Iranian women. Abu Lughod highlights Debashi's argument about how this type of writings by "the native, who confirms the absence of rights for Muslim women in Iran by glorifying classics of Western literature, denigrating local culture and traditions" (106). Another such writing is *Married by Force* (2005) by Leila, which depicts an overgeneralized picture of the Moroccan Muslim community. It is a story about a French girl of Moroccan descent, who endures violence and oppression within her family. Her autonomy, and yearning to align with the freer lifestyle of French girls are disrupted by the strict father and abusive brothers. Additionally, the forced marriage to a man she does not like adds more to her sufferings. The most objectionable aspect is hiring a predatory imam to exorcise her for resisting societal norms, which highlights how Moroccan culture uses religion as a tool for suppressing dissent, turning spiritual practices into instruments of fear and coercion. The book is written in the aftermath of Leila's suicide attempts and stays in a psychiatric hospital. Like Zana, Sold's heroine, Leila finally escapes her forced marriage and finds freedom. It is then that she tells us her story (92).

Another bestselling British author of Yemeni origin, Zana Muhsen who is widely celebrated for her autobiographical collaborated books with the famous British ghostwriter Andrew Crofts, *Sold* (1994) and *A Promise to Nadia* (2000). Sold narrates how their father has sold Zana and her sister, Nadia into marriage to an Yemeni man. After eight years of unbearable

hardships and tortures of their husband, Zana manages to escape but Nadia remains there. In the follow-up book, *A Promise to Nadia*, Zana shares her continued struggle to fulfill her promise to free her sister. The narrative delves into the emotional toll of Nadia's captivity and Zana's frustration with bureaucratic hurdles, legal systems, and cultural barriers that prevent her from bringing her sister home.

Crofts's 2009 book with Saira Ahmed, *Disgraced: Forced to Marry a Stranger, Betrayed by My Own Family, Sold My Body to Survive, This Is My Story* is another addition to this genre of what Abu Lughod names "A Taste of (for) Force" (91). It is an autobiographical account by Saira Ahmed. Born into a strict Pakistani family in the UK, Saira faces immense cultural and familial pressure from an early age. Her life takes a devastating turn when her parents force her into an arranged marriage with a stranger, which leads to further suffering. It is noteworthy how even the marketing platforms assist to promote this type of monolithic message as described on Amazon.co.uk about the book: "Disgraced is the true story of an innocence ruined and a life shattered. But it is also a tale of survival told by a woman who has finally discovered her true voice." Hannah Shah's *The Imam's Daughter* (2009), another amazing case of this genre, states a "gruesome story of sexual abuse by her father, an imam in North England of rural Pakistani origin (Lughod 96).

Lastly, addressing the three contemporary South Asian writers of Muslim background, Rushdie (1947–), Hanif Kureishi (1954–), Monica Ali (1967–), Hasan further argues that in their writings their primary focus on Islam's role in the vulnerability of Muslim community, exhibit an attempt to revive literary orientalism in a neocolonialist context (91). Lila Abu Lughod mentions about the pulp fiction which often portrays Muslim women's sufferings of physical and sexual abuses with sensual specificities. She continues her comments on the

“public appetite for such depictions of sordid and brutal treatment of women by Muslim or Arab men [which] is disquieting (95). Abu Lughod also comments: In our world of mass media, these iconic abused- but- defiant Muslim women are feted in elite New York circles, featured in glossy magazines, and funded lavishly through personal charity. They warm the hearts of those who promote them, sell their stories, and, as Sherene Razack puts it, “steal their pain” for profit and personal comfort. As I have argued, these stories are key ingredients in the normalization of political and military hostility toward countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq (107) by the American and European imperial powers. Sahar Amer has also commented on this issue in her book, *What is Veiling?* (2014):

Contemporary Muslim women continue to be viewed as subservient objects to male authority and subject to manipulation by fathers, brothers, and fundamentalist regimes. In this view, contemporary veiled Muslim women too await their liberation by Western forces, who are known today as the spreaders of democracy (4).

Under such contexts and conditions, these stories often focus on a single story of Muslim women’s oppression and sufferings that provide a general image of the entire communities where they inhabit. By doing so, the narratives risk generalizing or stereotyping Muslims as inherently ‘backward’, ‘barbarous’, ‘oppressive’, ‘terrorist’ while overlooking the cultural, social, and political complexities within these societies. Abu Lughod states that the result is that these best sellers that trade on images of bondage, sexual abuses, imprisonments, lead readers to surmise that oppression is normal in the Muslim community, that this is Islamic culture, and these women must be rescued (91). The Orientalist discourse presents only one side of the story about Muslim women, ignoring the other perspectives and voices of millions of Muslim women who hold and take pride in their religious identity where Islam is an integral part of their lives. These reductive

assumptions of Muslim women's identity and experiences give rise to stereotypical images about Islam and Muslims. In order to reverse this stereotypical representations, Islamic feminists like Leila Aboulela, Shelina Janmohamed, Mohja Kahf who themselves practice hijab and cherish their Muslim identities, feel the necessity to offer alternative representations through their writings by depicting the lived experiences of Muslim women who find solace and purpose in Islam and their Muslim identity.

2.2. Reviews on the Selected Two Novels

This section highlights some scholarly articles on *Minaret* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Through their studies, the scholars have mainly pointed out the issues of Muslim women's identity, struggles, freedom, and empowerment in diaspora, and Islam and Islamophobia in global stages, which can provide valuable insights to establish the main arguments of this thesis.

Muslims around the world have various ways of representing themselves, which shows the heterogeneity existed in the community. Alkarawi and Bahar have highlighted this heterogeneous image of Muslim identities in Khaf's novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Khadra, the protagonist, caught in the liminality, always in search for a definite identity of her own from an ambiguous and conflicted stance. She, through her plight of self-discovery, creates "a new identity for herself without compromising her [religious] identity so as to be accepted by mainstream America" (Alkarawi and Bahar 105). By observing various means of being as Muslim women through her grandmother, mother, friends in a secular stage, Khadra resolves to reach a negotiated position.

Muslim women's religious identity is global and can be a conscious choice. In a non-Muslim majority context, despite the issues of diasporic anxieties and Islamophobic struggles, many muslim women willingly embrace Islam and find fulfillment through their religious identities. Hasan in his article, points out that this "liberatory and emancipatory aspects of Islam" challenges the (neo)Orientalist discourses that "project Islam and Muslim women in a narrow and essentialist way" (102). Najwa, once a non-religious muslim, becomes a practicing muslim and finds solace in Islam. As a lone displaced refugee in London, her economic struggles are surpassed by the hardships she faces due to her religiosity. Despite all kinds of obstacles, she makes choices on her own to veil and attend the sermons in the mosque without any interruption

of family or friends: “No external—familial, domestic, social and cultural—pressures or inhibitions influence these informed and studied choices Najwa” (98). Embracing Islam or veiling is completely her personal and autonomous choice being shaped by her faiths, beliefs and lived experiences. Najwa’s plight, thus, reinforces Hasan’s argument that Muslim women’s religiosity is not always a sign of oppression and suppression on them and not confined to geographical or cultural boundaries: “Islam crosses spatiotemporal boundaries and has the potential to feel at home in various parts of the world” (102). After all, in the case of Najwa, despite being far from her own community and family, she seeks strength and agency through her religiosity. Hasan comments that her life gives an alternative definition of freedom which asserts that real freedom for a muslim woman is the right to choose her own way of life which certainly can be based on the “Islamic worldview.” For Najwa freedom means to come back to Islam and not go away from it (98).

Similarly, extending beyond its origins, how Islam flourishes and Muslims explore their identities in the global world has also been examined by other scholars. Nausheen Ishaque et al. in their article show the interconnectedness between identity, religion and diaspora. Globalized Islam, as Nausheen Ishaque et al. explain, “generates opportunities for the recognition of identity through faith” for immigrant Muslims (695), pointing to Najwa’s plight of reconciling her religious identity in the diaspora of London. With the help of a globalized Muslim community, she revisits Islam and explores the opportunities globalized Islam offers her. London as a global diasporic space offers her to reconcile with her Muslim identity, despite its associated hardships and struggles. As a result of it, she creates a “variegated identity” both “as a Muslim woman and a global citizen” (694).

Within one year Hasan again writes focusing on Muslim women's hijab (veil) where he argues that hijab as a mark of liberation also costs one to face hostile challenges in liberal Western societies. Hasan claims hostility to hijab is not only visible in non-Muslim majority communities, but also is prevalent in the Muslim-majority contexts: "They show that hostility to hijab crosses geographical or religious boundaries (163). Najwa's lived experiences bear the traces of his argument. In spite of opposition from family, friends and Islamophobic hostility, Najwa resolves to embrace this visible marker of her religious identity with a long contemplation and soul searching journey (147). Her experiences with veiling address the "gap between representation and reality when it comes to Muslims" (qtd. in 149). Najwa abandons her previous Western ways of life while living in Sudan and goes through a religious metamorphosis in her diasporic displacement in London. London, despite being a place of immense freedom to continue her previous lifestyle and threats to veiling, becomes the place where she accepts veiling as a "means of liberation and fulfilment" along with other Islamic practices (Hasan 149). Because of its distinguishable visibility, when hijab becomes an "added vulnerability of diasporic Muslim women" to being stigmatized and victim of hate crimes, many Muslim women who are like Najwa show their personal preference for opting veil as a marker of their religious identity. Veils become a symbol of resisting the forces that attempt to snatch their rights of choice. Najwa's assertion to veil is, thus, a claim of many Muslim women's "rights to freedom of religion and religious choice" who liberates them from the shackles of Western notion of freedom and rights by asserting their identities through their religion (162).

In the similar vein, Roshan and Tamimi also highlight Najwa's transformation from a liberal stance in a conservative Islamic country, Sudan to a religious entity in a secular setting in London is significant to understand the diversity of Muslim women's diasporic identities. Unlike

other diasporic individuals, Najwa does not go through the dilemmas of identity crisis. Roshan and Tamimi argue that her Muslim identity is a feminist stance which has come from the inner consciousness of her faith (15). She finds the guidance of Islam as a source of comfort and safety when she goes through economic hardships and class struggles as a maid servant in the house of Lamiya (16). Her connection with Islam gets so strong that even when she faces harassment by the bigotry on her way home, she never thinks of removing her hijab. Najwa's firm stance to wear hijab has not come as a form of resistance but "rather an effort to make her body more personal than political" (16). Regarding this Agnieszka Stanecka also comments that "Najwa's covered female body is not the symbol of resistance, but rather nurturing power that comes directly from transparent doctrines of Islam" (82). Like others, her diasporic identity is not a hybrid one, she has established it solely based on her religious faith and its practices.

Nonetheless, Muslim women in the Western contexts, face double patriarchal logic where their bodies become a space of patriarchal control and racialized othering. This logic not only dehumanizes Muslim women by their Orientalist view of looking at veiling as a sign of backwardness and inferiority, it also tries to control the Muslim women with the Western liberal definition of freedom and modernity in terms of sartorial practices. In the words of Magearu, "cultural racism intertwined with gendered logic of secular societies" doubles "the othering of Muslim women" (Magearu 145). Her study on the mechanism of Islamophobia in regards to Arab Muslim women's experience in the U.S. shows how "bodily disorientation" occurs from "racialized gaze", which leads Arab Muslim women to an "existential displacement". Racializing vision, according to Magearu, stems from the stereotypical "Orientalist assumptions about Muslim culture that inscribe gender violence as inherent to the practice of Islam" (146).

Magearu also shows that the orientalist assumption of hijab as a symbol of oppression not only implies an inherent backwardness with Muslim identity, it also reduces the diverse meanings of hijab. Firstly, this overgeneralized “projection of gender oppression onto Islam, specifically onto the bodies of veiled women” is “a form of cultural racism that hides itself under the guise of anti-sexist and even feminist liberatory discourse” (146). Secondly, this reduction to simply a visible bodily feature, erases the diverse meanings and agency Muslim women associate with their cultural and religious practices. In a secular setting, Muslim women’s practices like wearing a hijab, become hyper-visible. That is why being under the surveillance of the Orientalist gaze where racialized stares, comments and slurs are constantly projected towards the Muslims who feel unsafe by the surrounding or uncomfortable of themselves. This bodily awareness rising from the “racial objectification” creates “self objectification” in the psyche of the racialized subjects, which limits them to freely interact with their surroundings (138). Consequently, the racial gaze harms the racialized subjects by disorienting them - feeling out of place, marking them as “other” - feeling outsiders even in spaces they belong to, and ultimately diminishing their “expression of agency and creativity” (138). The paper concludes that in the phenomenon of Arab Muslim women’s gendered racialization in Western societies, the structures of racialization and patriarchy intersect to amplify their marginalization.

Due to such adversities, Muslim women often face arduous challenges in secular societies if they want to empower themselves. They opt for a negotiated position without compromising their religious identities. Lashley analyzes how Khadra, the protagonist of Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, as a Muslim woman in American society negotiates her “double consciousness”. Her family’s strict religious background in America, always holds Khadra in a constant clash between two the cultures - Muslim and secular. Finally, her liminality leads her to

a negotiated position - meaning she embraces a hybrid identity which is dominated by her Muslim culture: “she is both an individual and a social construct created and shaped primarily by the dominant culture” and “her dominant culture is Muslim” (52). Lashley also remarks on her transformation from a passive receiver who acts based on what her parents tell her to do, to an active participant who now “exerts her human rights, specifically her right to understand her religion” creating a “thirdness” in her consciousness (60). Through her hybrid identity, Khadra asserts her agency and empowers herself as a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim majority context. The vibrant tangerine scarf stands for her acceptance of this hybridity where she upholds her updated but authentic version of what it means to be a Muslim woman in American culture (63). Lashley concludes that Khadra’s portrayal thus breaks the oversimplified representation of Muslim women by highlighting the multifaceted complexity a Muslim woman faces both in Muslim and secular societies.

Chapter 3: Reversing the Stereotypes

3.1. Najwa's Experiences in Muslim Majority Sudan

3.1.1. Social Status and Family Background in Sudan

Najwa's story begins in Sudan, where she enjoys a life of privilege and affluence. She is portrayed as an educated girl from a Sudanese elite aristocratic family living in Khartoum. Najwa's father holds a high-ranking position as an advisor to the president. His political affiliation with the president is the key for the political influence and the unparalleled socio-economic privileges they enjoy. This background placing her at the top of the social hierarchy in Sudan, affords her a comfortable lifestyle and numerous advantages. As part of the Sudanese elite, Najwa and her family enjoy significant social and economic privileges. This status is reflected in their luxurious lifestyle, including the presence of multiple servants in their household, new brand cars, privileges to go to university, English medium schools, spending vacations in different European countries, and so on. Najwa is one of the few girls who drive in Khartoum. As part of the elite class, Najwa and her brother, Omar have access to quality education and opportunities that are not available to the majority of Sudanese citizens. This privilege is evident in her university education and her general detachment from the socio-political issues affecting most of Sudan. Najwa and Omar love to go to parties at night with their aristocratic friends at the local American club and dance in the "red and blue disco lights" with hip-hop English songs (29). Sometimes, Omar secretly visits bars where he along with his friends drinks and takes drugs. During vacation, the entire family visits Europe and explores everything that brings them closer to the Western culture: "In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have"

(20). Omar gets fascinated by everything related to Euro-Western cultures, who thinks independence from the British is a “shame” and creates a great obstruction to Sudan's progress and modernity (17).

It is noteworthy that due to her social background, Najwa is often subject to teasing comments from her university teachers and friends particularly who are associated with the Communist Party, the Democratic Front. Her teacher, Anwar Al-Sir, for example, criticizes her father's position in connection with the “landowning families, capitalists, [and] the aristocracy” who he thinks are responsible for the country's dire condition (Aboulela 17). Similarly, Najwa senses the mocking tone when her friend, Anwar remarks on sunny days: “It's hot, isn't it? And you're used to air conditioners (18). Or the question regarding having six servants for four family members in her house: “Does it not strike you that it is wrong for such wide discrepancies to exist between people? There's famine in the west. This country is one of the poorest in the world” (39). Najwa, thus, often becomes the target of such remarks for the privileges she and her family enjoys due to her father's association with the president. However, this close tie to the government becomes a pivotal factor in their eventual downfall.

3.1.2. Political Context and Its Impact on Najwa's Family

The political situation in Sudan during the 1980s serves as a critical backdrop to Najwa's story and dramatically alters her family's fortunes. Significant political instability, including the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005) and a series of coups form the volatile context in which Najwa's family's status is suddenly upended. First part of the novel is set in Khartoum during 1984-5 when the Sudanese Second Civil war is going on between the central government in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). To explain the roots of these wars, Douglas Johnson argues that "Religion, local perceptions of race and social status, economic exploitation, and colonial and post-colonial interventions are all elements in Sudan's current civil war, but none, by itself, fully explains it" (1-2). President Gaafar Nimeiry has violated the laws several times between north and south Sudan concerning the control over the newly found oil resources, which eventually leads to a serious second civil war in 1983 when Nimeiry imposes punishment codes based on Sharia Law across the nation which infuriates the minorities mostly in the autonomous region of the Christian Southern Sudan. Aboulela gives a glimpse of the coup in 1985, when Nimeri was overthrown and a new government was formed.

Due to a military coup, reflective of the real-life political instability in Sudan, her father, once a high-ranking government official, is accused of corruption and executed. This event marks the dramatic fall of Najwa's family from their privileged position. As a result of it, Najwa and her family flee to London, leaving behind their wealth, status, and the only life they are known to. This abrupt transition from a life of luxury to one of uncertainty and hardship is a pivotal moment in Najwa's journey towards faith.

3.1.3. Cultural and Religious Context: A Growing Consciousness towards Spirituality

While coming from a Muslim background, Najwa's initial portrayal suggests a relatively secular lifestyle. This aspect of her identity becomes more significant as the story progresses and she undergoes a spiritual transformation. None of her family members are closely related to Islamic practices except some occasional rituals. Three particular instances showcase Najwa's growing consciousness about modesty and her appearance at public events. From her childhood, she is used to wearing western clothes and neither she nor her family are not concerned about it. Even though she sees her mother wearing robes without head covering, especially during occasions, when she likes to set her hair from parlour and keep it open. But, eventually, Najwa starts noticing the lingering gazes of the boys, particularly how Anwar looks at her. Firstly, Najwa feels awkward noticing Anwar stares at her tight blouse. Referring to this Najwa states: "He kept looking at me. I felt that my blouse was too tight and my face too hot. I must have exhaled because he said, 'It's hot, isn't it? And you're used to air conditioners.'" There was a teasing in his voice" (17-18). Anwar, here, uses the word "hot" as a pun to indicate both to the weather and to Najwa's appearance in her tight-fitting dress. Afterwards, she becomes more critical about her western outfit. Second instance occurs when she encounters the provincial girls on her campus. These girls in her class who always maintain more coverings and wear long robes, not only fascinate Najwa but also awaken a sense of awareness of the contrast with her own clothes:

With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses. Many girls dressed like me, so I was not unusual. Yet these

provincial girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobes that covered their slimness - pure white cotton covering their arms and hair (20).

Here, her awareness of how she presents herself to others is heightened, and she feels a subtle tension between her Westernized style and the modesty she observes and admires in others. Another instance shows her admiration of such modest clothes:

She wore a blue tote today and looked even more cute. All the girls wore white tubes in the mornings and coloured ones in the evening. I liked watching the change in them, from the plain white in the morning to blue and pink flowers, patterns in bold colours (48).

The more Najwa observes these girls, the more she admires their dressing styles and becomes critical of her own appearance. For the third time, she seems concerned about her appearance in public spaces, particularly at the American club and Randa's house. Najwa shares her discomfort about her tight trousers with Randa who immediately dismisses her in support of such dress: 'My trousers are too tight.' An awkward twisting around to see my hips in the mirror... 'Your trousers are fine - how did you get them on?' (29). Also at Randa's house, Najwa pulls her blouse out of her trouser to hide her hips when she and Randa, who also puts a long-sleeved shirt over her halter-neck T-shirt to appear more covered and presentable, go downstairs. This may seem a small mundane act but it reveals an internal shift within Najwa to align herself with a sense of respectability and modesty.

It is crucial to note that her appreciation of modest ways of clothing has come out of her self-consciousness. This awakening has arisen from within herself, which is not imposed by anyone - neither family nor friends. Lila Abu-Lughob has argued that many Muslim women wear hijab and prefer modest clothing on their own as they embrace it as part of their religious and cultural identities. However, the contrasting attitude is seen in Randa's thoughts. She, like the

West, thinks veiling is a symbol of backwardness and smart girls do not wear such coverings. Her inferior attitude towards the girls who cover themselves, is evident when she derogatively remarks her comments on the magazine picture of covered Muslim women during the Iran-Iraq war:

Totally retarded,' she said, looking at the picture and handing me a spoon. 'We're supposed to go forward, not go back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything? (35).

As a result of her attitude, when Najwa mentions that in her university some girls wear such coverings, Randa gets offended since she herself did not pass to get into the university. Randa snorts: "Huh... 'I didn't study enough,' she said glumly. 'I just didn't take these exams seriously'" (36). However, these three particular moments not only highlight Najwa's shifting attitude toward her appearance and appreciation of modest clothing but also reflect an internal transition in preference to her religious identity. This growing awareness ultimately manifests into reality when she consciously starts wearing hijab with other Islamic practices in London. This is a conscious effort she makes to reconcile her past identity with the new values she is adopting, as she begins to reconfigure her sense of self in relation to her faith and cultural expectations.

3.2. Najwa's Experiences as a Muslim Immigrant in London

3.2.1. Transformed Social and Cultural Conditions

Najwa's life in London represents a stark contrast to her previous existence in Sudan, marked by significant changes in her social status and identity. Najwa gradually loses everything that sustains her survival instinct including family, friends, and a solvent economic background. Her mother's death and Omar's imprisonment on the accusation of drug dealings, not only alienates her from the social position but also pushes her to an extreme economic crisis. Lost in despair, Najwa tries to find a means for survival. Without a university degree and sufficient skills, she finds no other ways to manage her livelihood. From being a member of the Sudanese elite, Najwa finds herself working as a maid for wealthy families in London. This dramatic shift in her social and economic status highlights the precarious nature of privilege tied to political power.

She also faces cultural and social challenges. As an immigrant, Najwa goes through feelings of alienation and a lower social status, which deeply affect her. She must find a new environment where her previous social standing holds no value, which forces her to reconstruct her identity.

3.2.2. Relationships and Social Interactions

Najwa's relationship with Anwar and afterwards, with Tamer, the younger brother of her employer, illustrates the complexities of her evolving identity and social interactions in London. As Najwa navigates her new life in London, she gradually distances herself from the materialism and social networks, especially with Anwar, that once defined her. This internal transformation allows her to see beyond the ideological constraints of her past and find new sources of meaning and identity. On the other hand, though faith and religious identity brings Najwa and Tamer close to each other, the unequal social status obstructs their union since Tamer's family does not accept Najwa. Najwa's decision to move on and instead plan a pilgrimage in Mecca further strengthens her bond with faith. Overall, Najwa's experiences in London reflect the broader themes of cultural tension and identity negotiation faced by immigrants. Her story challenges stereotypical images of Muslim women and offers a complex view of identity in a diasporic context.

3.2.3. Spiritual Journey and Identity Reconstruction

This tragic shift from an elite background to a working class refugee in London leads Najwa being closer to spirituality. She starts visiting the nearby Regent's Park Mosque. In the midst of these challenges and hardships, religion gives her comfort and refuge as it is evident in her contemplation of her new found happiness: "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" back in Sudan (Aboulela 230). Initially, she tries to find lost love and affection of family from Anwar in London. But this more intimate relationship becomes tormenting for her. In response to her changed circumstances, Najwa turns to her faith for solace and meaning as she confesses: "My comfort is Allah's mercy, Allah's justice" (245). Her decision to wear the veil becomes a significant aspect of her identity reconstruction, symbolizing her attempt to find stability and purpose in her new life. First when Najwa wears the covering, she finds it as a shield from the male gaze and objectification that she experienced before. She feels a sense of invisibility and protection: "Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me any more. I was invisible and they were quiet" (233). So, the hijab ensures her control over her body and how she is viewed by the male gaze.

Najwa's plight of religiosity stands for the lived experiences of innumerable Muslim women around the world who do not feel oppressed by religion and proudly express their religious and cultural identity through their everyday practices and clothes. Similarly, leaving everything behind, Najwa finds religion as the most reliable place to seek refuge. Her growing faith makes her stronger and more courageous to deal with any kind of hardship. This is evident when she talks with Omar at the prison:

Those people who put you in prison - they don't care about you. You think that if they forgive you they will let you out of here, but it's more important that Allah forgives you. Then He will do wonderful things for you and open doors for you. Doors you didn't even know existed (96-97).

Najwa's religious views reflect her transformation through faith. She also sees religion as a source of personal redemption and stability, which contrasts with her privileged, secular upbringing. Najwa's prayers and wearing the hijab marks a turning point in her life and reconnects with her cultural and spiritual roots: "Ever since I started to pray and wear hijab, I have been hoping he would change like I've changed" (95-96). This shows her belief in the redemptive and transformative power of faith. Because of that faith, Najwa longs for her brother to embrace religion to find peace and purpose she has discovered through faith. Najwa also critiques her family's secularism. As she views religion as a stabilizing force, she links her family's moral and social downfall to their absence of religious practice. She asserts:

If Baba and Mania had prayed... we would have stayed a normal family... 'Allah would have protected us, if we had wanted Him to, if we had asked Him to but we didn't. So we were punished (96).

This reflects her belief that faith could have provided stability and unity during challenging times. Additionally, Najwa contrasts her family's secular attitudes with the devotion of their servants, who regularly pray. She recalls how "the nightwatchman would open the gate for our car arriving late after a night out, then sit reciting the Qur'an until it was time for the dawn prayer" (96). This comparison highlights her admiration for the humility and consistency of the servants' faith, which she now values. Therefore, for Najwa, she does not lose herself in religion. She has found a new version of her old self in it where her hijab is not a prison, rather it

becomes her shield against a world that often looks at her for what Laura Mulvey calls “voyeuristic pleasure” (806).

3.2.4. Orientalist Gaze and Her Challenges as a Muslim Woman

Said's theory of "Orientalism" explains how the West constructs the East as an exotic, inferior 'Other.' This lens can help explain how Islamophobia and xenophobia are rooted in stereotypical representations of Muslims as violent or backward. The Orientalist gaze is not neutral. It carries the weight of power and judgment. About the interwoven connection between representation and power dynamic, Stuart Hall is relevant as he asserts: "Representation is the way in which meaning is given to the things depicted. But this is not a neutral process. It is about power: those who have it and those who do not" (Hall 263). This gaze of viewing Tamer as "terrorist-like" during a walk in Regent Park embodies this tension between 'us' vs 'them' leading to the 'othering'. His "Arab-looking, dark eyes, and the beard" is framed through the Orientalist gaze, which projects stereotypes onto him. This gaze views him not as an individual but as a symbol of the 'other', reducing his identity to the figure of a "terrorist":

His voice is a little loud and, as we walk towards St John's Wood, I sense the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist (Aboulela 100).

This perception reflects a broader Islamophobic narrative perpetuated in Western societies, particularly post-9/11, where Muslim men and women with physical markers like beards and veils respectively, are often associated with violence or extremism. Saman Rezael et al. in their article titled "The Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western Media" argues that "Western media purposefully tend to collectivize Muslims to depict that terrorism and Islam are two inseparable notions which go hand in hand in the world of Muslims" (70). The study reveals that Islam and Muslims are often portrayed through an alienating and negative lens. This representation frequently emphasizes 'differences', portraying Muslims as distinct and separate

from the rest of the world (70). Such depictions commonly reinforce stereotypes, framing Muslim identities in a detrimental way that contributes to their marginalization and misrepresentation in public discourse. Hasan also observes: “As a result, such media hype rendered the Muslim residents in the West as ‘exoticized others’ and ‘outsiders’ whose presence is said to constitute a threat to the Western way of life” (“Seeking Freedom” 95). Amer questions on the Western biases on Muslim women’s veiling where “the tradition of modest dress and of covering the hair continues to be practiced by conservative, and especially Hasidic, Jewish women” (14). Indicating Islamophobia and Western obsession with Muslim’s veilings, Amer continues her argument that the way Muslim women are stigmatized and face terrible abuses, no other women face from other religious backgrounds, despite the fact that “it is impossible to tell from pictures alone a Haredi Jewish woman from a Muslim woman wearing a black burqa” (14).

Since the Orientalist view is inherently hierarchical, it positions itself as the norm while casting Muslims and their cultural or religious expressions as “foreign”, “threatening”, or incompatible with modernity. This act of ‘othering’ denies Muslims the ability to be seen as ordinary or benign within Western spaces. The perception of Tamer by passersby reveals how visible markers of Muslim identity are often viewed through a lens of suspicion and fear. In this scene, the gaze of passersby assigns unease to Tamer simply because of his visible Muslim identity. The act of labeling him as “terrorist-like” is not based on his actions but on his appearance. Despite Tamer’s gentle and caring behavior toward Mai, he is reduced to a stereotype - a one-dimensional caricature and ignores his individuality.

Due to Islamic identity, along with Muslim men, Muslim women go through tremendous challenges and sufferings affecting both physically and psychologically across the world. As a

Muslim woman in a Muslim minority context, Najwa also faces similar challenges. Her bus experience on her way home from mosque at night, sheds light on the entrenched Islamophobia in European countries like London.

I hear footsteps come up behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, ‘You Muslim scum,’ then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends - they are laughing. My chest hurts and I wipe my eyes” (83).

The verbal abuse “You Muslim scum” and the physical assault being doused with “Tizer” shows the hostility directed at her, not as an individual, but as a representative of her Muslim identity. The physical act of being splashed with Tizer is both shocking and humiliating. Najwa’s chest hurting and her wiping her eyes symbolize the emotional weight of such hostile incidents that leave lasting psychological scars beyond the immediate harm. This moment explains how public spaces can become sites of vulnerability for marginalized Muslim women, where their identities make them targets of aggression and dehumanization.

It is equally important to note that from the start on the bus, Najwa’s anxiety builds as she anticipates potential harm from the young men: "I know just by glancing at them that they are not reliable, they are not harmless" (82). Her heightened awareness of the men’s behavior reveals how past experiences of discrimination have conditioned her to be constantly vigilant. Her internal dialogue: “Will they move closer, and what if they run out of things to throw?” portrays her powerlessness in the face of imminent danger (82). Even the bus driver’s refusal to intervene not only highlights her isolation and helplessness but also exposes the broader societal indifference to such harassment.

3.3. Khadra's Experiences in Muslim Minority Indiana

3.3.1. Islamophobia and Xenophobia

The backdrop of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is significant, as it reflects the political and social condition of the time. The story is set against the rise of Islamophobia and the Middle Eastern political turmoil that characterized the late 20th century. This period saw increasing tensions in the Middle East, particularly with events such as the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Oil Crisis of 1973, which influenced perceptions of Muslims in the West. Western media coverage often oversimplified the conflict, portraying Arab nations as aggressors, while ignoring the complexities of the historical and political factors (Said, 1978). Due to the OPEC oil embargo, a response to U.S. support for Israel, the subsequent economic strain further sparked resentment against Arab nations, where Muslims were unfairly associated with these negative perceptions like “greedy and manipulative” by the West (Ajami, 1974).

Another historical moment that is crucial to the growing Islamophobia in the West is the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Although the Iranian Revolution occurred at the end of the decade, the events leading up to it had already begun shaping Western perceptions of Islam. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and the shift from a pro-Western monarchy to an Islamic Republic alarmed many in the U.S. and Europe. This period saw the emergence of the term “Islamic fundamentalism,” which became shorthand for political militancy and extremism (Esposito, 1992). These fears further cemented the association of Islam with violence and fanaticism, affecting Muslims' identities worldwide.

Khadra's family's relocation from Syria to Indiana during the 1970s marks these turbulent historical and political events where, like her family, many Arab families were forced to migrate in America. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act in the U.S. allowed an increase in

Muslim immigrants. By the 1970s, more Muslim communities formed in cities across the U.S., prompting backlash from those who viewed their cultural and religious practices as alien or threatening (Haddad, 1994).

Muslim immigrants often struggled with societal integration, facing challenges in balancing their religious identities with the pressure to assimilate (Barrett, 2007). The majority of Muslim immigrants in the 1970s came from Middle Eastern, South Asian, or African countries. As non-white immigrants, they faced systemic racism and xenophobia in addition to Islamophobia. This overlap of discrimination reinforced their marginalization, making it difficult for them to integrate into society (Naber, 2008). The novel captures the struggles of assimilation and the quest for personal identities of such Arab Muslims, particularly Muslim women who are caught between the external pressures from both their cultural heritage and the host American society because of veil or hijab, as a hyper-visible marker of their religious identity. Sahar Amer in her book, *What is Veiling ?* (2014), comments on this issue: “Muslim veiling is a notion that often evokes fear, anxiety, and a rising sense of threat, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, the onset of the war in Afghanistan, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq” (2).

Under such circumstances, similar to Najwa, Khadra also encounters many instances of Islamophobia and racism as a Muslim girl in 1970s America. Khadra keeps facing the Xenophobic abuses and racialized gaze from her childhood in Indiana due to her hijab. These incidents show how prejudice against Muslims can be both personal and part of larger societal discrimination. One example of Islamophobia is when Brian Lott threatens Khadra and her friends. He chases her with his dirt bike and yells hateful slurs.

Suddenly it revealed a boy with heavy pink flushed cheeks on a dirt bike, tearing through the hung laundry, pulling down rope, soiling sheets with his tire tread. Khadra ran.

Screamed and ran. Fell, scraped her cheekbone on the cracked asphalt. He wheeled and turned. Gunning for her. ‘Stop it! Stop! You leave me alone, Brian Lott’ (8)

‘Fuck you, raghead!’ Brian shouted back. ‘We’re gonna get all you fuckers!’ He wheeled on ‘fuckers.’ (9)

This illustrates the Islamophobia and xenophobia that Khadra and her friends endure as Muslim children in 1970s America. Brian Lott's physical aggression - knocking Khadra against a wall and threatening her with his dirt bike, reflects targeted harassment fueled by racialized prejudice. His verbal abuse, including slurs like ‘raghead’ and threats such as ‘We’re gonna get all you fuckers,’ explicitly targets Khadra's Muslim identity, and reduces her to a harmful stereotype. This language not only reflects Brian's personal hostility but also mirrors the broader societal attitudes of the time where Muslims and immigrants are easily dehumanized and othered.

Even though Khadra is terrified, her brother and friends come to her rescue, showing the importance of sticking together when facing hate. The scene also depicts how Islamophobia intersects with racism, as Khadra and her friends—Arab and Black Muslims—experience hostility rooted in their visible identities. Despite being children, they face threats and violence simply for being different. However, their unity and defiance transform the incident into a moment of resilience. As they ride away together, Khadra’s exultant gesture and her friend, Hanifa’s smile signify their refusal to let xenophobia define their experiences. (Kahf, 2006, p. 10). This moment shows how Muslims as a marginalized group learn from childhood how to face hostility and reclaim agency in the face of bigotry.

Another incident happens when the mosque Khadra’s family attends is vandalized. Hateful messages like “Terrorists go home” and swastikas are sprayed on its walls (Kahf, 2006, p. 14). For Khadra, this attack feels personal because the mosque is not just a religious space but

a safe place for her and her community. The vandalism shows how deeply the secular minds reject Muslims and view them as outsiders.

The most personal attack comes when two boys at school, Brent Lott and Curtis Stephenson, pull off Khadra's hijab in a cruel and humiliating way. They mock her by saying, "Take off your towel first, raghead," and even tear her scarf, leaving her feeling exposed and embarrassed (Kahf, 2006, p. 104- 105). This moment shows how Muslim women are often attacked for their hijabs, and even in public spaces like school, they are constantly denied an inclusive environment where they can feel welcomed and safe. Since for Khadra, the hijab is part of her identity, losing it this way feels like a deep violation and denial of her rights to uphold her religious identity and choose her own ways of life.

This repeated portrayal of Muslims as "ragheads" or "terrorists" mirrors the reductive stereotypes of Stuart Hall's "Cultural Representation" (1997). As Hall's work on representation explains how stereotypes reduce individuals to simplified, fixed characteristics, on a broader level, Khadra, Najwa, Zuhura, Tamer all can sense the weight of stereotypes about Muslims. Remarkably, after the events like the Iranian hostage crisis, Khadra notices how people treat all Muslims with suspicion, even though they have no connection to such events (Kahf, 2006, p. 13). This shows how global politics can fuel prejudices and racism which makes life even harder for Muslims who are like Khadra, Najwa, Zuhura or Tamer. Through these events, Kahf shows how Islamophobia impacts Khadra's life, from personal attacks to larger societal bias. These actions frighten Khadra and show how she is targeted simply for being visibly Muslim. Despite everything, Khadra remains strong, finding support in her family and friends. Her story highlights the struggles of being a Muslim in a prejudiced world but also celebrates the resilience and unity of those who face such challenges.

3.3.2. Ku Klux Klan: The White Supremacist Racist Organization

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf has also mentioned the racist organization Ku Klux Klan. The KKK was founded in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee, by six Confederate veterans. Initially, it functioned as a social club but quickly transformed into a paramilitary group aiming to suppress the rights of freed African Americans and restore white dominance in the South. The Klan employed terror tactics, including lynchings, beatings, and arson, to intimidate Black citizens and their allies, particularly those advocating for civil rights and Reconstruction reforms. Historian Elaine Frantz Parsons writes:

From 1866 through 1871, men calling themselves ‘Ku-Klux’ killed hundreds of black Southerners and their white supporters, sexually molested hundreds of black women and men, drove thousands of black families from their homes and thousands of black men and women from their employment, and appropriated land, crops, guns, livestock, and food from black Southerners on a massive scale (138).

The tragic fate of Zuhura gives a glimpse of physical assault and homicide Black-Muslim women face by the racist groups like KKK. It is a terrible shock to any Black-Muslim family like Zuhura's, who becomes a target of unimaginable cruelty. She has been raped, followed by her murder, and her body is further mutilated. This gruesome crime is not only a physical attack but also a symbolic act meant to degrade and erase her identity as a Black-Muslim woman. Zuhura's death reflects the intersection of racial and gendered violence along with Islamophobia. The deliberate mutilation of her body alongside her hijab torn apart signifies the perpetrators' intent to dehumanize and humiliate both her and what she represents. This incident serves as a stark reminder of the extreme dangers faced by Black-Muslim women who explore a society rife with racial, religious, and cultural prejudices.

Days later, Zuhura's body was found in a ravine near Beanblossom Bridge. Murdered. Raped. Cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds-the grown-ups didn't want to give details in front of the children, but it was in the news” (Kahf 80).

Behind this kind of cruelty, Stereotyping plays a key role, which Hall defines as the act of reducing to “a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics” (249). Just like “the Blacks were reduced to the signifiers of their physical difference - thick lips,, fuzzy hair, broad face and nose, and so on,” the Muslims, especially the Black Muslims who are like Zuhura, are often targeted with violence and abuses based on the visible markers like beard, ethnic features, veils. This approach not only reduces the benefit of being seen as multifaceted individuals (249) but also brings dehumanization and the tragic fate like Zohura . Remarkably, in the case of both Najwa and Tamer in *Minaret*, their physical attributes are linked to stereotypes of aggression and radicalism. Timer’s Arab looking appearance with beard, and Najwa’s hijab make their identity hyper-visible in the eyes of the West and invites misjudgment. Apart from the stigma and physical assaults, such stereotyping not only alienates the Muslim communities but also creates a psychological burden as they are constantly judged. Within Western contexts, whether it is hijab, beard, or Arab-looking appearances, it becomes a visual marker of ‘difference’. This signifier reinforces the binary of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ where Muslim women are excluded from dominant cultural norms and framed as ‘Other.’ This exclusion is not based on inherent qualities but constructed through misrepresentation, which Hall critiques as a central mechanism of stereotyping: “The notion of ‘difference’ is central to the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, and the processes of social inclusion and exclusion” (234). These markers are not just seen as symbols of religious or cultural identity but are homogenized into a singular representation of “Muslim Otherness.” The hijab, for example, is,

thus, interpreted in Western discourses as a universal symbol of oppression or resistance, disregarding the multiplicity of meanings it holds for wearers across different contexts. As a reaction to this stereotypes, in the selected novels, both Aboulela and Kahf has subverted this discourse by presenting Islam and veil or hijab as source of strength for Muslim women who are like Zuhura, Khadra, Ebtehaj, Najwa, or Teta.

3.4. Responses from the Muslim Communities

3.4.1. Establishing Religious Centres in Search for Solidarity

As a result of Islamophobia and racial prejudices, Muslims in the West experience increased alienation due to these cultural and political dynamics. They are frequently misunderstood and stereotyped as part of a homogenous group, despite the diversity within Islamic communities. Islamophobic attitudes are particularly challenging for women who wear visible symbols of their faith, such as the hijab, as they become easy targets for prejudice (Haddad & Smith, 2002). Muslim women face a triple layer of discrimination. On the one hand, they are marginalized for their gender and religious identity, and on the other, they are subject to racism due to their ethnic backgrounds. In predominantly Christian or secular societies, practicing Muslims those who wear hijabs or build mosques—are usually viewed with suspicion. The unfamiliarity of Islamic practices lead to misconceptions and prejudice. Cainkar observes that basic rituals like praying five times a day or fasting during Ramadan being interpreted as overly rigid or fanatical, cause alienate Muslim communities in the Western society(Cainkar, 2009).

In response to marginalization, Muslim communities often become more unified, and work together to establish schools, mosques, and cultural organizations. This shows a strengthening of religious identity as a form of resistance to Islamophobia. In *Minaret* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, the Dawa lessons in Regent's Park Mosque and Khadra's parents' dedication to the Dawah Center exemplify this effort to preserve faith and culture in a non-Muslim society. The Regent's Park Mosque offers Najwa a sense of belongingness, whereas she never feels belonging to her employer's house as a maid servant. Lamya, her employer, looks down upon her religiosity but in the mosque, Najwa is not distinguished due to her

social status; rather she can befriend with Muslim women from the upper class who treat her with equal respect and love.

3.4.2. Faith as a Source of Resilience and Resistance against Racialized Abuses

In the face of Islamophobia and racial violences, neither Zuhura, Khadra, Ebtehaj, nor Najwa compromise with their religious practices, which show how faith becomes a source of resilience and resistance against the racial prejudices of the West. Khadra's response to the harassment she faces exemplifies both her resistance to Islamophobia and her firm commitment to her hijab. After being harassed by Brent and Curtis, Khadra experiences profound anger and vulnerability. The humiliation is compounded by her teacher, Mr. Eggleston, who notices the aftermath but chooses to disapprove of her reaction rather than address the bullying (Kahf, 2006, p. 106). This lack of support further alienates Khadra, which shows the systemic neglect and normalization of Islamophobia in Western environment. Despite the emotional and physical toll, Khadra's commitment to her hijab remains steadfast. She recognizes the symbolic significance of her scarf and refuses to allow her oppressors to see her bare-headed, knowing it would give them a sense of victory. Even with her scarf torn, her hair disheveled, and blood staining the fabric, she rewraps it, determined to reclaim her dignity (Kahf, 2006, p. 117). This act of reclaiming her *hijab*, highlights her resilience and her refusal to let the abuse define her or force her to abandon a key part of her religious and cultural identity. It also highlights how the *hijab* for her functions not only as a symbol of faith but also as a source of personal empowerment in the face of oppression.

Similar resistance is found the way Khadra's mother, Ebtehaj fights for her hijab against the step-mother's objection and hatred towards her modest wearing back in Syria. In the broader political context of Syria, her refusal to unveil against the Assad regime also marks hijab as not only a sign of cultural or religious identity, it also stands as a form of resistance against the politics of secularism. Saba Mahmood, in *Politics of Piety* (2005), explains that "agency is not a

synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable” (Mahmood 17). This perspective is evident in Khadra's mother's insistence on wearing the hijab despite the stepmother's objections and the Assad regime's pressure to unveil.

Her refusal to unveil can be understood by Mahmood's argument that acts of piety are not just passive compliance but are closely tied to ethical self-formation and resistance to external coercion. Mahmood further states: “What may appear to be a gesture of submission may in fact be a strategy of survival, strength, or even critique” (Mahmood 153). Her refusal to unveil is her assertion of her agency, where the hijab has been used as a symbol of defiance against familial and political forces.

In the midst of fear, anxiety, and helplessness, Najwa is also seen to turn to her faith for solace and strength. Najwa's growing connection to her Muslim faith in London represents a significant shift in her identity. This spiritual journey becomes a source of strength and stability, helping her cope with the challenges of her new life and providing a new framework for understanding her place in the world. During the bus incident, she repeatedly recites Surah Al-Falaq: “ I start to recite Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak. I recite it again and again” as a protective measure, which shows her reliance on Allah to shield her from harm (82). Her belief that “Allah will protect me so that even if they hurt me, I won't feel it too badly” showcases her resilience and the numbing comfort faith provides in moments of acute vulnerability (83). For Najwa, faith becomes a psychological defense against both physical and emotional harm. She finds religion which offers her a sense of control and hope in a situation where she, otherwise, has none.

This incident can be seen as a microcosm of Najwa's broader experience of her religious identity as a Muslim woman in a discriminatory society. Her reflections reveal her sense of being an outsider, both physically and socially. On one hand, it captures her internal struggles arising due to the political turmoil and loss of social position, Islamophobic hostility she faces, and on the other hand, it highlights the ways her faith provides resilience and strength in the face of these challenges. Through the contrast between her reliance on faith and the hostility she faces Aboulela critiques the social indifference to Islamophobia while illuminating the quiet strength of Muslim individuals who endure it daily in non-Muslim majority European countries.

Therefore, based on Mahmood's observation that practices like veiling become not just a marker of cultural or religious identity but a profound act of resistance as well. Thus, Kahf's and Aboulela's detailed portrayals of the multiple meanings of the hijab through characters like Khadra, Ebtahaj, and Najwa challenge Western discourses that often overlook "the multiplicity of desires, capacities, and social practices that constitute individual subjectivity" (Mahmood 33).

Chapter 4: Polyphony and Religious Consciousness: Diverse Muslim Women's Voices in the Selected Novels

Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and Aboulel's *Minaret* offer a multi-voiced narrative of Muslim women's experiences across the world which aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and dialogism. By offering a plurality of voices and perspectives, both texts highlight the diversity of Muslim experiences in Western societies and Muslim-majority countries. The texts uphold the importance of diverse voices and myriad perspectives in the search of truth about Muslim women's experiences echoing Bakhtin's notion that: "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 110).

Bakhtin's idea of polyphony, where "the voices remain independent and as such are combined into a unity of a higher order" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 21), is evident in the diverse portrayals of Muslim women in Kahf's text. It presents Khadra's mother and the conservative immigrant community in Indiana as one voice, who stand firm for preserving Islamic values in a secular society. This perspective emphasizes modesty, ritual, and discipline. For example, for Khadra's mother, "A woman's scarf is her honor. Without it, she is lost" (Kahf, p. 34). Her background informs the audience how she has been shaped over time by her surroundings. The incident of rape by her history teacher during a study trip in France affects her so much that after that she is changed completely. She starts praying five times regularly and could never think of going outside without a hijab. She transforms into a strict practicing Muslim from one who was once totally oblivious of her religious practices and values (Kahf 273). So, Ebtehaj's perspective towards the world and her religious sentiments are closely tied to her past

experiences altogether because what she is, is made of her surroundings. For her, after the tragic incident, turning to religion means finding solace and comfort through spirituality in a world where she was not even safe to her teacher. This background also explains Ebtehaj's strictness and over cautiousness over Khadra in Indiana, particularly wearing hijab, not roaming around, especially with the boys are a must for Khadra to maintain without any excuse. Similarly, Ebtejah's elder sister, Razanne, Khadra's aunt has also been given her own voice in the text. Her religiosity is also a part of showing resistance to the Baathism movement alongside her sincerity to Islam. Her comments on Ebtehaj's trip to France reveals her firm stance against the imperialist idea of unveiling which she considers as closely linked to Muslim women's vulnerability and degradation of morality: "The whole idea of taking schoolgirls to France is wrong. It was part of the Baathist plan to ruin the morals of the land. To get us out of our homes, out of our veils, make us vulnerable" (239).

In contrast, Khadra's encounters with feminist Muslims, such as a college friend who argues, "Faith is not just rules; it's a relationship," reveal another voice (Kahf, p. 147). Also, in Philadelphia, Khadra's Iranian roommate Bisty shows a radical perspective about Muslim identity. When Bisty meets Khadra with hijab, her reaction is noteworthy: Bisty had been totally creeped out when she first saw Khadra in hijab. 'You're not one of those fanatics, are you?' she said, her voice a little shrill" (301). It is not just about hijab, she hates everything about the Arabs -their religion, religious practices, Arabic language, because she thinks it is the Arabs and their Arab culture that has corrupted the Persian culture with the religion of Islam and Islamic practices. However, these differing perspectives are not subordinated to the author's viewpoint but are given equal narrative weight, where characters are "not voiceless slaves of the author's consciousness" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 7).

Teta, Khadra's grandmother, is another amazing example of defining the versatile aspect of Muslim identity. She defines herself as an "extraordinary" philosopher woman who breaks the societal norms of her time again and again by challenging the system that tries to define what it means to be a Muslim woman back in when Syria went under French rule. She did love marriage going against the norm of her culture and wanted to be the breadwinner for herself and her family: "I married for love. This was extraordinary in my day, darling!-and still is, in much of the world" (224). Ignoring harsh criticisms from all around, working as a "telephone operator" is her another extraordinary step towards becoming one of the "New Women" of the age. Her bold smirks towards all the criticisms show how as a Muslim woman, Teta shows being conscious of her rights and potentials as a human to explore the world outside the household: "They tried to make out that a telephone girl's job was a bad thing, a thing for floozies, imagine! No, but I and my girlfriends laughed in their faces. We wanted to be the New Woman" (226). More interestingly, in her extraordinary journey, she is not alone, rather her strong friendship with two more remarkable ladies - Iman and Hayat, strengthens their firm stance that lies in solidarity, as Teta recounts: "So we linked arms and went out into the new day" (226). They name themselves as the *azizahs* meaning the "women who cherish themselves, women who are cherished"(226).

Zuhura is another example of an empowered and proactive Muslim woman who has equally been sincere to her identity and responsibilities in American society. She is an activist for Muslim rights at her university, and also works at the Dawa center to help fellow Muslims practice their religion with ease. Challenging the stereotypes of Muslim women as passive or oppressed, she upholds her voice through agency and leadership. The liberal and supportive approach of her family contrasts with Khadra's more restrictive family background, especially how her mother keeps inspiring Zuhura balancing the cultural and religious commitments to

ensure inclusivity and resilience within her community. Her meaningful contribution to the religious and social environments, represents the potential and promise of Muslim women with a unique and positive perspective of what it means to be a Muslim woman living in Western societies. Ironically though, her tragic fate—being raped and murdered by the local KKK points to the existing brutality of Islamophobia, racism, and misogyny in American society. Her tragic death, thus, silences a promising voice.

Regarding this plurality, Alkarawi and Bahar also note that through various images of Muslim women living in America, Kahf has challenged the stereotypical Western assumption of Muslim women as backward and powerless. They comment on Teta, as “an empowered woman” who breaks the societal expectations of a Muslim woman as a telephone girl back in the 1980s. Khadra’s mother, Ebtehaj, an educated and ambitious woman, had to continuously fight against her secular stepmother to continue her veiling. Similarly, Maryam, her friend, gives a positive image of a practicing Muslim woman who holds a successful career in America without compromising her religious values (105). A contrasting image has also been given through Khadra’s Iranian American roommate, Bisty who has rejected both her previous name Fatima-Zahra, and religion. She wants to fully assimilate into American ways of life while discarding her Iranian roots and origin. The scholars comment that these diversities significantly shape Khadra to gain a new perspective about her identity that is deeply embedded into her religious values (105). Khadra’s plight of enlightenment and resolution of continuing her veil after long dilemmas and conflicts, challenges the Western monolithic image of the Muslim Arab-American women who have no agency of their own.

These multiple voices play a major role in how Khadra’s own perspective evolves throughout the novel. Her frustration with Western stereotypes of veiling, expressed in her

outburst, “Why do they think a scarf is a prison? Can’t they see it’s a choice?” (Kahf, p. 89), exemplifies her engagement with competing discourses. Through such moments, Kahf illustrates Bakhtin’s assertion that “truth requires a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 25). Due to her broader perspectives, Khadra’s growing discomfort with her community’s rigidity is evident when she reflects, “They speak of Islam as though it’s a fortress, but I’m beginning to think it’s more like an ocean—vast, boundless, and hard to pin down” (Kahf, p. 174). This openness again aligns with Bakhtin’s belief in dialogism’s capacity to capture the multiplicity of truths in human existence as Khadra holds in her views.

Kahf has tried to combine these contradictory perspectives of veiling and unveiling with the philosophical idea of light and dark coexisting. As light and dark coexist to create balance, veiling, and unveiling are part of the same cycle. One cannot exist without the other. Veiling represents introspection and inner growth, while unveiling signifies emergence and self-expression. Both processes are necessary for the soul’s journey. Darkness is not a void but a fertile ground for creativity, healing, and renewal, while light represents that effort's clarity, beauty, and realization: “How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom” (257). In the case of Khadra, her embrace of both modes of being—covered and uncovered during her stay in Syria—acknowledges the interdependence between veiling and unveiling. On one hand, wearing the hijab and loose clothing gives her comfort, a sense of identity, and a way to stay connected to her faith and modesty. The veil acts as a trusted “old friend” and “comrade” and in her spiritual journey, helping her feel grounded and aligned with her values (259). Because of it, going outside without a hijab seems a “rigorous

challenge” (259) to Khadra, as she realizes that without the physical marker of modesty, she must show modesty through her behavior, and actions. This requires her to shift from relying on the external practice of veiling to developing modesty as an inner quality. It demands more thought and self-awareness as she works to live her values in a new way. Through her eyes, Kahf shows how veiling and unveiling are not opposing forces but interconnected processes where veiling comes with more comfort and less effort than unveiling as it requires extra efforts to show modesty through actions only. Khadra’s resolution of continuing the hijab highlights not only her preferences with the familiar ease but also a commitment to showing solidarity with her mother’s spiritual journey towards veiling. Her mother, Ebtehaj has remained stuck to hijab despite a lot of challenges, especially the hardships she had to face due to her stepmother’s Western belief and abhorrence for hijab back in Syria. Ebtehaj’s commitment to her faith and resistance against any imposition of her religious identity echo Leila Ahmed’s comments on the hijab in her 2011 book, *A Quiet Revolution*: “The veil has become a marker of identity and resistance, a symbol of faith and assertion in the face of homogenizing Western cultural dominance” (45).

Likewise, *Minaret*, alongside Najwa’s perspective, also offers other voices and viewpoints of Muslim women. Back in Sudan, Najwa’s religious classmates serve the perspective of practicing young Muslim girls who are not only mindful of their religious duties but also equally aware of their rights and importance of liberal education. While Najwa gets mesmerized by their modest attires, ways of prayers, and confidence, Randa, Najwa’s best friend gives an opposite reaction about their religiosity. Randa, much like the West, thinks veiling as a sign of backwardness and if women want to succeed in life, according to her belief, they must abandon veiling or extra coverings. On the other hand, in London, Najwa’s employer Lamiya

and her mother exemplify another aspect of Muslim identity. Both the ladies are highly qualified in their professional lives - Zaynab is a doctor while Lamiya is doing her PhD. Despite coming from a Muslim background, they have preferred a liberal approach in their lifestyles who do not consider religion as important as their career. Though Mrs. Zaynab appreciates the way Najwa tries to practice hijab and prayers, Lamiya seems to look down upon her religiosity. Unlikely, Tamer, Mrs. Zaynab's son and Lamiya's brother is a devout religious young man who also appreciates Najwa's efforts in religion. Tamer's indifference to his university life, and more interest in studying Islamic history, also gives a perspective of a young Muslim man exploring life in London.

The dialogical nature of both the texts emerges through each of the characters' consciousness and understanding of the worlds where they inhabit. Bakhtin asserts, "Consciousness is in essence multiple, always shaped in response to others" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 36). Najwa's or Khadra's literalist understanding of Islam, shaped by their communities and surroundings, is again and again influenced by social, political, cultural, and economic conditions. For Khadra when she travels to Syria. Here, she meets a woman who declares, "I don't need a scarf to show my faith. My heart does that" (Kahf, p. 202). This encounter also impacts on how Khadra turns to a gradual transformation with more flexible views toward her Muslim identity. This transformation is explicitly evident when she decides to wear a bright tangerine scarf instead of the black one that she used to wear. Similarly, for Najwa, she not only is affected by her religious classmates, but also her challenging life in London shaped by her social, political background, transforming her into a religious woman. These transformations reflect Bakhtin's view that multiple perspectives can transform consciousness, creating a dynamic interplay of ideas.

Aboulela's and Kahf's narratives resist the monologism that Bakhtin critiques as "a single, unified perspective that denies the autonomy of other voices" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 29). By presenting contrasting views on Islam, identity, and culture, Kahf and Aboulela question the reductionist tendencies of both conservative Muslim orthodoxy and Western liberalism. Through the texts, the authors invite readers into a dialogue of Muslim women's perspectives which can dismantle stereotypes as Bakhtin thinks "a word is a bridge thrown between myself and another" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 95). The novels, thus, critique the Western portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed victims while also interrogating the limitations of traditional Muslim communities. For instance, Khadra's epiphany—"I don't have to fit into a box labeled 'good Muslim' or 'bad Muslim.' I just have to be me" (Kahf, p. 296)—epitomizes the novel's commitment to fostering dialogue rather than dictating a singular truth. Emphasizing the multiple perspectives in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, in her doctoral thesis, Nancy El Gendy asserts: "Therefore, the ways in which Kahf discusses Arab American social problems need to be seen as perspectival, rather than representational of the truth of Arab and Arab American Muslim women or of Muslims at large" (19). Similarly, through the lens of Bakhtin's polyphony and dialogism, *Minaret* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* emerge as good examples of dialogical texts which offer plurality of voices by reflecting the irreducible complexity of Muslim women's experiences. By presenting these perspectives in dialogue with one another, Kahf and Aboulela highlight Bakhtin's belief that meaning is born not in isolation but through interaction and engagement. Mais Yusuf AlQutami has also worked on contemporary American women writers of color where she highlights how these writers provide alternative perspectives that empower women and subvert the traditional narratives of veils and house imposed by Western ideologies (218).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the two contemporary novels - *Minaret* (2005) by Sudanese origin British author Leila Aboulela and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) by Syrian American author Mohja Kahf. Focusing on the literature, this study highlights the significance of representations in the literary works to challenge the reductive narratives on Muslim women's identity and experiences. In response to the Orientalist literature discussed in the review section, the selection of the certain two novels have been a priority because of their subject matters' relevance to each chapter. The main arguments of the study focus on how the selected novels offer alternative narratives of the Orientalist discourse of Muslim women's identity and veils. It also explains how the novels' unique characteristic of dialogism emphasize the diverse perspectives existing in Muslim women's identity formation and experiences across the world. The study argues that in order to challenge the monolithic and reductive assumption of the Orientalist discourse, it is crucial to represent the multiple viewpoints in literary works that mark the lived experiences of Muslim women, and the selected novels have served that purpose of the study. Based on the analysis of the two novels through Said's concept of 'Orientalism,' Hall's concept of the stereotypical representation of the 'Other,' and lastly, Bakhtin's theory of 'dialogism', this study concludes:

i) There are many Muslim women who are like Ebtehaj, Khadra, Zuhura, or Najwa as depicted in the novels, for them Islam is not oppressive, rather it has offered them peace, purpose and solace in the face of challenges and upheavals. Similarly, for these women, the veil is not a symbol of backwardness or vulnerability but it conveys multiple meanings representing their modesty, religiosity, cultural identity, and sartorial resistance against stereotypes. Acknowledging

the instance of some Muslim women who practice veiling out of imposition by their family's conservative understanding of Islamic traditions, Amer points out the other stories of majority muslim women who wear hijab or veil out of numerous reasons:

Some women wear the veil proudly out of deep piety and the conviction that it is an Islamic prescription. Others adopt it as a political assertion of their national identity, as an expression of their disappointment with the failure of Arab nationalism, as a tool of resistance to Euro- American stereotypes and policies toward Muslims, or as a means of declaring their opposition to the commodification of women's bodies in Euro-American societies. Still others wear it for socioeconomic reasons, either because it allows them to forego the expense of new clothes and a hairdresser, or because it legitimates their ambition to hold a job outside the home and gain financial independence from their family (109-110).

Echoing Amer's arguments, the selected two novels have also highlighted this "polysemy" (Amer 109) aspect of the veil by challenging the Orientalist discourse which views veiling as a marker of Muslim women's oppression, vulnerability, and backwardness.

ii) In representing Muslim women's identities and experiences, like Aboulela, and Kahf, other authors should account for the diverse stories that Muslim women create everyday, being shaped by their social, cultural, political, and economic contexts; instead of repeating the single story of the Orientalist narrative about how Muslim women suffer for their religion, which just creates a misunderstanding about Islam and Muslim women in general. To conclude with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 Ted Talk where she warns "the danger of a single story": Show people as

one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become, because one single story makes it impossible to see them as anything else but that one story (4:05 -4:12).

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